

FOLLOWING VINCENT

Part II

by

Christopher Stasheff

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Ada she wasn't sure she trusted a French cabaret called the 'Yellow Kitty.'

Her expectations were not disappointed.

They'd entered the seedier part of town, the type of place any respectable lady like her would never venture into. When they pulled up in front of a rather run-down storefront and Yorick climbed out, Ada merely stared at him scandalized, frozen in place. When she finally exited the cab, the driver up on the carriage bench gave her a knowing nod, a quick wink, and a rather disturbing grin. Ada would have slapped him if she'd been able to reach that high.

Ada looked up at the sign above the windowless doors. It featured a slit-eyed, sickly-yellow cat arching its back. It was instantly clear which sort of cabaret this was. And, once she followed Yorick through the doors, the establishment's specialty was doubly clear: Chinese girls in dancing costumes worked the floors, chatting and giggling with their (mostly) masculine clientele at dimly lit tables scattered around the stage.

"Mr. Thall," Ada hissed, deeply uncomfortable. "What *is* this place?"

"Time station. Our ticket home." Yorick leaned closer and whispered, "Think about it, Ada. Would *you* look for a time machine in here?"

Ada wasn't quite sure how to respond to that, and Yorick didn't give her a chance. He turned to the maitre d' instead, a huge Oriental gentlemen squeezed into a waistcoat and tie. Ada hunched her shoulders and pulled the brim of her hat down low, hoping to hide her face as the they were led to a table with a stained tablecloth and a lone candle

(which Ada promptly blew out, providing some shadows to hide in). Before the maitre d' departed, Yorick leaned over and whispered, "We need to see Claude. Tell him the Eagle sent us." The maitre d' nodded and left without saying a word.

Ada shot Yorick a puzzled look. "The Eagle?"

"One of the Doc's nicknames. Well... not yet, but it will be. It's... complicated. Guess you could say it's a Neanderthal thing."

Ada didn't understand any of it, and Yorick didn't seem inclined to explain. He sat down at the table, pulled out a cigar, and lit it, puffing on it with obvious satisfaction. Ada's frustration grew in silence for about for about thirty seconds before finally exploding in the most dignified way possible.

"Mr. Thall," she began in a voice icy enough to freeze the Seine solid, "what are we *doing* in such a... a *disreputable* place?"

Yorick cast an amused glace her way. "Why so tense, Ada? After a year in the 1970s, I figured you'd be immune to a place like this."

Ada opened her mouth to respond, then closed it. The big man had a point, and it only seemed logical... but, although Ada couldn't quite explain why, there a distinct difference between a college campus and a cat house. This hit closer to home—literally. Living in 1970s America, with its miniskirts, public displays of affection, and so-called "sexual revolution," was like visiting a foreign land. It was a different time and place with its own set of customs and values, and she accepted that. But being in her own native time and place was different. She was suddenly intimately exposed to the seedy underbelly of her society that respectable folk preferred to pretend didn't exist—and it disturbed her in a way that was hard to describe.

Unsure how to respond, she chose it ignore it altogether and push on. "But you still haven't explained what we're *doing* here. Surely you don't plan to... to..." Ada couldn't verbalize the thought, gesturing to a passing dancer instead.

"Huh?" Yorick looked over at the passing girl. "Wha—oh! No, no, Ada," he chuckled. "I'm a Neanderthal, remember? All you *homo sapien* girls all look too sickly and scrawny to me."

Ada hesitated, not sure whether to feel reassured or offended.

"Besides," Yorick continued, "time agents aren't allowed to... well, you know... with non-agents. An accidental child can screw up the timeline something awful."

Just then, a walking stereotype appeared at their table, a Chinese gentleman complete with long queue braid running down his back and a fu-manchu mustache. He sat down at their table and stuck a cigarette in his mouth. "You got as long as it takes me to smoke this," he muttered in perfectly fluent French as he lit his cigarette. Ada wrinkled her nose. "So, whatever you gotta say..." he waved out the match and looked up, "you better say it fa—Yorick?"

The big man smiled. "Hey, Claude."

Claude grinned like an idiot. Instantly he switched to English, allowing some degree of privacy in a French cabaret. "Well, I'll be a—where the hell have you *been*, man! We haven't seen you since... forever!" He seized Yorick's hand and pumped it. "So where are you now, Yor? *When* are you? Still in the past, playing nanny to Baby Angus?"

"Hey, don't let him fool you—the Doc was born old!" Yorick spread his hands. "He just invented the time machine, and I'm *already* having trouble keeping up with

him!"

"Yeah..." Claude chuckled as he puffed his cigarette. "Doc's like that."

