What a pain in the ass! Luckily, I had a set of master keys left. These are old buildings; they haven’t switched to digital code or anything. I made a full red Coca type, similar to Ferrari red, with a slight undertone. Thursday evening, I met up with Funk. The others were already going around the city to spray it with this new anti-advertising campaign.

We had to wait until there was really no one left, so we walked around a bit in Tâchelêt-les-Halles and in the Marais area to pass the time. I had stashed my painting in a corner. The pressure was already mounting. I never stopped having the shakes, even after twenty years of graffiti.

I used to pull out my nose hairs. That’s my way of evacuating. The other one, it must have disgusted him, but he pretended not to see. We took the opportunity to talk about graffiti and everything. And I wanted to ask him about his life and what it was like in prison, but he didn’t seem interested in talking. So we went to a terrace near the building to see how things were going, if there were schmits in the area or not so much. It seemed fine. We spotted the code so well that there wasn’t even a key. We started to kid the passersby. I hate waiting. We shouldn’t have come so early. After that, very quickly, it was time for the pochetrons, the ones I normally belong to. There they were, going back somewhere, piling up in a Parisian apartment to talk nonsense between two bottles bought at the grocery store. They would talk political crap that they would surely regret the next day if they remembered. The latest movie review, the latest TV series would be played along with a radio nostalgia tune while waiting for the neighbor to come and yell. Or they’ll go and drink donkey piss in East Paris, with ten guys on a girl who inevitably already feels harassed, and these gentlemen, powerless, will go outside, scratch a tourniquet, and beat up a guy at random. Beautiful.

We passed the first door at ease with the material. I had taken care to stick the holder of the second

door. We went all the way up. We had a little telescoping ladder to get to the skylight. The roof was fucking attic, man. I didn’t know how to fuck with my body. Funk was handing me the gear while I clung to the tiles with the taut paw of a bear on too-fragile ice. I'm afraid of the void. How could I forget? I didn’t have it before, but the older I get, the less I can stand it. I was already sweating profusely, and it wasn’t because of the heat. We drove back to the edge to have some time without being too exposed. Funk had the roll ready on a pole. He held it out to me.

«-Come on, go ahead.

-Nah, I can’t go big. I’m afraid of heights. You go ahead.

-Nah, it’s dead. I’m not drawing a Nazi cross, man. Seriously.

-Well, it’s the same for me.

-It was your idea, right? You proposed it at the meeting.

-Oh fuck... Okay.»

I went forward with my pelvis like a spider, or rather like a possessed person in the style of The Exorcist. I was right on the edge. I looked down. I wanted to assess. Fuck, it took me to the heart. I am one of those people who have the call of the void. I don’t know why, I imagine myself jumping. It stuck in my craw. I blew like an ox to get my heart rate down a notch, but there was nothing I could do. I didn’t even have the energy to go up and join him on the edge.

-Come on, damn it! We’re not going to pass the night here, yo!

-Yeah. Okay, I'll do my best, bro!

One more breath later, I was close enough to the wall to start. It’s a good thing I wasn’t doing the Mona Lisa because my hand was shaking as hard as my knees. I had to get up to do the upper right part. There, my body fooled me. Out of nervousness, I did a mini lambada and swuiped! A tile came off. I smashed my face backwards with a big Aaaah! or rather a dry but sharp Ah! Fortunately, the tile didn’t go any further than the gutter, but it sure made a lot of noise. The other guy was yelling at me.

-Damn it! Go back up! Come on up.

He held out his hand to me. I couldn’t even move, so he reached down a little. He pulled hard enough so I didn’t have much time to think. He wedged me near the skylight.

-Don’t move. I’ll take care of it.

I felt like crap.

-You’ve made a mess of things.

He was trying to take in my features. That’s when I saw his face tilt. Tac tac. Two blasts of gyros lit him up. «Shit» he whispered as he reached me. That «Shit» meant, I’m not going back in front of the judge. Especially not to be accused of being a Nazi. Indeed, the red cross was done, but not the rest.

-What do we do?

-One goes down again.

-Especially not man. They are waiting for us downstairs.

