

## CHAPTER I

A dull crack. Then a second one. More violent.

The Polish Death Metal band, which had just brought thousands of spectators to their feet, screaming and dancing, had left the stage for only a few seconds. Very quick when necessary to set up the stage between two shows, the Copenhell 2022 technicians were already installing the grey and white banner announcing the next group. To the left and right of the ten-meter-wide canvas, two nuns wearing headdresses topped with crescent moons symbolized the implacable and powerful Deathdoom music of the four Danish women who would play immediately afterwards. The name of the band was written in large letters on the background of the stage, capturing everyone's attention: KONVENT. The "O" repeated the particular imagery of the nuns' headdresses, positioning the crescent moon with its two ends pointing up.

The large plasticized banner had just been hoisted successfully. The crowd was growing more and more agitated; since the release of their first album *Puritan Masochism*, Konvent's reputation had spread far beyond the borders of Denmark. Everyone was looking forward to their powerful riffs and the cavernous voice of Rikke Emilie List.

At this very moment, a huge roar made all heads turn to the back of the stage. Much like the frightening noise of a monster from the depths swallowing its prey by the thousands, the din had certainly been heard in the center of Copenhagen.

An enormous cavity appeared, covering an area the size of four or five soccer fields. Metal fans were dumbfounded by the sight; the ground had simply disappeared. A dark gap replaced a lawn that had been hammered a few minutes earlier by jumping, jostling fans, regularly forming circle pits that twisted like skillful caterpillars among the enthusiastic spectators dancing wild pogos.

Surrounded by unstable rock debris and on the verge of wavering into the abyss, this gigantic hole had an irregular shape. It looked a bit like the upper portion of a boiled egg, the top of which had been broken off in order to taste the inside. But here, there was neither yolk nor white. Just a lake of darkness exhaling the smells of wet earth and swamp.

After total amazement subsided into a kind of astonishment, a few spectators and several members of the festival's technical staff approached. Slowly. Very slowly. Their caution was justified. Given the current state of affairs, it was impossible to know if the perimeter of the well that had suddenly appeared in the middle of the show was stable or if it would in turn tip into this cavity, which was as dark as the night.

The other spectators and the musicians of the bands attending this festival devoted to Metal in all its forms remained motionless, apparently waiting for an announcement : either the show would soon resume or a quick evacuation of the site would be recommended.

The noise of the landslide and rock fall had subsided and the situation seemed to be at a standstill. Anyone who climbed above the Copenhell would have felt the poignant emotions of a disaster movie scene shot in slow motion. In such circumstances, silence and lack of movement were often more anxiety-provoking than tumult and shouting.

While stillness prevailed everywhere, the members of Konvent began to move towards the edge of this dark, unfathomable well. The Danish Deathdoom band, composed of Heidi Withington Brink on bass, Julie Simonsen on drums, Rikke Emilie List on vocals and Sara Helena Nørregaard on guitar, was scheduled to start playing in a few minutes. The sudden collapse of part of the field made it unlikely that the festival would continue in its usual form. The four musicians didn't know what to do.

However, they did not have the opportunity to dwell on their questions. The young Danish girls soon felt the power of an immaterial force on their legs, torsos and shoulders. They turned around. Nothing... Nobody! Driven by a disturbing vitality, the emptiness propelled them forward without the slightest wind. Strangely enough, this unusual phenomenon affected no one other than the foursome.

Why? They had no idea. But it was a fact. An invisible hand was urging them to approach a colossal lip of crushed rocks overlooking a stinking abyss.

“What’s going on?” Heidi asked, eyes wide.

“I don’t know,” Julie, Sara and Rikke answered in chorus.

Realizing there was no point in resisting an unknown and perfectly invisible force, the four young women allowed themselves to be carried to the edge of the pit.