Being left out of the conversation pushed Ada over the edge. "*This* is a GRIPE time station?" she demanded of Yorick. "*This* is the conductor? I thought we were a *respectable* organization! Not some three-penny charade operating out of a..." She screwed up her courage and said the distasteful word. "A *whorehouse!*"

Claude just stared at Ada a moment looking shocked, almost hurt. He took a long drag off his cigarette and let it out slowly. He turned to Yorick and jerked his head toward Ada. "Time agent, right?"

"Yup."

"So where's this broad from? Utah? New Mecca? Citadel?"

Yorick shook his head. "Closer to home."

Claude looked puzzled for a moment, then his face fell. "Oh, God. Victorian England. Great." He jammed the cigarette back between his lips.

Yorick held a hand out to her. "May I introduce Ada Berkshire?"

Claude choked on the smoke and his entire demeanor suddenly changed. His looked up at Ada, jaw open, eyes wide with respect. "The... the *lawyer*?"

"Um... I'm still at university, actually..." Ada mumbled, taken aback. She was having a hard time keeping up with the drastic swings in the conversation.

Claude held out a hand. "My deepest apologies, Mademoiselle. It is an honor to finally meet you." Still in shock, Ada took his hand numbly. Claude flipped the back of her hand up before his face and dropped a quick, chaste kiss on her knuckles, a perfect French gentlemen at his most charming. "Our organization owes you a great debt of

gratitude, Mademoiselle. Why, that trick you pulled at—"

Yorick cleared his throat loudly.

Claude glance at him. "Ah. Of course. No discussion of personal futures. My apologies. And speaking of apologies... Mademoiselle ... about that 'broad' comment..."

"Water under the bridge, Monsieur, I assure you."

"Mademoiselle is too kind."

Ada managed to wrestle her hand away. "Pleased to meet you, Monsieur...?"

"Minh. Claude Minh."

"And you're... Chinese?"

"Sino-French. Franco-Cambodian, actually."

"Oh. I see." She didn't. Ada wasn't quite sure where Cambodia was. *French Indochina?* "Well, your French is quite excellent, Monsieur Minh."

"I should hope so! I was born in Paris."

Ada blinked. "Really?"

Claude shrugged. "Well, 1990s Paris—but who's counting?"

"The Doc," Yorick answered.

"You bet he is!" Claude chuckled, beginning to relax again. "Not sure that man ever *stops* counting..."

Yorick shrugged. "It's what he does."

Claude turned back to Ada. "But to answer your question, Mademoiselle, about why we operate a time station from a cabaret... well, first of all, GRIPE doesn't own and operate this place, you know—it's just me and my machine. Well, and Xian-Liang, the

maitre d'. The fewer agents, the better. Safer that way."

He paused to take another puff off his cigarette. Ada waved the drifting smoke away from her face. Claude noticed and immediately crushed it out in an ashtray. Against her better judgment, Ada found herself warming to the man.

"What you must understand, Mademoiselle Berkshire," Claude continued, "is that a place like this exists largely off the historical record. You'd be surprised how much information passes through here that you won't find in any history book."

"Indeed?"

"Oh yes. You'd be amazed what people let slip when they think the staff can't understand what they're saying."

"People?" Ada frowned. "You mean... customers? Sailors and soldiers and such?"

Claude shook his head with the faintest of smiles. "We don't get too many sailors in Paris. I meant businessman and politicians."

"No!" Ada gasped, shocked. The idea of respectable pillars of the community patronizing to a place like *this*... But, taking a closer look for the first time at the men in the audience, she realized that many did indeed seem more affluent than she would expect for the working-class dregs of society. "But... why?"

"What can I say?" Claude spread his hands. "Men of money and power tend to have... exotic tastes. We get the occasional time agent, too."

"Like us?"

"Well, yes... but I meant SPITE and VETO. To be honest, I'm always kinda glad when one of them shows up—means they haven't figured out my operation yet."

"But... if they *aren't* here for you..." Ada's brow furrowed in confusion, "then why do they come h... oh."

Claude nodded gravely. "Their idea of recruitment, I'm afraid." He looked around sadly at the Chinese courtesans. He grimaced, and the disgust was clear on his face. "Father a child that wasn't supposed to be born, into a situation so desperate that signing up with their organization seems like the only way out. And to hell with the consequences for the mothers... the bastards..."

And uncomfortable silence stretched out. Yorick shot Ada a warning glance that clearly said, *Don't ask.*

"Well! Enough of that!" Claude said, waving away his melancholy with a flourish of his hands. He turned to Ada. "How can I be of service, Mademoiselle Berkshire?"

"Well, uh..." Ada felt a little overwhelmed. "We'd like to go home, please."

