

The Lazarus Effect: The Family That Returns
By Chad Hunter

Ana Alicia Agosto came to Cook County hospital six hours ago to see her daddy. The doctors used words she didn't understand to say why he was hurt. Her father told Ana Alicia that he loved her and that she would be fine. Ana Alicia sat by the lady who was sent to watch her. When they wheeled her daddy away, he promised he would see her soon.

Miguel Agosto died in Cook County Hospital from BAT, Blunt Abdominal Trauma received in a car-on-car collision. His body lay in an operating room, sheet covered and bloody.

But tonight, Miguel would still return to his daughter.

DuMons crouched down in the lobby of the hospital. With a gloved fist held off the side of his head, RCO Alex Darrel DuMons froze in the bottom-man position of the high-low breach with a black handgun extended. The 9mm Glock's barrel caught the repeated shine of the flash-white emergency lighting flickering in the lobby's far corners.

The outside cherry flashes of the Chicago Police Department cruisers rhythmically struck the officer in the eyes. He squinted, moving his head and sweeping the room. The caramel skinned young man's brown eyes scanned the corners, the exits and the silenced elevators.

The power was down.

The plush chairs were flipped over. A couch was sprayed with dark patterns.

Two partially devoured orderlies were strewn ten feet from DuMons. One was lying in a wave of dark spray patterns and his own large intestines. The other stared at Alex with frozen eyes, his head was open in the back and jelly had poured from the back.

The officer whispered into his mike-collar, "Room clear."

His fisted hand moved to a waving motion, sending the signal for the rest of his team to move up. More emergency light caught the shock of white in Alex's otherwise black hair.

DuMons was joined by two others in black uniform with CPV790 body armor. The Special Weapons and Tactics protection offered security from small arms fire and biting.

And biting was the primary threat tonight.

The first person moving up behind Alex was RCO Michael R. Marshall often called "Kansas." Marshall was medium build with a boyish look that had more mischief than maturity. Well-off and family wealthy, Kansas was always well-groomed as if nights like these and downtown clubbing were one and the same.

The second was Carmen Marie Ortiz. Carmen's normally waist-length hair was pulled back and tight. High-cheek bones and full lips were prominent with her gritted teeth. Kansas always told her she would need a dentist for each mission call.

Both were federal officers as was DuMons. The trio's body armor and uniform was standard dress for Revenant Control Officers. Since the first corpse rose up in a small town in Pennsylvania in 1968, cadaver management was a global necessity. Since the United States' chapter of resurrection control formed in '69, "Revenant Control Officer" went hand-in-hand with RCO and the slang term "zombie cop."

Either way, the job was the same.

Alex addressed his team. "We've got a C2 uprising – low to mid numbers but structure-contained. From what we've been told, there was some break-down in crematory rotations in the morgue. Roster gives a count of approximately six to ten fresh revenants. They've attacked down here." The trio moved eyes to the devoured and disemboweled orderlies.

"Kansas, Two-R on the kills." Two-R referred to a Resurrection Report, standard operating procedures on the recently deceased.

Marshall moved forward in the dark and looked over the dead.

"Lex," as the officer had come to call his fellow RCO, "One has zero percent return – cranial trauma," he began, "Complete brain extraction. Second has high percent return – body cavity trauma only."

"This is Ortiz," Carmen clicked on her mike-collar. "We have two down fifteen feet from the entrance. One with high chance of return. Requesting immediate EV, ID and quiet burn."

“Roger that, officer Ortiz,” came back through the trio’s earpieces. A team of local law enforcement officers would immediately retrieve the bodies, identify them, verify cause of death and cremate the orderlies on-site. Hopefully before one could exhibit the Lazarus Effect.

DuMons exhaled. "I want burners on tight spread. Double-load. Watch for close proximity civilians." With the word burner, all three retrieved their shotgun firearms from the holsters slung across their hips and bound to their respective sides. The weapons were short-barreled with break-open, sawed-off designs. They had double pipes for the business ends and two wide tubes on the weapon’s side. The Mossberg special design weapons were standard issue for Revenant Control Officers. The firearm could deliver an explosive mixture of 70 mm buckshot, military grade napalm and RDX. While the Department had an exact designation for the standard issue weapon, those who used it daily and saw what it did called it a “burner.”

