

The Revenant Cave
By Danny Cove

Our packs weighed heavy on us as we walked through the gloom. We only used our lights half the time, in those moments when the dark clouds would obscure the moon and the shadows would grow and stretch, as if crawling out from beneath the rocks and bushes, reaching for us. Our lights would disperse those shadows long enough for the clouds to shift and send the dark patches on the earth back to their hiding places. Cavendish, my superior on this mission, led the way in his steady, never-wavering pace, the constant, rhythmic footsteps of a methodically-trained soldier.

But he didn't stay silent as you'd think a soldier on a mission would. Instead, he spoke an almost unusual amount, as if he was afraid of the silence. And on our walk, he began explaining more about our mysterious mission and its connection to the DDC, the agency which had only just barely hired me. "So if you missed your briefing," Cavendish began after he'd exhausted most avenues of chitchat, "then you don't know much about what it is we're doing out here, eh?" I could pick the slight hint of a Welsh accent hidden beneath years of travel and the ingratiating of a decade or two's worth of foreign words into his own basic speech.

"I know we're locating something called a Revenant Pit," I answered him. "And we're under strict orders from Interpol to...to identify it and...handle...the situation...according to standard protocols." I struggled to remember the exact wording of our mission guidelines.

"In a manner, yes," Cavendish answered. "Only our orders aren't from Interpol. While our company was initially founded as a sub-branch of the *Polizii Internazionale*, we've gone under the radar. Off the grid, as those across the pond would say. The DDC operates independently; while we managed to keep ahold of Interpol's resources and authority, that

agency no longer even knows about us. I think the Vatican had something to do with that cover-up, though I can only speculate on how.”

“So the Vatican has a hand in the DDC, then?” I asked. “I know they let Interpol store some of their important artifacts, but I didn’t know they had a controlling interest in the DDC.”

“Who the bloody hell knows if they do or not?” he responded. “You and me, the free agents, we’re kept out-of-the-loo on most things. Personally, I don’t even know what DDC stands for, and I’ve worked for them over twenty years. Do you happen to have any ideas?” I shook my head. “Shame. I have my own theory but...well, we’ll get to that later. Move along.”

“So what’s a Revenant Pit, then?” I asked as I moved up beside him, trying to keep up with his longer strides. Though he was much heavier than me, he was also significantly taller, which gave him an elongated gait.

“They really didn’t brief you at all, did they?” Cavendish asked. “They must have been in a sorry rush on this one. Must be a bad one, though I haven’t seen anything yet, thank the heavens.” He slowed down ever so slightly and cleared his throat. “I can’t say with certainty what a Revenant Pit *is*, only that they’ve most likely been around as long as mankind itself, and they’re the source of...well, queer things. Most cultures have legends of forbidden places they’ve thought haunted or cursed, which they forget as their culture gets more advanced. Then the culture collapses and the legends resume in whatever culture is newly minted by their descendants.

One prominent story I heard of was from South America about five hundred years ago, when Cortes first led his armada against the Mayan Empire. The story goes that after he set foot in the New World, one of his captured slaves let slip to him that there was this temple – ‘Qianx’tachlan’ or some other muddled nonsense – where the real power of the empire lay. So

Cortes, he sends one of his secret generals, a man named Johannes Torzuna, to go and tear down that temple and cripple the Mayan power. About a month later, only one man from that crew, some bloke named Domingo, returns, carrying Torzuna's journal with him. Well good ol' Cortes, he isn't happy to see one of his prized generals shamed by failure, so he accuses the man of defecting and executes poor Domingo on the spot."

"And what happened to Torzuna's journal?"

"Cortes claimed it for himself, kept it locked away until his death. Right now it's stored in some Spanish vault under DDC supervision."

"What happened to the crew, then?" I pressed.

"Officially, nothing," Cavendish went on. "Cortes erased the records of anything but Domingo's execution. There's some evidence that Torzuna and every man on his crew had their names crossed out of Cortes' official records, almost like that bastard of a conquistador wanted to hide the whole thing. But he kept the journal, and according to our archive, the last few passages in it were written by poor Domingo, who claimed that most of Torzuna's men were eaten by monstrous beasts. What few survived managed to find the temple, but Torzuna himself, by Domingo's claim, went mad and began killing the rest of them off before the temple swallowed him whole. Domingo never wrote about how the temple was destroyed, but he claimed to have done the deed himself, and explained that he only survived by clinging to the large, iron cross which he wore around his neck. Now, I don't know if any of that is true, but the legend goes that Domingo made it back only a few days before the Empire collapsed. A friend of mine who ran missions with me way back said that Torzuna's mission broke the back of the Mayan might."