Claude glanced at Yorick. "HQ?"

"Yup."

"Coordinates?"

"June 3rd, 1956. At, uh..." He checked his pocket-watch again. "7:36 PM, if you can manage it."

"Done," Claude nodded, then turned back to Ada. "Here's what you'll do. During my act, you'll—"

"You perform here?" Ada asked, surprised.

"Yeah, Minh the Magician, Minh the Magnificent." He waved the thought away casually. "Anyway, for the finale I need two volunteers from the audience—that'll be you guys"

"On stage?" Ada asked, horrified. "In front of all these people? What if—"

"Don't worry, Mademoiselle," Claude cut her off with an amused smile. "Even if anyone recognized you—which is doubtful—no one will admit to having seen you here."

"But... however can you be so sure?"

"Because by doing so, they'd admit to being here *themselves...* and no respectable gentlemen is about to do that."

"Oh. I see." It made sense, she supposed.

Claude stood and dropped a polite bow to Ada. "It's been delightful meeting you, Mademoiselle Berkshire. Now please forgive me, but I really must go change into costume." He spun on his heel and disappeared into the dim, smoky cabaret.

The pair of time agents were quiet for a moment. "Well!" Ada broke the silence. "He was certainly... interesting."

Yorick nodded. "Claude's a hell of a guy."

"Heavy on the hell, I imagine." Ada's back stiffened.

"Aw, c'mon Ada... cut him some slack, will ya? You got no idea what he's been through." Yorick's face darkened. "Paris wasn't a great place for immigrants at the turn of the millennium, you know. Hell, there were riots all over France by 2005... I'm afraid the anarchists won *that* round..." his voice trailed off, and he didn't elaborate.

And for once, Ada was grateful. She'd long since exceeded her capacity for processing the disjointed barrage of information about times and places. She needed a few minutes to recover.

Thankfully, right then the lights went up and the curtain opened. Ada sat back and watched the singers and dancers perform. It was a shameless display of exposed

legs and flashing petticoats, but... well, compared to the "Disco" her roommate had dragged her too, she had to admit it was comparatively tame. By the time the dancers bowed and left the stage to mingle with the gentlemen in the crowd, Ada had relaxed and was almost enjoying herself.

A loud gong sounded, calling attention back to the stage as the emcee jumped onstage to present the next act—the Magnificent Minh the Magician! Just then a flash pot exploded, filling the central stage with smoke and light... and when it cleared, Claude stood there in a shining blue silk robe embroidered with golden Chinese characters. The audience gasped, then displayed their appreciation with a loud round of applause.

Yorick chuckled and shook his head, muttering something about "a sufficiently advanced technology."

"Radies and Gentermen!" Minh began—and instantly Ada noticed that his perfect French had disappeared, replaced instead with the most hideous of Chinese accents. "I, Magnificent Minh, am *wu jen*—ancient Chinese sorcerer!" Claude continued. Yorick snickered—and the longer Minh talked, the more difficulty the Neanderthal had stifling his laughter.

"What's the joke?" Ada asked, leaning closer to the big man.

"The joke's on *them!*" Yorick answered, waving at the audience. "Claude's giving them exactly what they expect—and they're falling for it hook, line, and sinker! Claude's always been a master of hiding in plain sight, y'know. When people judge a book by its cover, they rarely bother opening it up to see what's written inside."

It made sense. The longer Ada watched Minh's act, the more she could see the

amusement in Claude's eyes. He was playing to every Oriental stereotype, and doing it perfectly. He was an excellent magician, too, and Ada soon found herself applauding in delight at his tricks and showmanship.

For his finale, Minh announced, he would perform a rare trick. He spun a long tale of an ancient Chinese puzzle box, crafted by the court magician of the Qing Dynasty in the Forbidden City... which, of course, had just happened to fall into his possession. A gong sounded again, and the muscular maitre d' rolled a tall, ornate box onto stage, roughly the size of a wardrobe and covered in carved lions and dragons.

"That's the time booth," Yorick whispered to Ada. "Claude's gonna use it to make us disappear—right back to 1956!"

"In front of all these people?" Ada gasped. "Is that wise?"

"That's the beauty of it, Ada." Yorick grinned. "Think about it: When Claude made all those birds appear from his handkerchief, was that magic?"

"Well, of course not. That was just a trick. Magic isn't real."

"Well...maybe on Gramarye..."

"What?"

"Nothing. Point is, when the time booth makes us vanish into thin air, everyone in the audience will be *sure* it's a trick. They'll have no idea how Claude did it, of course, but they'll be absolutely certain of one thing—that we didn't *really* disappear!"

"I see." Ada thought about that. "More 'hiding in plain sight,' as you say?"