“Kansas,” DuMons continued, “Take the first three floors above the morgue. Carmen, you've got the three below. I'm taking the morgue. Keep com-units on and report once your area is secured. Be ready for UCPs." UCP was revenant control speak for Up-close-and-personal, close quarters combat – for meeting eye-to-eye with sunken gaze and blood-shot irises. Close quarters combat when rank breath sent out waves of rot.

Marshall waved a gloved hand through dark-brown hair. Kansas looked at his squad-mates. "You know, I was enjoying my night-off up until now."

Ortiz snapped a side glance at the young man. "I'll be sure to tell THEM that, Kansas. I'm sure they'll apologize."

“Alright, cut the chatter, people,” Alex interjected. “Be careful. We all go home tonight.” The three looked at one another one last time. They bumped fists.

"Let's move."

Alexander Darrell DuMons had been fighting revenants most of his life. An early memory, just outside of his teens ran through his mind. He shook it with a quick shiver of his head.

He remembered the tales his grandmother would tell him. Grandma, or Belle as the DuMons children had come to call her, was eighth generation Creole. To her, the resurrected were reminiscent of the DuMons roots in islands far from Chicago.

The hospital stairwell echoed with Alex’s every boot heel. He regularly stopped to listen. Waiting to hear the signature moaning or screaming.

Belle was always commenting on the undead. To her, they were merely a way of life since the late 1960’s. She fought them off her property with broomstick and pans. Plus a little candle, charm or incense.

Officer DuMons had found that the burner dealt with revenants a little bit better.

He neared the morgue doors. Strobe flashes of emergency lighting continued to annoy his vision.

One door was open, broken and hanging impotently off its hinges. A hand print smeared dark on the hospital white paint near the metal panel labeled “PUSH.” The officer had seen enough scenes to replay what had probably occurred. Someone ran for help – in vain. Never making it past the doors which they burst through. Grabbed by cold hands and dragged back in while fending off bites and gore-filled jaws.

Burner gripped tightly and DuMons inhaled. Before he could finish his deep breath, he heard a scream and clangor. The officer swung into the room.

In the corner, he found the last living technician in the room. Almond-eyed with a round face and disheveled hair in her face, she was using her legs to keep a table between her and the two bodies reaching for her. One dead man was lacking stitches for an incision that had yet been closed. Entrails hung and jiggled. The other was nude and had finished the morgue technician that was now only organs strewn about the room.

In these close quarters, the weapon in the officer's hand would eliminate the dead but also the technician he was trying to save. DuMons holstered the weapon. His Glock was an option but with the metal wall he dared not risk a ricochet. The officer slid a gloved hand to the blade at his side. It pulled from its nylon sheath. The extended Schrade Cutlery SCHF2 blade had a cutting length of a foot and a half. With its smooth retreat, it promised a spray of dead blood cells and the resistance of cutting bone.

Alex sighed. Although he would never admit it to his close friend and team mate, like Marshall, he too hated getting messy.

"RCO, ma'am! Stay where you are," he yelled out. With the noise, sunken, dark and dreary eyes swiveled in their sockets matching their undead heads turning towards him. One cadaver made an approach with its typical attack - arms outstretched; mouth moaning.

DuMons followed combat SOP in his mind. After five years of doing this, the procedures had become reflexive. He swung with the blade. Stainless steel cut through the arms of his opponent. Despite the sudden lack of appendage, the craving and mindless husk continued its hoarse-gasping approach. DuMons slapped aside the congealed nubs and moved in close. The decedent's breath was fetid, a similar odor of infested meat washed over the officer. Teeth ran with saliva and jaws opened as the RCO caught the head with one arm and swung with the blade in the other. The blade sunk deep into the skull, halving the brain.

The Lazarus Effect imbued the entire body with resurrection side effects but without brain reanimated activity, a corpse shut down permanently.