I stayed silent for a few minutes, taking in the story. I didn't know a whole lot about Cortes, but I knew it wasn't uncharacteristic of him to send secret missions and alter records to support his goals. But what of the mysterious temple? "So Domingo only survived because he was wearing a cross?" I asked, looking for reaffirmation of what I'd already heard.

"That intrigues you too, eh?" Cavendish asked, smirking. "I wonder if that played a part in this mission back in the thirties. As it goes, there was a confirmed Revenant Pit found in one of those nameless, ever-shifting Eastern European countries. The Vatican thought it'd be a good idea to send some priest along with the scouting party. The whole team went missing, and so a second team was sent, this time with some godless Danish scientist who thought he'd crack the code with a perfectly natural, scientific explanation."

"Did they find the first team?"

"No." Cavendish let the word hover in the air for a moment, as if savoring the moment. "At least, not that it was reported. As it goes, the second team ended up destroying the pit outright, bombing it to oblivion, but at the expense of all but one of them. Can you guess who the Domingo of that group was?"

"The scientist, I'm guessing."

"Outstanding," Cavendish assured me. "The scientist walked away from that devastation all alone. He refused to tell his superiors what happened and spent the rest of his life in some Hungarian monastery. According to the records, all he did after that was write and pray. And, on the rarest of occasions, eat and sleep. The last I heard, the Vatican had his writings sealed in one of their secret vaults a thousand meters under Saint Peter's Basilica."

"And we're still not sure about the Vatican's involvement?" I said, half-seriously.

“There’s no official explanation of the DDC’s highest ranks,” Cavendish said. “For all we know, the pope himself runs the whole thing.”

As Cavendish spoke the last few words, a great sound erupted from all around us, some screeching howl as of great beasts enraged, or near-humans in agony. We both froze as the cacophony of sound floated around us, permeating into our bones with the chilling threat of imminent destruction and dismemberment. After a few seconds, the sounds died down to total silence, without even so much as a cricket chirping in the grass. “We need to pick up the pace,” Cavendish said very quietly as he resumed his walking, albeit at a much greater speed.

“What was that?” I asked. “It didn’t sound like any animal I’ve ever heard.”

“Aberrations.” He slowed down slightly for my benefit, but he still kept his voice low and quiet. “For reasons we don’t quite grasp, the pits tend to produce...mutations...in proximate wildlife. On the rarest of occasions, even humans have suffered mutations as well. We call these mutants ‘aberrations.’ Some scientific teams have suggested that the pits give off some sort of odd radiation, which alters the DNA of anything exposed to it for long durations. Only these aberrations aren’t suffering from cancer or radiation poisoning. It’s...it’s something else.”

“Like growths?” I suggested. “Like tumors and deformities?”

“More like transformations. I’ve seen two of them before: a dead one on a DDC operating table and a live one on this mission in Paraguay. Let’s just say it’s hard to tell what they used to be, human or otherwise.”

“What did they look like?”

“The stuff of bad dreams,” he answered quietly, a very dark look crossing his face. “Not just the way it looked, but the way it moved, the sounds it made, even the way it looked at us...it was like something just up and walked right out of a demented nightmare.”

A few minutes later we broke the treeline and emerged into a great field, with hills that rolled slightly, giving the appearance of great waves in a small ocean. But the center of the field was scarred, with the grass torn up into a half-crater which dipped down about eight meters. At the bottom of that ditch, the mouth to a cave rested, looking much like the gaping maw of some mostly-buried beast. "It should be safe to approach," Cavendish said, though his voice suggested that he, himself, was unconvinced.

"The aberrations won't approach?" I asked.

"They're under control," he uttered enigmatically. He stopped at the edge of the crater and squatted down, examining the loose dirt. I looked closely and saw scores of footprints in it, though at least half of these bore the same impression: DDC-issued combat boots. "The advance team did their job well, it seems," Cavendish said quietly.

"They removed the local cult," I said.

Cavendish turned his gaze up to me and remained silent for a moment. "So they at least briefed you on *something*, it seems," he spoke after the moment of silence. "What did they tell you?"

"Only that the Revenant Pits tend to be the centers of cult activity," I explained. "The Indian death cults, for instance, and the voodoo communities of Central America."

"Those locations tend to have the highest concentration of pits in them," Cavendish confirmed. "In India, more often than not, the DDC's found pits in those places where the most bizarre and barbaric rituals are performed. And the stories from South and Central America go back-

"As far as Cortes," I finished for him.

He stood up and cracked his neck, then rolled his head a bit more. “True. Torzuna’s temple wasn’t alone. A few decades ago, there was this American named Jones. He found one down in Guyana and led a thousand people to their deaths there. Some say they laced their drinks with the blood of aberrations, but that’s just one of a hundred rumors about that damned town.”

“I take it the report from America wasn’t too clear,” I pressed.

