

# The Grand Finale

by Krill&Zon, translated from French by Femke Galle

The garden party at the Palace of Versailles was winding down. It had been a roaring success. As usual, the president, at the behest of his wife, had spared no expense. Once again, *grandeur* had been the order of the day. The entire A-list of the country had shown up, along with their foreign pals. Even the opposition had accepted the invitation and allowed themselves to be dazzled by the extravagant proceedings, the French gardens, the flowing champagne and the refined catering. The historian Zalar, official expert in the French Third Republic, an era so dear to the president's heart, was a little tipsy and leering at the young waitresses who were handing out the last drinks for the road.

The imposing motorcade of official vehicles left Versailles under the escort of motorbikes, the notorious *voltigeurs* and dozens of squad cars. The day before, the president had studied a variety of routes and chosen the one that crossed Paris from the South-East to the North, the one taken 150 years earlier on the eve of the *Semaine Sanglante*.

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In Paris, the area around Montmartre was crowded. The president's latest act of provocation had been the final straw. The "convergence of struggles" by opposition forces throughout the entire community, so often dreamed of, seemed on the verge of being realized, and spontaneously so, or rather thanks to the adversary himself. Along with habitual demonstrators, *gilets jaunes*, political activists, and union members, numerous ordinary people of all backgrounds and ages had rallied too.

At the bottom of the hill, an impressive security detail had been deployed: soldiers, police, and *gendarmes* were under orders not to allow anyone at all to venture close to the basilica. Vans, fire trucks, barricades topped with barbed wire formed an insurmountable wall between ordinary and powerful people. Public order forces – in riot gear, their machine guns locked and loaded – were ready for the command to assault the crowds, if and when it came.

At the top of the *Buttes Chaumont*, near the small temple of Sybil, the team stood – all except for Yaëlle and Tuning who were charged with technical matters down in the square, and except for Ahmed who had been unable to resist watching his work finally come to fruition from up close. No-one spoke. The moment had arrived. Once upon a time, they had begun to tell one another a fairy tale. And then the fairy tale had gained momentum and they had run with it. They had taken big risks. They had gone underground, asked for the help of communist agents; they had crossed France on a barge, they had made deals with mercenaries, worked out complicated arithmetic, and even involved Swiss musicians. And now here they were. It was hard to believe. Paul reflected on the risks he had taken, on the sketchy people he had had to

deal with, and he no longer wished to think of himself as a confident soldier. Thierry was attempting in vain to come up with a rationalization but nothing in the recesses of history was in the league of what was about to happen. Simone was playing with her son; she could not explain how she had come to be part of the fairy tale: initially perhaps as the presumptive scientist, later perhaps out of sheer rage, but no explanation would suffice – it was just too difficult to comprehend. Bertrand was telling himself this was not the revolution he had imagined, but that particular revolution was to be forgotten; instead, perhaps the fairy tale was all that remained. Errico could hardly believe that this had all begun with one of his drunken soliloquies, in the aftermath of the devastating death of Edmond and the upsetting events in Corsica, but it had. Lise had no faith that this would truly succeed, and she did not know what to hope for. She had been so committed, had envisaged a party, music, people dancing. She had joined the fairy tale with all her peace-loving ideals but now she was sure of nothing, and even felt a niggling sense of guilt. But here they were. Here they all were, waiting, with their eyes trained upon the *Sacré Coeur*.

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Lemoine’s cellphone pinged with a notification. The two of them packed their bags and hastily left the Mansart suite of the Ritz, then double backed when they realized they had forgotten the glue spray gun on the small table on the terrace. Once they had coated the lock with glue, Lemoine posted the notice given to him by Yaëlle onto the door. The notice, in red ink, read: “Any attempt to force this door and stop the music will trigger an explosion inside the suite”.

“Not good enough” said Lemoine.

He fished a pen out of the inside pocket of his jacket, put on his glasses and thought for a moment. He then wrote a longer message on the other side of the notice. He re-read it, nodded with satisfaction, and stuck the notice back onto the door with a thumbtack. The notice now read:

“By all means, do pass through the Caudine Forks like a Roman surrendering to the Samnites; by all means, do run your hand gently down the face of the Zouave... but do not disturb! I am being rocked to sleep in a Presidential Suite with a lullaby by Stockhausen. You don’t believe me, you bunch of idiots? Any attempt at forced entry, any attempt to raid this room, will trigger fireworks ... and they will not be the monochromatic blues of Klein and Deschamps, but the blacks of Soulages! The stock price of the Ritz will crash, there will be collateral damage to your neighbour Dupont. Do enjoy your last cigarette!”