In the moments he finished the first revenant, the second came up on Alex's left. He dropped to one knee and drew the handgun. The first and only slug hit the dead woman between the eyes, punching out the brain and much of her head's contents. The body stopped and dropped to its knees before falling completely onto the Morgue tile and speckled floor.

"Ma'am," he said, stooping down to help the middle-aged woman to her feet, "It's all right. We're going to get you out of here. How many reanimates are there?"

She wiped away the few strands of loose hair in her eyes. A deep chest-echoing swallow and she regained her composure.

"Eight, officer...Eight all together. The two you just...finished plus six more. We were ordered to evacuate the hospital but some of us did not make it...oh God, someone said there were two orderlies screaming in the lobby ---" The morgue attendant shot her hand up to her mouth. Her eyes closed and tears streamed down her rounded cheeks.

Alex placed a hand on her shoulders. He guided her to a flipped over chair, righted it and set her down. "Ma'am, I'm going to need to know where the others have gone."

She breathed deeply, wiping her face. "Four went upstairs. Two...they went down, I think..."

DuMons kept one hand on the traumatized woman; another went to the collar-mike. "Carmen, Kansas, Morgue secure. We've got a total of six reanimates. Four upstairs from my location and two below. Sit-rep."

"Ortiz here. I've got the two that went down. Targets burned."

"Marshall reporting in. I got three but one slipped by, 'Lex. I'll need one of you to track that one. I'm still...I've still got my hands full here. Literally."

Alex cocked his standard issue. He exhaled, realizing he had been holding his breath.

"Ortiz, backup Kansas. I'm on the loose one."

Ana Alicia wandered down the hall.

The doctors told her that her daddy had gone away to get better. Then she heard the noises. Then the lights went dark.

She hid while the hospital was evacuated.

She went down the hall to find her father.

He couldn't have left her. He said he would come back to see her then they could leave and go home. However, since her father had not found her, Ana Alicia Agosto looked until she found her daddy.

"Papi!" she yelled. A smile spread wide on her face as she saw her father in the long dark corridor. She knew how he was tall and strong. In the dimly lit hall, she could not see his now pale skin or sunken eyes. Over her thumping heartbeat and calls for her father, she did not hear the soft, hoarse groaning coming from desiccated lips.

Miguel Agosto had died six hours ago. And he was now walking the hospital again.

RJ-237, or the Lazarus Isotope as it had come to be called, raged in his body. Ana Alicia's father was now nothing more than an animated shell with limited synaptic function and hunger.

Alex covered the stairwell in three stairs a stride.

Boot heels pounded metal grating. He stopped mid-way and listened. He focused on regaining his breath. Although young and in peak shape, even DuMons could only cover so much of the the mammoth Southside Chicago facility.

The officer listened. Sometimes a moan could give away a revenant. Or sometimes, it was a scream.

RCOs were aware of the still-being-researched ability the undead had in finding the living – a draw towards the low levels of resurrection isotope. It made sense. Especially when seeing a corpse with no eyes and sagging ears raise arms towards a living meal.

A child's scream.

DuMons ran two stairwells and jump another two. He whispered a prayer that the doors were not locked as he threw himself against the "EXIT" marked entrance.

Revenant Control Officer Alex DuMons found Ana Alicia Agosto cowering from her father.

Memories flooded the lawman's mind.

A car crash. Flames and smoke.

Sirens far off.

Miguel Agosto's status shocked Alex back to the now. His maw dark-filled.

His eyes rolling back in his head.

The dead man's daughter held herself tight in the corner of the hallway. DuMons aimed his burner but had no shot that would not risk the girl. There was debris in the hallway that blocked a clean discharge from the Glock. Alex cursed.

The Creole-born ran, leaping onto a gurney, landing hard and letting his momentum send him rolling alongside the wall, past the re-animated body and flipped off.

Landing hard between the revenant and the child, DuMons huffed as the wind left him. Before inhaling, the service weapon was back in familiar hands.

The dead man stopped for an instant.

Alex grabbed the girl and pulled held her close.

He pointed the barrel.

"No, no!" pled Ana Alicia Agosto. "Don't hurt him..."