-Well yeah. But we’re not staying here.» Personally, I wanted to go back down. I prefer the waterfall to the heights. Arsène Lupin does not count among my ancestors.

«-We’ll leave the stuff here. Come on, let’s go from rooftop to rooftop.

-Nah, I can’t.

-Come on! Courage, damn it!»

He gave me a little shake and took off like a cat. I followed him. We stepped over a first path. Afterwards, he walked on the roof. I was on all fours. He was waiting for me at each low wall. We did five like that. He most likely found a skylight he liked. He was kicking it. So to relax, I said :

«-It’s called a vasistas because the Germans asked «Was ist das?»

He answered:

«-Fuck, this is not the right time, man.» Fortunately, the wood had been eaten away by moths. It gave way. We snuck in. At arm’s length, there was more than a man’s length to fall down. We tumbled down the stairs like schoolboys. At the bottom, we went to the backyard to see if there was an escape route, but in Paris that rarely exists. We had to go out the front. Funk said he wasn’t staying there.

We had to separate quickly. We went out next to the Monop’.

I heard «Police!» My blood ran cold. We ran without looking back. Funk turned left onto Rue Rambuteau, which led to the Forum. I turned right. I ran with my hands straight up like Usain Bolt. My lungs were already spitting everything but saliva. I expelled a future cancer that day. My thighs were swelling, already all sinewy. My heart was shooting acid into my arms. I was careful not to sprain my ankle (it was weak from a fight three years ago) and to know which way to go. I went through the Place de l’Horloge. Then I found a deep parking lot entrance. I went there to hide. Catch my breath. I really didn’t know what to do. This thing was a dead end. So, I went back for a run with less reserve. I slowed down somewhere. I don’t know where. The problem is, I get lost fast enough to go in circles. This has happened to me more than once. So I went into a small square where some guys were chilling. On the sign, I read: Square Anne Frank. Fucking shame. Why did I go and make a fucking Nazi cross? Shit. The guys looked at me suspiciously, but they didn’t ask. I left after another ten minutes. I had made sure to turn my jacket inside out, according to the description. I washed off the paint stains by spitting in my hands and caught the first Noctilien that passed by.

We had our vandal scandal, but it was more like a failure. In the end, it is always public opinion that sets the tone and the press a little. Both were mixed. Le Parisien talked about the Nazi cross, but there was no reference to Jeffrey. It was blamed on young skinheads, the kind of youth with a patriotic identity. Fortunately for us. But it was a failure because it was just a Nazi cross story that came out and nothing else. The specialized press talked about the posters posed by our teams and the vandalism acts multiplied tenfold by the fans who got the NFT. Le Monde wrote two columns. The newspaper was positive. Artists were needed to speak out against the hegemony of the big brands promoting harmful drinks on the streets of the capital. They were happy to see that not everything was regulated by money alone. Or so they thought. Jeffrey had shown that, despite her status as a well-known artist, she could stand up and fight. But that wasn’t enough for the team. They wanted international press and headlines. They had to go one step further to live without the patron they were leaving. And the former sponsor didn’t take it lying down. Coca Cola had an extraordinary reactivity. They hired a powerful communication agency, in fact, two guys who were the first in France to attempt ambush marketing and to create fake Twitter and Instagram accounts for advertising services. Young and offensive guys to respond to our young and offensive company.