“There wasn’t one. The Americans refuse to cooperate with the DDC. Sure, they’ll let Interpol set foot on their soil sometimes, but they’ve rebuffed any DDC communiques, and to date, our agency’s never exterminated a single Revenant Pit in the States, though we have some intelligence on one, and suspicions of a few more.” At this, he went silent for a moment, as if surveying the opening to the cave. Finally, after the wind began to blow, he started moving toward it, and I followed close behind.

As we reached the entrance, I paused and held Cavendish back. Almost as if startled, he turned to me with a questioning look. “Before we go in there, I want to know what intelligence we have on this specific pit.”

“It’s just rumors, although most of what we do is based on such things. Approximately four months ago, Interpol caught wind of a story about a pitch-dark man who crawled up out of the ground here. Supposed witnesses claim the man was screaming and crying and howling all at once, like some sodding psychopath. The next day, the ground opened up into a sinkhole, and some spelunkers disappeared after going in to explore it. Almost immediately, the locals sent a party to dig around the sinkhole, and they ended up opening up this cave system, although none of them were willing to go inside and look for the bodies of the spelunkers. Some of the workers started getting sick or disappearing, and finally, our scouting team gathered enough evidence to warrant a raid on it, though the specifics of that are classified beyond my clearance level.” He

cocked his head to the side for a moment, as if reacting to some sound which I hadn't heard.

"Satisfied?" He gave me that same questioning look, only this time it was mingled with a growing sense of urgency. I nodded, tipped my head down slightly and followed my companion as he began to wriggle his way through the narrow entrance to the cave itself.

After I climbed in, we began to move throughout the small, dark spaces, the thin sliver of a tunnel beginning to branch out in different directions. "Mind your surroundings, and the paths you choose," Cavendish's voice echoed off the hard walls. "And don't pay any mind to any sound but my voice. Now you know what to do, so be quick about it."

I turned and followed a passage to the right, my light bouncing off the stone around me. But the deeper I pushed forward into that enigmatic cave, the weaker my light became. It wasn't because of a diminishing in my light's ability, though; instead, it seemed that the stone of the cave was actually *absorbing* the light, rather than reflecting it. Pausing for a moment, I found a small, stone shelf near the roof of the passage, so I reached into my pack, pulled out one of the small boxes, flicked the switch on its side and laid it on the shelf before continuing. Further on, I started coughing and my nose caught the acrid whiff of something burning. The light dimmed even further, seemingly obscured by a dark mist floating in the air. I determined that this was not a good place to lay one of my parcels, so I pressed further.

The smell went away momentarily, only to return a few feet further. Calculating, I retreated back to the clean section and laid another box on the cave floor, flicking its switch before leaving it behind. I pushed forward.

The passage opened up into a large chamber, with a few stalactites hanging from the ceiling, in one or two places connecting with a stalagmite on the floor. The chamber was enormous, the ceiling going up at least fifteen meters. I wasn't aware that I had descended at all,

but I must have for this chamber to not have broken the surface. I trained my light, which was at this point quite weak, on the center of the room and saw a great, stone formation, bloated in the middle but filled with holes, like it was some great hive that vaguely resembled a human brain. This distended form seemed to be suspended between a stalactite, which snaked down from the roof, and a stalagmite, which rose like a cone from a shallow pool of water. The structure dominated the room, and when I shined my light on it, I could have sworn that for a few seconds, an array of colors had reflected back at me as if I'd shone the light through a prism. I circled the sight, noting that it was located almost in the exact center of the chamber. It was as if the chamber itself had been built to house this particular object, as if the path I was on was designated purely as a place for strange people to bow down in a circular manner around a bloated alien deity. I despised the thing.

I chose the location for the last few of my parcels, but as I reached the edge of that shallow pool, an immense heat rolled out toward me and the chamber erupted in orange light. I was momentarily knocked off my feet, but when I looked up, it seemed that the bloated idol was suspended over a pool of fire, the flames licking at its underside. I heard strange sounds bubbling up from the somehow-still-liquid pool: at first, they were gargles, but these soon developed into screams and cries as of the tormented people of a thousand different languages. And amid that chorus of wails, I could hear a deep, low thrumming, something wholly inhuman that began to steadily take on a human-like quality. The beat became a whisper, a soft voice somehow audible over the cries from the flaming pool. Another blast of heat and I spun around, turning my face away to keep from getting scorched. I opened my eyes to see a great, blank wall opposite the pool and its stony ruler. I could see my own shadow pressed against this wall, but as I stared, I saw more shapes, strange ones, some human, others clearly monstrous and inhuman, dancing

around my silhouette. I saw gaping maws and dripping claws, tatters of what I hoped were clothes but which could also have been loose flesh. The whisper in my ears, the images on the wall, but no footsteps, as if I was being accosted by ghosts or darker, hideously unknown entities.