The corpse shambled. Its arms stretched out, creaking and wanting.

She sniffled. "That's---that's my daddy!"

Alex turned the Ana from the sight. He spoke softly into her ears.

"No, no it's not."

The revenant moved forward. The burner coughed up fire and metal.

Nestled by the French Quarter, the Lower Garden and Central city, the business district of New Orleans, Louisiana was home to many research facilities. Despite numerous petitions and demonstrations, the New Orleans Center for Revenant Research had been newly built and put into operation. As of late, the center's work was completely funded by The Church of Internment.

The Church had been the leading opponent of the 1968 Revenant Control Protocols since its creation immediately after the procedures became globally recognized. The Church stood for finding a solution to the Lazarus Effect rather than the popular opinion of solution thru magnesium, dynamite and fire. It was upon widely debated Corinthian scripture that the Church of Internment based its foundation - burial above cremation.

It had been both a long and heated debate. Since the fateful week in October 1968 when a Cold War skirmish released undetermined, undocumented biological weapons into the sky over Central Europe; Since that auspicious week in the tenth month in 1968 when an extreme group of activists raided an animal testing facility in Great Britain and a rare radioactive primate virus was released; since those critical seven days in October 1968 when a satellite came crashing back from exploration and brought back a massive amount of radiation, bombarding the atmosphere. It was even an apocalyptic date on an ancient Mayan calendar that coincided with these events and no one, no scientist, general or clergy could say with certainty that their fear, their event was what began to imbue tissue and bone with the element RJ-237. No one could say with certainty what was raising the dead.

It simply was a way of life now. It was not about a bite or an airborne virus. It was not about HAZMAT suits or concrete bunkers.

A body, any corpse, who died returned with violence and bloodlust. A body, any corpse, since that night, Day Zero, was affected by the Lazarus Effect.

The Church of Internment sought a solution for the condition: a solution that almost fifty years of international scientists had determined impossible.

"Dr. Stengel? Any progress?" The older man with white hair and equally white lab coat turned to face a young woman. She entered the white-walled lab with its banks of silver computer equipment and ceiling-mounted instrumentation. The door behind her slid shut with a hissing. The center was several floors of data servers, chemical laboratories and real-time camera feeds.

It all reminded the woman of the science-fiction films her brothers would watch; the movies about the walking flesh-eating, brain-craving dead that were common place in her lifetime.

Movies about the shambling corpses identical to those behind the electrified holding pens across the room.

Louisiana heat called out in the noon day with bird call and sizzling humidity.

Dr. Cyril Stengel, lean, aged and complete with bifocals, turned with clipboard in hand.

"Ah, yes, Melissa. Our latest tests have showed some sort of progress. Our latest experiments have shown there is a definite slowing in the revenant resurrection cycle." He snapped the head of his ink pen down quickly twice.

"However, we are still so far away from stopping RJ-237."

Melissa's eyes widened and a slight turn up in her lips. "But," she began, "Cyril, we've made progress! The church believes in your work and so should you."

The scientist made his way over to the holding pen.

The immediate air had a touch of burning; even though the circulation system did its twenty-four hour best to eliminate the odor.

Electricity stung at undead flesh.

RJ-237 resurrected muscles and nervous systems were still affected by electrical impulses. Corpses felt no pain but the flow of current affected the body and sent the cadaver jolting back.

Repeated flashes of white-blue sparks highlighted sunken eyes and rotting flesh. The distant looks and exposed cheekbone reflected off Stengel's glasses. Lumbering cadavers stumbled into the electrified fencing of the containment cell. Sparks sizzle as amp and voltage redirected the reanimated. Teeth chattered, exposed through rotted cheek. Fingers and legs twitched under sloughing skin and loosened tissue.

"Melissa," Stengel began, "Out of everyone here, you have, by far, showed a...tolerance for working with revenants."

The young woman walked over to the scientist. They both stood before reaching hands and gaping mouths. Melissa's eyes narrowed.

"It runs in the family," she answered.

Deep within the wiring of the center, beneath metal floors and silver conduits, wires birthed wisps of smoke and smolder. Crackling began in circuit boards that would run up to surveillance, door controls and the holding pens.