«Ouuuuulala... I’m sure they’re just doing it for the fun of it. It makes them feel good to jump on a hot artist. A nice feat for them» said Jo. Actually, Coca explained right away that they were working with Jeffrey. By leaking their privileged information to the press, they were able to discredit it. It was hard to believe. These big companies were the type to cover up everything, but this time they preferred to expose the artist. They are, in fact, too big to fall, as the Americans say. The comments underneath the articles on the internet were cinglant. The public was disappointed. Trolls trolled. A corrupt artist always hurts the public. On the internet, the comments were buzzing: I was sure, this artist is a sell-out like all the others. They do it only for the money. The art world has been perverted for far too long. - Pop artists are lawless. They work hand in hand with those they should denounce and when they do, you realize that it is only a revenge for a badly sealed pact. It disgusts me. Or The street artists call themselves underground, but they are just waiting for a cock to suck. And so on. They weren’t philosophers’ criticisms, but Jeffrey’s fan was taking a big hit. The worst came from all the feminist bloggers who had all the stones they wanted to throw. The marketing department of Coke immediately commented in the press and issued a denial on their own website by posing in their meeting room with a painting of Jeffrey in the background. They said they would start a procedure for all targeted acts of vandalism. So, this is how a major corporation murders a partner artist to show who is the powerful one in this story. The company leaks its own relationship, offers a denial and smothers its prey in unending legal proceedings. The public is left with a complicated impression of a controversial artist and does not want to hear about it anymore. For that simple reason: Crowd’s imagination likes simple things. And Coke knows this. And if Coke finds a way to tire the artist out with legal harassment then it’s history. They had won.

A crisis meeting was already promised. We put the visuals on sale, despite everything. Lisa received invitations to do an interview with Graffiti Art magazine and Beaux Art magazine, asking to speak with the artist, but she preferred not to answer. It was too small; it wasn’t worth it. Funk looked at me with dark eyes. I was glad to know he was home safe, though. Jack was now more concerned than usual. Lost his cool. He was avoiding eye contact. That wasn’t his style. He was a straight-laced type. He addressed Jo and with a sharp tone.

«-Well then! How does this story go? Did we crash or what?»

Jack was showing a more brutal side of his personality. He had def dropped the benevolent boss. You could see the street guy behind the mask, a hint of a street accent in the endings.

«-We’ll have to wait for a sales result, but we all understood that for this debut as a free artist, it’s not great. We could have done better. Can they really sue our asses off? These guys probably have private investigators who specialize in industrial espionage. Are we really safe from this? They can find us by following Lisa, right?»

-Lisa?»

«-I didn’t expect them to expose their relationship with the artist. I have to admit, this works well. For the vandalism, we’d have enough for paying back, but the defamation against Coke and Nestlé with all the lawyers they have, we can lose some feathers. As long as we hide, we can slip through the net. They will surely have better things to do soon.

-Pedro, what do you think?

-Honestly. I don’t know. Maybe with a little time, it can pass as a funny move. A rebellious act. I like the new stuff. That’s what we wanted, right? Let’s get moving!

-Yeah. We wanted it to move, but for the better!» Said Funk. «The quality doesn’t follow, brother. We should not even release the videos. Besides, it’s a good thing we didn’t get busted on the Nazi cross. I don’t do stuff like this again. It was a bad idea. That’s all I’m saying.

-Domi?

-I agree with just about everyone. It’s a damp squib as they say.

-Yeah well, it’s your damp squib actually.» cut in Funk.

-Well, no, actually. I’ve been given a hot potato. I do what I can.

-Well, you can’t apparently...

I threw a hand forward to give me time to speak. «-I’m sorry about that. The guys on the internet, they’re right. Your concept wasn’t clear from the beginning and by trying to go the long way around, you just lost both parties, your patron and your re- putation.

-That’s the tragedy of street artists, said Pedro. They do altruistic campaigns in order to gain power, fame and money. You can’t have a clear message and therefore you can’t have an exceptional artist in the long run.

-So what do you suggest?» asked Jack.

Pedro said:

-I propose Jeffrey simply make art for art’s sake. Something beautiful in the streets. Beauty works too. People don’t care about committed artists. They’ve lost all hope anyway. They want beautiful colors. And we can do product placement on the first level. Even placement for luxury brands, I’m sure.» Lisa retorted:

«-It’s not the same artist if we go down that road. And it doesn’t change the problem that falls on Jeffrey: A lawsuit.»

In a hitherto unsuspected burst of initiative, I stood up and cut short:

«-Exactly. It’s best to play dead. I know you’ve gone to a lot of effort to get Jeffrey in shape but, you have to learn to cut it short. That’s why I think you have to kill Jeffrey. You have to stage a tragic death, I said.

-An accident?

-A murder?