I squeezed my eyes shut as the light in my hand died off, something in the air, that same acrid smell, seemingly swallowing the light I carried with me. With my eyes closed, new images began to climb up out of my mind, strange thoughts coming in flashes. I was in an infinite crowd, an uncountable number of bodies shuffling around me among mighty pillars. I was standing before an immense being, whose eyes bore into mine, the strength leaving my body. I was in a world of fire, flames leaping a score, a hundred, a thousand meters high, touching and scorching the sky. And in it all was that same, low whisper, the sound which could be heard above and below everything else.

I opened my eyes as I suddenly felt cold. There was no light but what I held in my hand. No shadows on the wall, no fire in the small pool beneath the bizarre growth which this chamber held. The smell and the whisper were gone, leaving the cave silent, cold, dark. Dead. Scrambling to my feet, I pulled out the rest of the small boxes, flicked them on, scattered them throughout the chamber and started rushing out the way I'd come.

I almost ran through the passage which led to the cave entrance, and eventually the light I held was not alone, for moonlight seeped in through the cavern's entrance. I exhaled a great sigh of relief as I saw Cavendish standing resolutely just outside, his foot tapping on the ground, his hands shaking slightly. Together, we climbed back up and out of the half-crater, putting distance between us and that accursed place.

We stopped for a moment and surveyed the field in the direction of the pit. “You saw something in there, didn’t you?” he asked. I nodded my head, but said nothing. “We all do. But don’t worry, it won’t be here much longer.”

“What...what do you think...” I began, trying to formulate my question. “Do you think that the cave causes...hallucinations?”

“That’s one theory,” Cavendish responded. “But I have my own. You see, I think that what we have here is a portal, a gateway to another world. The word my old friends would use for it is ‘topen,’ a place where the border between two different realms of existence is...thinner...than it otherwise should be.”

“Do you think that other world is anything like ours?”

“I’d like to hope so, but I really don’t think so. Given the experiences associated with the Revenant Pits, I’d say it’s something much darker, some hellish world of fire and monsters. And that’s where I get my own idea for the name of our employer.” He paused and took a few breaths, taking in the cool freshness of the nighttime air around us. “The DDC: Dimensional Damage Control.”

With that, Cavendish reached into his pocket and pulled out what looked like a small remote control. “You set all the charges, eh?” he asked. I nodded, and then I began to hear the sounds again, faint screams echoing on the wind, dancing into my ears. “You can hear them, can’t you?” I ignored him and twisted my neck, trying to ignore the piercing shrieks which were beginning to grow in intensity inside my head. “This can’t be done quickly enough, then,” he stated resolutely as he depressed a central button on the remote.

There was nothing for a few seconds, and then a dull quake, the ground rumbling slightly in accordance with the force of the concussions. A cloud of dust rose up into the air about a

hundred meters away, floating for a full five minutes before settling back to the earth. Then, the night was still again, and silent, and the moon shone overhead. Quietly, Cavendish and I began retracing our steps back to the road where the rental auto was parked. When we were in the woods, I asked him again about the possibility of Revenant Pits in America, in particular the one which had solid intelligence on it. Initially, Cavendish merely shrugged. “There’s not much I can say on it,” he described. “None of us have ever been there. The report I heard about used a code: ‘beneath the bloated bulb where Capitol meets its First.’ Hell if I know what that means. But there’s more to suggest that the colonies aren’t immune to this phenomenon. Every now and then, you get stories, little news snippets about some American tourist who’s gotten lost in the Vatican’s secret libraries. We take special notice when they’re found near the DDC-cooperative sections.”

“It would make sense,” I said. “If they don’t want their own pits discovered, they’d look for the catalogue of locations, if such a catalogue exists.” I looked over at the other agent, whose brief nod confirmed without words that such an item was real. “So they’d send agents to erase their own from the record.”

“Unless there were darker plans in mind,” Cavendish said enigmatically. “The caves are...well, they’re the source of a queer sort of power, a dark power.”

“So what’s going to happen to the remnants of our pit?” I asked, wanting to quickly change the subject as I had a chilling feeling about its implications. “As it stands, we now have a great crater where a cave system once branched out beneath the sod.”

“It’ll be taken care of before dawn,” Cavendish said as we broke out of the treeline and saw the road before us, our auto hidden on the shoulder. “The DDC has commandeered a number of cargo aeros and maximized their holds. Before sunrise tomorrow, that field will be buried in

ten thousand tonnes of earth. If anything remains of that pit, no one will ever find it.” As he finished, he swung his door open and hopped into the driver’s seat. I put my hand on the door, but stopped for a moment and stared back in the direction of the pit. *Beneath ten thousand tonnes of earth*, I thought to myself. Then, as I opened the door and settled myself into the seat, I smiled only the slightest bit, thinking about what a good thing that would be. I wouldn’t want anyone figuring out how I made it back to this world.