"Will you just shut up and pass me the shrimp?"

Alex DuMons and his two friends moved around his loft. The late morning, early afternoon sun caught the trio from both sides of the corner windows. Lakeshore Drive seemed an ant farm from the stories high building which granted DuMons a view of Lake Michigan in its endless turquoise majesty.

Kansas found a comfortable spot on the couch. A vintage stressed t-shirt found its way out of his dark blue jeans. Carmen, in equally informal attire, opened the refrigerator while Alex stirred the simmering pot on the stove. The loft was a great find for Alex and paid off by an even greater stock tip from his uncle.

"Hell no, I ain't passing you the shrimp," Kansas replied, "I've done my part, man, I'm relaxing!" DuMons, seemingly covered from head-to-toe in apron, shook his head. The brick wall of the kitchen caught the rising steam of the boiling cauldron.

"Done your part? Lazy ass," Carmen answered, "You made salad, Michael! SALAD."

"Hey, salad is food! That's always our deal. We each make food."

Alex stirred the concoction which simmered with deep gulps and pops of oregano and far hotter spices. "Could someone pass me the shrimp?" he asked again.

Marshall waved his teammate off. "Get the dog to get the shrimp, homey!"

Carmen was still enflamed at her partner. "Yes, we make food. And your lazy butt always makes simple junk! Salad, brownies, punch...!"

Alex moved from his pot. "Fine, I'll get the shrimp myself..." he mumbled. "Will you two quit arguing about food?"

Kansas popped up from his horizontal position. "Carmen Maria Delgado Hernandez Ortiz, that was some difficult salad. It had croutons! Just because I don't have an aunt, five sisters, a mom and two grandmothers to help me at home like you..."

"Oh NO...You did not go there!!"

While the two argued and began a storm of pillows and near-breakables, Alex returned to his gumbo. This was the way they relaxed after assignments. He had lost his Creole accent, his style of Louisiana life. All that remained were his cooking skills of the bayou. The same skills he picked up watching Belle in the kitchen as a little boy on box and tiptoes.

The cell phone on Carmen's side beeped several times in quick succession. As did Marshall's and Alex's. They all stopped their actions and grouped around one another. Alex's dog, a mixture of retriever and anonymous, ran from the other room and joined the impromptu meeting.

"Down Isis! Down girl!" Alex called out while answering his phone. The number read back on the LCD.

"This is DuMons," The officer answered.

"Officer DuMons, this is Selma. Please go to speaker and hold."

"Roger that," Alex answered back, reaching back and shutting off the gumbo's flames.

The three waited. The Creole was without expression. Ortiz found her hands behind her and stood at attention. Kansas made faces at the phone in his partner's hand. The Chicago landscape painted itself in the windows behind them. Boats far off in the distance moved in silence atop dark blue waves.

When a voice finally broke the silence, it was gruff. Authoritative with more accusation than acceptance. There was a sound to it as if DuMons had kept the man waiting for hours.

"Alex? Is the rest of the team with you?"

"Yes Captain Patel."

"Get down to the station. Immediately."

"May I ask about the assignment sir?"

"No you may not. Get here. Now."

Alex closed his phone up after the other end clicked.

"Good, I really was starting to hate gumbo, Lex."

Ortiz shook her head. "Shut up, Michael."

The Chicago Police Department station buzzed. With over 13,000 officers, the CPD was the second largest police department in the Midwest. As all police stations do, the South Michigan Avenue structure buzzed with activity around the clock. Given the duty of protecting nearly three million people would keep any department active. Add in the high percentage of resurrected corpses every day and the CPD welcomed revenant control with open arms.

DuMons, Marshall and Ortiz entered the office in half-gear. After several pleasantries with fellow personnel, the trio continued into their captain's office.

Captain Vekram Patel was built solid. The suspenders on his dress pants pushed out from his thickened frame. His pepper gray hair faded from the top of his head and crowned the sides. Balding looked good on the Bangalore-born policeman. He spun in his chair, facing his in-house RCOs.