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For once, the Romani youths were on time. They arrived on eight spanking new bicycles, seven of which featured luggage racks upon which sat the youngest members of the group. Every now and then, they stood on the pegs attached to the rear wheels and looked around. At the head of their formation, the oldest among them wobbled as he performed a wheelie. There were few

people in the *rue de Rivoli* and the youths gathered round before turning right towards the *Place Vendôme*. The sight of the column shrouded in advertising banners triggered a sprint: the riders rose from their saddles and accelerated, while their passengers on the luggage racks shrieked war cries and pulled spray guns on straps from inside their jackets. They made a beeline for the column, narrowly missing bystanders, and aimed their spray guns at the advertising banners. A thick red cloud rose from the center of the square and forced the bystanders to back away, while the Romani youths continued on and disappeared in the neighbouring streets.

The column had disappeared completely in the red mist, the Purple Cloud as Thierry would have called it, proud of his literary reference. The bystanders, who had retreated to the outer corners of the square, stared at it in disbelief. Workers at the Ministry of Justice had gathered at the windows. The cabinet secretary tried in vain to reach the minister himself, who at that moment was chatting animatedly in his state car headed from Versailles to Paris. From the nearby Ritz hotel, staff and a few guests emerged and stood on the sidewalk.

Suddenly, the sound of a foghorn blasted from the speakers on the terrace of the Ritz, followed by a woman's voice urging all to stay away from the column in several languages.

When the mist dissipated, the column reappeared, still shrouded in advertising banners. For two minutes, there was complete silence, and then the scaffolding holding up the banners gave way and came crashing to the ground. And then the music started.

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Thénard was halfway through his daily jog around the Tuileries Gardens. He had taken sick leave the moment he'd caught wind of the ceremony at the *Sacré Coeur*. The red mist emanating from around the *rue de Rivoli* drew his attention. He stopped to remove his earbuds as the heavy bass emanating from the *Place Vendôme* was reverberating in his chest. Then he ran over. When he arrived at the square, he was dumbfounded by the beauty of the spectacle before him. The column was finally visible: from top to bottom, she appeared as an electric blue background dotted with images of all sorts of organisms in vivid colours. All manner of species – animal, botanical, imaginary – were depicted in a haphazard arrangement. It was a psychedelic ode to Nature, to all forms of life. For Ahmed, it was the leitmotiv that had led him on his journey from Sète to the outskirts of Paris. The bas-relief on the frieze of the column, and its presumptuous and obnoxious message, had disappeared.

The music blaring from the speakers on the terrace of the Ritz was remarkable too. a mix of electronica, jazz, pop, rap and protest songs. The Swiss musicians had been busy. And from their alpine meadow, they were now controlling the soundtrack in real-time through their personal laptops.

Inspector Thénard circled the column, full of admiration. He remembered the sketches seized from the squat; he never imagined that they would one day lead to such magnificence. He

noticed the eight, long, pink sea anemones that were arranged four by four and extending their multi-colored tentacles.

Suddenly, he noticed Ahmed who was standing a few yards away from him and gazing at his work. Thénard rifled through the pouch on his arm: along with id cards, his keys and his cellphone, he always carried a zip tie. He walked up to the artist and touched him on the shoulder.

“Nice work, mister graffiti artist. But now I will cuff you and then you can give me a guided tour of this exhibit.”

Ahmed, hands tied behind his back, remained silent. Then he smiled and said:

“Take a good look, inspector, because soon it will all vanish.”

Both men continued to take in the visuals and the music. Slowly they circled the column, examining her new appearance carefully. Thénard stared at the base of the column: it was black, dotted with tiny white specks that represented constellations and galaxies. He wondered what Ahmed meant when he said “vanish”.

“What is that ladderlike thing around the base?” Thénard asked.

“It’s DNA: at the end, it opens wide and lets out colourful confetti that symbolize Nature’s development”, Ahmed replied with a sagacious tone.

People around the square were beginning to dance. Thénard felt a sting in his lower back and heard a rough voice ordering him to set his prisoner free. Ahmed turned around and saw the man from the barge smiling at him.

A couple of Japanese tourists walked closer to the column to take photographs: the man was wielding a telescopic selfie arm to which his cellphone was affixed. From the speakers on the terrace, a peremptory voice ordered him in Japanese to step back immediately. The couple obeyed and hurried off while making slight apologetic bows.

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The countdown began.