"Exactly!" Yorick rapped the tabletop for emphasis. "Claude's been doing it for ten years now, and SPITE and VETO have never caught on!"

"Sometimes the best tricks are the simplest, I suppose." Ada watched Minh

walking around the box, turning concealed dials and flipping hidden switches, all the while spinning another yarn of how he had discovered the secret to opening the mysterious puzzle box.

"Locked for security, I imagine?" she whispered.

"That, and camouflage," Yorick answered. "If anyone took the booth apart and looked inside... well, only an expert could tell that the time machine components aren't part of the locking mechanisms."

Ada was beginning to understand why Yorick was so impressed with Claude Minh. He hit a final hidden switch and the front of the puzzle box swung open silently. "To show magic, I need two volunteer!"

"That's our cue," Yorick whispered to Ada, throwing his hand in the air. The other patrons looked around for a moment before some of the more inebriated customers chuckled and raised their arms too.

But understandably Minn chose his most eager volunteer. "Ah! Rarge genterman and pretty rady! You come!" Minh cried in his hideous accent. "No worry, Minh make sure you be safe!"

Yorick jumped to his feet, shoving his three paper-wrapped paintings under his massive arms, and strode toward the stage. After a moment's hesitation, Ada collected her two canvases and followed him.

"This box powerful, very strong magic," Minh explained to the captivated audience as his volunteers climbed up to the stage. "It make thing disappear! Now, most magician, they tricky, they shady! They put people in box, close door, *then* make disappear, when you not see! But Minh mighty magician, Minh *not* shady! Minh *not*

close door! Minh make rarge genterman and pretty rady disappear—before your eyes!"

Minh turned to Yorick and bowed. "Will genterman prease step inside box?

Yorick took a step back and shook his head vehemently, eliciting a peal of laughter from the audience.

"No worry! You be safe! Minh very careful! I show you! I make package disappear first!" He held out his hands, and Yorick made a big display of reluctantly handing over his and Ada's paintings. Minh placed then inside the box. Then, with some dramatic chanting in Cambodian and a flourish of gestures, jabbed his magic wand against the side of the puzzle box—right into the concealed button of a carved dragon's eye. The painting vanished with a tiny *whoosh!* of air rushing into a vacuum. The audience burst into cheers and delighted applause. "Now, genterman—you go inside box!"

Yorick threw a panicked look at the audience and shoved Ada in front of him, earning another burst of laughter from the crowd. Yorick was hamming it up enormously, and Ada could tell Minh was having a hard time keeping a straight face.

"Honestly!" she declared. "Women run where brave men fear to tread!" And with that, she stepped up into the puzzle box. Turning around to face the audience, she waited, calm and collected, as Minh repeated his chants and gestures.

The familiar instant of dizzy nausea still caught her off guard, even though she was expecting it. She was momentarily disoriented, but when she got her bearings again she realized she was staring at the white wall at the back of the time booth in GRIPE headquarters. She turned around, still and little woozy, and saw Dr. McAran leaning the last of the paper-covered painting against his desk.

He looked up, saw Ada, and hobbled toward the woman still blinking into the dim gloom of the cavern after the glare of the limelight. "Don't just stand there!" he snapped. "Get out of the way! Someone else is coming though!" He grabbed her hand and yanked her roughly out of the way right as a loud *pop!* and a wave of displaced air announced Yorick's arrival behind her.

Yorick causally stepped out of the time booth (along with a thin cloud of smoky air), then stumbled slightly. "Well!" he said. "That was fun!"

Doc Angus raised a bushy white eyebrow at him. "Had a bit much French wine, did you?" he asked.

"Well, you know what they say," Yorick replied with a grin and a shrug. "When in Rome..."

"Eat pasta, I know," Doc said dryly, finished the thought for him. Angus turned back to Ada. "You have a nice trip?"

"It was exciting being in Paris at last," she answered, "and I do believe I'm beginning to become accustomed to the sensations of time travel."

"Soon it'll be second nature," Angus assured her as he walked back behind the control console. "So! Where to next?"

"Arles, on May 15th of the year 1889," Ada directed. "Van Gogh's brother Theo had advised him to make a change of scene."

"Alienating too many of the other artists in Paris, huh?"

"He was argumentative, yes," Ada said in surprise. "I did not realize you knew his biography."

"Knew it? I've *lived* it!" Angus finished adjusting a dial. "Alright, date's set. Back

in the booth with you two. Go! Shoo!" Angus didn't waste a second, throwing the switch the instant both Yorick and Ada were inside the booth. "There you go!"

And, after an instant of the now-familiar dizzy nausea, there they were—standing on a narrow street in the pale light before dawn.