"Sit down, you three. Selma?"

Selma was barely into her thirties if that. A dark mushroom cut accented Mediterranean features. She smiled quickly at her favorite officers while swiveling in her wheelchair. Manicured nails danced atop a laptop in the captain's office.

Lights dimmed. A screen lowered, covering a wall of plaques awarded to Captain V. Patel. A projector came to life and a presentation began.

Patel began. His voice like mixing gravel. "Approximately 2200 hours, Central time, a call came out for Revenant Control assistance. Oddly enough, the call came from the Primary southern Center of

Revenant Research." Selma tapped the illuminated PDA and the projection of the structure in question rotated in pixilated blueprint atop the captain's wall.

Alex snapped a furrowed brow at his commanding officer, who was simultaneously meeting his gaze.

"Southern center, sir? New Orleans?"

"Yes, Officer DuMons. I believe you know the center's layout fairly well?"

"Yes, sir," the RCO answered, "I did training and research there after New Delhi. Is that why we're being brought in on this one? There are at least a dozen teams between here and New Orleans that could - --"

Patel interrupted Alex. "The call was sent out by a high ranking Church of Internment member. From the New Orleans main temple."

Alex's face lost expression. Rising to his feet; his mouth agape.

"Sir?...Melissa..."

"I'm afraid it is, Alex, and the only reason you're being brought in is because the center's layouts are outdated. Due to the Church's secrecy, we're in the dark on this one. We don't know about injuries. We don't know how many revenants. With the Arkansas flooding and the Pennsylvania mine collapse, you're the only available person who knows the site inside and out. Get your gear. Wheels up in thirty minutes."

Patel faced his lead officer. "We don't know how Melissa is..."

Alex turned, reaching for the door. "I'm leaving now, sir. I'll report in when I can."

The officer left the room. His two friends rose to leave.

"Hold on you two." Ortiz and Marshall were halted by their captain.

"I can tell by the looks on your faces that you are surprised by DuMons actions. Normally, he's good but now he's racing off half-cocked. I would have left him out but we needed him because of his knowledge of the location. I brought you two on-board because Alex is going to need backup; he's going to need his friends. Unlike DuMons, neither of you are emotionally tied to this assignment."

Marshall raised an eyebrow. "Emotionally tied, captain?"

"That's right, Officer Marshall. The call came from Church of Internment official, Melissa Fontaine. Maiden name - DuMons. Alex's sister."

A car crash. Flames and smoke.

Sirens far off.

Blood in young Alex DuMons' eyes.

His father. His mother. Melissa. Jean. Claude and JB.

Mother was still. Then she jerks around.

And turns around. Reaching. Blood in her mouth.

Daddy DuMons' gun by Alex's foot.

Melissa screaming.

The trio prepped.

Kansas listened to music in his MP3 player while watching stock reports and cleaning his Burner.

Carmen called her mother and caught up on her family's latest news.

Alex stared at his cell. The name "FONTAINE, MELISSA" read back on his list of contacts. He had tried calling it but there was no answer.

He was partially relieved. He was partially terrified.

The blur of chopper blade spun above the helicopter's top. The transport held inside six New Orleans police officers, two local SWAT team members and the three Chicago-based Revenant Control Officers. The pilot checked her instruments.

"Coming up on the center now, Officer DuMons" said the pilot, speaking into her helmet's mike. The loud beating of the blade made normal conversation almost impossible. "Another fifteen minutes."

"Let me know when we're within landing," Alex ordered while the team looked over digitized blue-prints of the Revenant research center, "Touch us down on the north parking lot."

Alex checked his burner. He leaned back and shut his eyes.

"Yo 'Lex," Kansas called out into his headset's mike, "What's the story?"

Alex looked up, seeing his friends with wide eyes. "What story?"

"Don't play stupid with us, Alex," Carmen ordered.

"He ain't playin'," Kansas quickly threw in.

"Shut up, Michael," Carmen threw back, "Alex, we're talking about what's bothering you. We know... your sister's at that center." DuMons closed his eyes at Ortiz' information.