Their emotions were contradictory. Fear dominated. Without being particularly prone to vertigo, Sara, Rikke, Heidi and Julie didn’t want to find themselves just above a dark precipice that could, at any moment, catch them and draw them into the void. Another overwhelming feeling: their bodies refused to respond and this unexpected situation generated a shiver tinged with the supernatural. Pushed by an invisible force, one that could not be counterbalanced, the four young women wondered about the origin of this senseless power that affected them while the crowd around them remained motionless. Almost dazed. The last impression was almost joyful, voluptuous. Simple curiosity. An insatiable curiosity that counterbalanced anguish and panic. The desire to discover what lay behind this collapse was the strongest feeling of all.

Why? No answer for now.

The queens of Danish Deathdoom continued to head in the direction of the gigantic abyss. They had to make their way through a heterogeneous, colorful crowd. In the case of a festival dedicated to Metal, like Copenhell, uniformity of dress and behavior was banned. Most of those present were wearing their fetish kutte or “battle jacket”. Comfortable and symbolic of a lifestyle dedicated to Metal, these sleeveless, patched jackets had all been patiently covered with the emblems of their favorite bands. As proof that such jackets were important and truly part of the life of the metal lover: each battle jacket was strictly personal. Even better, each fan sewed on their own patches and their emblematic jacket was never repaired. If a jacket was torn, it stayed torn.

Here, many spectators wore patches with the Konvent logo on their kutties. Elegant and intriguing, it was structured in two distinct levels with the first three letters of the group’s name at the top and the last four at the bottom. This original, neat design included old runic characters. This choice comes as no surprise. Heidi, Sara, Rikke and Julie are Danish. The oldest datable runic inscriptions, the Vimose inscriptions, are in Denmark and date from the 2nd century.

Yet, among the sleeveless and highly decorated jackets, there were shorts, tee-shirts and a wide range of clothing showing that Metal is open to everyone and does not care about the origin, age, lifestyle or dress of its fans. Only one passion counted here: good music that drives you crazy and the vibrations that go with it. Nothing else matters.

The Konvent musicians sneaked out without looking back at the stage where they were to have played five minutes later if the cataclysm had not opened up the ground over a very wide area.

After a one-minute walk that was greatly facilitated by the friendly and firm presence of an invisible hand pushing at their backs, they finally reached the edge of the abyss.

Several of the festival’s technical and security staff were there too. They formed an effective perimeter, securing the area.

The Konvent members moved forward a little more. The place was dangerous and caution was called for. The edge of the abyss seemed fragile, ragged and jagged. They froze for a moment and peered down into the well, which seemed to have been built on a titanic scale.

“It’s completely black down there,” Sara said, nodding doubtfully.

The guitar player swept back a few blonde locks that seemed to be attracted to the abyss. Then she continued, “You can’t see anything at all. But there is a strong smell of moisture and mold.”

“Exactly!” confirmed Rikke, wrinkling her nose.

The singer with the deep, hoarse voice wondered just then what they were doing here.

“A dark, smelly sewer...” Heidi summed up. “I wouldn’t vacation there!”

The Konvent bass player had just summed up their common impression. Given the situation, the first logical reaction to this statement should have been a brief step back. Then, a cautious return to the vast esplanade in front of the stage.

Yet they didn't move. From multiple questions to aborted gestures, the four young women, who enthralled their fans with their heavy, hypnotic, powerful sound, were consulting one another, exchanging explicit glances. This mute discussion reflected confused feelings, feelings they could not find a source for. Julie Simonsen was about to speak when a deep, infrasound voice roared in their ears, "THE TIME HAS COME!"

Tetvanized, Sara, Julie, Rikke and Heidi looked at one another, wondering where this phonic tsunami had come from; apparently it was not at all audible to the dozens of people near them. The relative impassivity of the audience and the Copenhell staff indicated that this tectonically-induced rumble was concentrated only in the heads of the four Konvent musicians.

They were taken aback, wondering what the voice meant by "the time has come!". What time? And why?

The sudden appearance of a gigantic hole that gave the troubling sensation of an opening to the abyss of hell described by Greek mythology or by Dante in the *Divine Comedy* was in itself quite astonishing. The singer and her three friends had the impression that, if they bent forward a little, they would be able to see the Styx and the other infernal rivers surrounding Tartarus, the deepest, darkest and most sinister place in the underworld. In this frightening environment, discovering that the "time had come" did not reassure them. Not at all!