- A Suicide. We need to send a strong message to the public. Slander is wrong and dangerous. A feminist artist like Jeffrey is pure, uncorruptible. The corrupted world of humans who cast the first stone and the temptations of the red drink have taken their toll on our Joan of Arc burned at the stake of the contemporary inquisition. The Coca group will not be able to communicate on such unexpected and tragic news. Jeff’s aura will be multiplied tenfold. Coke will simply drop the case. Either she’s really dead. Or they have nothing to gain. If they discover us and expose us, the public will surely find this little trick like an extraordinary and cringe-worthy situation for the first imaginary, feminist, dead, x-rated artist. Yo! And between you and me, death is still the greatest work an artist can boast of staging.» Lisa gave a nervous laugh.

«-This is nonsense! What do we sell after ?»

I said:

«Whatever happens, we can expect Jeff’s stock to rise quickly and we can even send you, Lisa, to auction houses. No more galleries, we make money on the works we already have in stock.

-It’s called a collection fund in the business and it’s true big collectors love it, said Jack.

I picked it up while I got five on it.

-Yes. Because a dead artist, it’s an artist who doesn’t piss anyone off anymore... And that leaves us time to create another artist...»

I could feel the reluctance of just about everyone. The worker doesn’t like change. The boss does. Because a boss always has a budget in mind that corresponds to the programmed death of the company. His role, among other things, is to always delay this death. So Jack, as a good leader, supported me in my strategy of sacrificing soldiers for the benefit of the team:

«- The kid is right. The important thing is that we have a team, our team. We have a know-how and more experience.»

I went on to put Lisa in my pocket first. She didn’t want to leave her baby.

-Lisa, the galleries will feel sorry for you and you will take the opportunity to introduce our brand new artist. This will give you a better footing. Whereas if you insist, you will sink slowly. As much as this company will either hide or go to court for criminal conspiracy until liquidation. And the problem...

-It’s that you’ll be the first one followed by investigators if there is some...»

Jack finished my sentence with aplomb. Jo was no longer completely serene.

«-We lose the insta account and everything else...» But Jack resumed:

«-I know. But it’s exciting... Our company works in secrecy. If we’re going to be discovered, we’d better disappear as soon as possible... And reappear somewhere else where we’re not expected.»

Funk said:

«-Wait. So what happens is we introduce Domi. Nobody really knows him. He made a bad move that puts our revenue stream at risk, so we kill that revenue stream and let him change everything. What did your NFT’s do? Did they even make any money on that?

- No, they don’t make money because we did an airdrop.

-A what?

-An airdrop, which means that we gave everything away for free. We’ll get money on resales. For the moment, it can’t give much. But with Jeffrey’s death, we can expect to make money on speculation... Because the model is the same as the art model.

-But who will be in charge of takinf care of the NFT sites if Jeffrey is supposed to be dead?

I said:

-That’s the whole point. Jeffrey will be able to discuss NFT as his most recent work as a last wish before her death. The NFT are managed by smart contracts, programs that regulate the royalties by themselves. So we can say that Jeffrey had planned everything, that the royalties would go to a trusted program that would give a part to feminist associations... That she is doing this for posterity...

Jo asked:

-And who will be supposed to speak on the chat... And the Discord?

-... Well... We can pay moderators, but it would be more interesting if Jeffrey created an artificial intelligence to answer and advance his digital work indefinitely: her ultimate work.

"What the fuck?" Funk exclaimed.

- It’s very interesting,» said Jack.

- But artificial intelligence is dumb!

-Not at all, I said. It’s everywhere now. Wake up, you too.»

It was time for me to go further...

«And then you can say it's AI... We don’t have to actually create a real one.

-... You’re a good talker, but in real life, I’m not sure you’re that good. You won’t be there to help if it doesn’t work. But me brother, if I don’t have a job because of you, I’ll break your face.

-In the meantime, you don’t have anything better. Jack finally closed:

-Dominique. I agree with you. And even for this artificial intelligence thing, I think we have the tools to create one for real. I outsource Kiki, our hacker. Other than that... the most important thing for us is, do you know what you want to do? I mean, do you have an idea for a new artist who would work better? So we don’t get thrown for a loop or at a loss? We can’t all get motivated without a real project... Without a good idea.