Carmen continued. "But it seems like there's something more, Alex. You've had important people in danger before and you're a hundred percent more than ever. But, with your sister, I don't know, you're distracted. You didn't ask the Captain how many potential revenants are in there, staff numbers, how much the local law enforcement had found out---"

The air hung and was heavy with Ortiz' statements and Marshall's look of concern hiding behind flippancy. The officer sighed heavily. He leaned back harder against the rocking sides of the chopper.

"Our mom and dad met Day One in a farmhouse just outside Pennsylvania. After holding up against revenants all night, they stayed in touch, got married. Dad was former military and enlisted as soon as the RCO program was made public. He and mom popped out a whole lot of us soon as they moved down to New Orleans."

Ortiz and Kansas leaned in with every word of their partner and friend.

"One night, my folks and several of us were heading down the Chef Menteur. It was our parents, me, Jean, Claude, baby J.B and Melissa. Missy and I close, maybe the closest out of our family. She's second oldest and I was way down the chain. After Ben went away to school, whenever dad was out on calls and mom was working, it was Melissa who raised the rest of us." A smile jumped out on Alex's face; and then the smile faded.

"A truck's tire blew out. It hit us dead on---" DuMons gaze wandered. He was more reliving the story than he was re-telling it.

"---Our..." Alex cleared his throat. "Both our parents died on impact. Dad died from massive trauma to the head. Mom was torn loose from her seatbelt. She died from blood loss. The rest of us...in the back of the van. We were rattled but okay. It seemed like forever before we heard the sirens coming. It wasn't long. But it was long enough."

Carmen opened her mouth. "Oh God, Alex, no..."

"Mom resurrected. The reanimate turned around, reaching for us. We screamed. God, I can still hear the shouting, still feel the crushed doors that wouldn't open...Our moth—the revenant, it crawled closer." The officer had stepped in and replaced the man reliving the boy's terror.

"Dad's firearm was knocked loose. I reached for it. Held it up. Melissa begged me not to. She cried over and over that it was mom. It was mom. It was mom."

Kansas looked his friend in the eyes. "Alex, you had to."

"It got close to J.B. He was just a baby, guys. Melissa begged me. The gun shook. The sirens were--- just-right-there..." The officer breathed out.

"I emptied the clip. The cops showed up and found us all safe. Me...clicking an empty gun over and over. Melissa never spoke to me again. We lived with Belle, our dad's relation and the only family we had left. Soon as she could, Melissa moved out and as far away as possible."

There was silence.

"T minus five minutes," the pilot called out. The local officers tightened up their uniforms, loaded their weapons and prepared to exit the chopper. "Touching down in the north parking lot."

Carmen returned her attention to the rattled DuMons. "So, you're more worried about seeing her than you are worried about getting killed down there?"

"Don't feel bad, Lex," Marshall added, "When the trust fund came down? Hell, I still got family that wants to kill me!"

Ortiz threw him her look. It said "shut up."

DuMons looked his friends in the eyes. But more so, he looked through them.

"The hole that Melissa left...it honest-to-God hurts, Carmen. I love her but this is a reunion I'm not looking forward to. Her opinion...of me...counted more than anything," Alex took one more deep breath, looking out the helicopter window and away from his friends. The parking lot's gray surface and yellow stripes raced up to meet them.

"I did what I had to do," the officer continued, "If only she could know what that."

The parking lot was attacked by the sudden gale of wind and vacuum. The chopper's wheels landed with a rocking thud on the blacktop. The strike force filed out. DuMons headed for the beige-and-brown clad police surrounding the compound. A lone officer parted away from the squad cars and approached the federal officers and crew. He was medium height with a build that showed too many nights of high calorie beer and deep fried foods. But underneath the layer of bulk, the policeman showed muscle and strength that came with thick forearms and a grizzled face.

"Sgt. Jay Anthony Boudreaux, New Orleans Police Department," he said. His accent was thick. He was Cajun and mixed with a bit of citified mannerism. He tipped the edge of his hat's brim. A cigar rolled wet around on his lips.