"What are we going to do?" Heidi asked.

The band's bass player suspected that no one was in a position to answer that question. However, the simple fact of asking it meant they were still anchored in reality and not scattered in constantly shifting nightmares.

"DESCEND!"

Halfway between the crash of a cliff collapsing into the sea and the early rumblings of a major volcanic eruption, the sounds escaping from the abyss were of unheard-of power. Making the brain vibrate. The body too.

The invisible entity inviting them to descend into the abyss specified, "TAKE THE SPIRAL PATH JUST UNDER YOUR FEET!"

Rikke and Sara sighed and took a first step.

Their reaction was astonishing because this dark void was disturbing, almost evil. Obeying a thundering voice that crept into one's head seemed just a little crazy.

"What are you doing?" Julie asked, alarmed.

The gray, green eyes of the Konvent drummer widened.

"We're going down," answered Rikke and the band's guitar player in an almost peaceful tone.

Heidi joined them. She in turn realized that approaching the abyss brought a feeling of regained calm. It would have been an exaggeration to refer to it as serenity or happiness. But calm was returning.

"Come!" the bass player said, waving to Julie, who was now the only one still standing away from the dark pit that whispered strange calls and spoke in a thunderous voice heard only by them.

The drummer wrinkled her nose with its golden ring. Realizing that her three friends did not seem very frightened to be on a first-name terms with an abyss that had only been in existence for a few minutes, she decided to join them.

Mesmerized, the festival audience and the Copenhell technical teams observed four figures dressed in black walking along a deep chasm, without giving the impression of feeling the slightest fear.

Standing side by side, the Konvent singer and musicians were able to observe the immense, seemingly bottomless well. As darkness reigned unchallenged there, it was very difficult to discern the real structure of Dante's *Inferno*, which had just opened in the middle of a Metal festival. However, the future participants in an underground and vertical odyssey followed a narrow path down into the abyss. It sloped steeply. But it did not seem to present any danger comparable to that of an acrobatic descent in the Himalayas or the Andes. As the sound tsunami that had crept into them had pointed out, this dark and stony track formed a spiral that swirled through the heart of the titanic vertical cavity.

The queens of Deathdoom, facing the abyss beneath them, were trying to estimate the depth of the cavity, which looked a bit like the chimney of a volcano that had been fossilized for millions of years. A

comparison immediately came to mind: Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Yet, two important details set this natural architecture apart from the French novelist's world. It could be legitimately hoped that this wide, irregularly shaped well did not descend into the heart of our planet. Moreover, the chimney of the volcano described by Jules Verne had been dug into the earth's crust in time immemorial while this deep vertical scar had just appeared.

"We're going down?" Rikke asked, glancing at the three musicians standing shoulder to shoulder.

This closeness was not merely the result of the powerful bonds of friendship that had bound the four young women together since they had made the decision in 2015 to form a metal band. Permanent contact allowed them to exchange their body heat, to give one another strength and courage in the face of this crazy project: descending into an unknown abyss that hadn't existed ten minutes earlier.

"YOUR ODYSSEY BEGINS..."

The hubbub of colliding metal sheets and breaking mountains had given them the answer they had all been waiting for. This telluric thought from the most archaic ages was no longer giving orders. It simply confirmed the reality that was going to be theirs for some time.

Sara, Heidi, Julie and Rikke briefly wondered why they didn't just step away from the humid crevice, its darkness most likely concealing the existence of terrifying monsters and innumerable dangers. Stepping away and fleeing were always possible; the invisible pressure which had pushed them to the edge of the abyss seemed to have disappeared. Only that inner voice remained, vibrating within them like the sound of a giant gong refusing to dissipate in the atmosphere.

However, this thought disguised as a sound cataclysm took precedence over everything.

They began to descend slowly, without bothering to look back or inform their fans. The band's followers saw them plunge into the abyss of a world doomed to the omnipotence of tectonic forces.