-I have an idea in mind.

-What idea?

-I don’t know... I have to think about it calmly. Funk was waiting for me at the corner:

-Well yeah... But don’t put yourself down too much either, because afterwards, you have to assume that you’re a sucker.

"Ech, you’re not in Middleschool anymore, stop talking to me like that.»

Jack once again intervened.

-Ohhh!... That’s good!

I said:

-I will create a clear and consistent artist for you and it will be life changing...»

Pedro said he would help me work on the question. I complied.

The struggles for power, the wounded egos, the conflicts of interest, the jealousies and all the damn baseness of the human animal went right up my nostrils. The environment was a bit toxic, I had to admit. Finally, I had just arrived and if I took care of the project, that made me a superior in a way. Pedro was older and wanted to be put in charge. Funk was the only one who expressed reluctance to trust me, but it was probably a natural feeling. I couldn't understand why Jack had so much faith in me. At the same time, without being arrogant, true creative people, true artists, are hard to come by, and a creative company without good creative is doomed to fail. They needed someone to direct their energy.

«-Job’s done, my friends. Paris is a great city and Jeffrey is already part of the walls. She has contributed much and time will repay her. But it is time for us to celebrate the life  and welcome a new artist. Domi was hired for this after all, so let’s give him a chance. Amen.»

As I reached my office, I opened my Blackbook to admire the blank pages and what I could put in them. And then I noticed something. Amer had written a note that wasn’t there when I arrived this morning.

Hi Domi,

Be careful what happens next. When you succeed in something, you attract jealousy. Prepare your plan. Share only what needs to be shared. Get rid of your ego and write a good story.

Amer

I scanned the writing to see if the ink still looked fresh. I didn’t really like it. In addition to the toxic nature of the team, and the semi-legal aspect of the business, I had the impression that one could potentially be bugged or watched... Anyway. The enigma of Amer and its Blackbooks was starting to weigh on me. Jack is in the office. He sat across the table and banged on it.

«-God Michel!» he said. That was rock n’ roll! Good. Come and see. Come here.»

I approached, and he grabbed me by the collar, kind of like a ghetto boy. He put his big blonde  head close to mine. It surprised me. A big change of attitude. Threatening atmosphere. For the first time, he played the shy one with strange humor, similar to the guys who put their arm around your shoulders when they try a racket. And I’m not really a people person, so that made me bristle.

«-Don’t be a jerk. That’s a whole lot of people counting on you. I guess you’ve never had this kind of responsibility before.»

He smiled and let me go. It looked like a bad Joe Pesci imitation. He softened, if I may say so... The caress after the slap.

«-My little Domi. Don’t worry. Good. What do you have to take care of?

- Time.

- How much is it?

-One week.

- One week is good.

- If it works. I want to get paid accordingly.

-Go for a walk. Get some fresh air and come back to us. We’ll take care of the rest.

-Did you come to put the note in my book?

-When?

-There, just now.

-No. I was at the meeting with you. Chop-chop. Don’t show me. It’s from Amer so it’s confidential. You really need to take the reflex, it is important.

-Was he here this morning?

-Surely, yes. Didn’t you see ?

-It’s you Amer, actually.

-Ahahah. No, sorry man. Don’t worry, you’ll see her one day.

-Her ?

-Yes. It’s a woman. Do you mind?

-No, no....Not at all. I just didn’t know. I was imagining...

-There are many things that you are not yet aware of, my boy.

-I’ll need to talk to the hacker.

-Kiki? No way. You make all your requests on your Blackbook or verbally when you see me. That’s it.»

I didn’t like the atmosphere at all, but I also felt that I had to do something important here. It was like a call, a destiny, a timing, a momentum. I’ve missed so many opportunities in my life and it’s precisely because I didn’t know they were important. This time, I had a kind of reading, an intimate conviction. I thought about that mysterious note from Amer. Had it passed during the meeting? Maybe it was her, with her books, that gave this mystical impression. Maybe it was. I went to cafes to write, to the parks to think about it. Theory.