Inside the van, Yaëlle and Tuning were glued to their laptop screen, entranced by the scene in the *Place Vendôme* as relayed by cameras positioned on the terrace of the Ritz. Tuning, who had helped Ahmed with the transformation of the column’s appearance, could scarcely believe his eyes. Never before had acetate sheets been used for this purpose. He thought he recognized in a creature with six tentacles a depiction of his own tattoo. Yaëlle laughed when she saw the statue of Napoleon swathed in a long red robe: the erstwhile emperor was wearing a cylindrical hat adorned with peacock feathers. Inside it was the container holding Edmond’s ashes.

Yaëlle had done all the final checks: the connection with the start-up system was up and stable. Tuning was humming a stadium song: “We will break your hearts ...we will kick your asses...”, perhaps out of heedlessness, perhaps out of the nervousness that was causing his sweaty palms. With the countdown finished, Yaëlle gave him the signal and he pressed the “Enter” key on the laptop. Eight missiles, disguised as sea anemones, were launched. But the column on the *Place Vendôme* remained standing. Yaëlle and Tuning stared at the screen in despair. Not a moment too soon, the column began to tremble and gave up her resistance. She took off, one yard, fifty yards, up and up she went to show her new appearance to the entire city. Down on the square, her stone core remained, and inside it the spiral staircase that was now an endless stairway, a metaphor for the assault on the heavens that had been so dear to Thierry.

When she reached an altitude of a hundred feet, the column changed course and began to fly north. The multi-coloured rocket, topped by an emperor transformed into the “perfidious queen of Albion”, gained speed. Napoleon’s long red robe began to billow, evoking the red flag symbolic of the Paris Commune. The rocket continued at full speed towards Montmartre and the *Sacré Coeur*, where the president had just begun his speech. The streets all around were teeming with demonstrators.

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The blast was heard all over the city. The demonstrators stared in the direction of the *Sacré Coeur*: they did not know what to think, but they knew something huge had occurred. Utter silence had replaced their chants and protest songs. It was broken by the sound of an airplane that came from the south. The crowds turned their eyes towards the sky. The plane was the kind used for skydiving, and it was flying low and in circles. Soon, red specks began to appear from its belly and float down; little by little it became clear that they were small, red, Chinese umbrellas that carried bamboo baskets, slowly making their way down. The crowds were dazed and remained still, until a brave soul stepped up to a basket that had landed. It was full of cherries – the fruit that “oozes blood”, the fruit that looks like “dangle earrings made of coral”. The onlookers understood that it was a homage to them all.

Here and there, black-clad youths jumped into action, their faces covered with balaclavas and goggles. With heavy bats, they smashed storefront windows to smithereens – some fifty storefronts of commercial spaces that had been turned to AirBnb. Makeshift tables were revealed, covered with beer kegs and bottles of *kriek* and *ginginha*. Banners were displayed with the message “It’s the *Temps des Cerises!*” The Black Bloc boys turned on music, and a version for “piano and female voice” of the Anthem of the Paris Commune broke the silence. The Black Bloc boys pulled off their balaclavas and revealed their grinning faces. The crowds helped themselves and raised their drinks. On the tables, they also found masks of the happy faces of the Communards, and they put them on before dancing away.

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Back on the *Place Vendôme*, the onlookers were still stunned by what they had just witnessed. Images of the events began to circulate on social media.

Thénard felt at a loss of what to do; all his convictions shaken to the core. He turned towards Ahmed and Lolo who were staring at him, then down at the stopwatch he had been using for his jog and paused. All he knew was that he had not completed his daily route, so he nodded goodbye and resumed his run.

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A few miles away, on top of the Buttes Chaumont, the team had witnessed the column's flight.

The *Sacré Coeur* was no more.

Thierry was jotting down notes; he was already planning an appraisal of his life. Errico was staring blankly at the spot where, just a few minutes earlier, the forces of power had called the shots, both in the real and figurative sense. Tuning imagined himself at the wheel of a fast car – he was determined it would be a Mustang this time; he knew where to get one. Bertrand stared at his own hands, the hands with which he had wanted to build a better world. He wondered about that persistent ache under his left shoulder blade that left him breathless and that he had told no-one about. He bade farewell to his revolution. Yaëlle and Lise stared silently at the scene, then at each other; they embraced tightly and kissed each other on the mouth. Simone's face remained expressionless as she followed the large cloud of smoke in its slow rise. She held her son with her left hand; her right hand rose and rested on Paul's shoulder. The former serviceman's cellphone pinged: it was a message from Ahmed saying "on my way".

"Right then!" Lise shouted, "shall we celebrate?"