"Sgt.," Alex began, shaking the extended hand, "Revenant Control Officer Alexander DuMons, RCO task force-Chicago division. These are officers Ortiz and Marshall. We're here to assist with the situation."

"Pleased to meet you, DuMons," the sergeant answered, pausing slightly. "You say Chicago? You a bit out of your ways, ain't you, son?"

Alex played the jurisdiction game well. Despite the fact his sister could already be dead or dead and walking, dead and waiting for him.

He couldn't race in half-cocked. He would need all the backup possible. Politics was part of the job.

"Yes, we are, sir. We're on special assignment. We've got some inside Intel. Plus, our people down here are tied up with the Arkansas and California resurrections."

"DuMons? You Creole, son?"

"Generations back on my father's side. We've got to get in there, Sgt. Time's running out. I need to know what your people know."

The sergeant paused. Thought for a moment and then motioned for the newly arrived team to follow him over to a nearby squad car. On its hood, were the blueprints for the center and its layout.

"We don't know much. Place is locked down tighter than Dick's hat band. There's a whole mess of rot-and-stinkers creepy crawlin' through every hall and hallway. All we do got is over here, the old and highly outdated format of the center..."

"Nine floors," Alex jumped in, "Five above ground with four below. Power center on floor nine, security on floor two. Support column rising from the basement to the ceiling. Middle of columns are housing pens for revenant storage which are linked, for security purposes, by raised bridges. Three major revenant holding pens; each wired with a high-intensity electrified fencing system. One pen on floor one, the second on the fourth and the last on the seventh."

Sgt. Boudreaux looked with wide-eyed admiration at the young officer. Ortiz returned with a no emotion and a locked set of features. Marshall gave the Southerner a head nod and smile.

Jay Anthony Boudreaux whistled. "Hell, son, you been here before?"

"Yes, sir, all personnel at that time were required to memorize the layout," Alex answered while pointing out key locations to his team, "I was stationed here. After the Mumbai-New Delhi Resurrections."

"God, son, you were in all that mess overseas? 'Bout a thousand rot-and-stinkers?"

"Yes, sir. Mess...it was. And it was more...much more than a thousand." Alex's voice shook a bit. His time in India had left scars. Anyone who knew Officer DuMons knew not to bring it up. Especially since the New Delhi Resurrections years ago were classified and sealed.

"I suggest we divide up," Alex continued, "Ten equal teams. Each team takes a floor. Enter on the west entrances. Sweep towards the east with concentrations on the pens. Even with the fields down, it's still difficult to get out of those containment cells. There will be revenants in the pits and on the loose so keep alert. Team nine and ten double up on the last floor. The tenth team is to head for the generators. Concentrate on getting that power grid up. Ortiz, I want you on team ten. With the intel I gave you en route and your double advanced engineering degrees on your side, you're our best shot for getting this center operational."

The sergeant shot another look of amazement.

"I'll take point, Sergeant....with your permission," DuMons threw in gently. He was asking superficial permission. Given the situation and the Revenant Control Protocols, as the highest ranking officer on-site, he could pull this whole operation under his command in a heartbeat. With his sister at risk,

estranged or otherwise, he would use his burner for more than revenants tonight if these people got in his way.

"Hell, son, you and yours kill the dead people, y'all the *jen-u-wine* ghost-busters," the Sgt. replied "Let's get this show on the road. I got the missus at home and she ain't happy."

Alex nodded and found he could smile being this close to his sister again.

"Be careful, everyone. We all go home tonight."

In spite of the others around them, the three officers looked at one another. They bumped fists.

"Let's move."

The lights in the Center had shifted to emergency red. As always, it seemed, that in outbreaks of undead, the bright and happy shine of halogen tubes and sunlight were stripped away. The metal steps echoed with numerous boots falling in the various team directions that had been discussed.

Alex slid up the stairwell; his squad of three followed directly behind him. His group numbered four, including him. They were local LEOs, law enforcement officers who were maybe used to gun-runners and drug busts. The best weapons they carried for revenants were wide spread Ithaca class shotguns. DuMons, with his fire-spewing burner took point. Alex would have to watch out for these officers more so than he had to watch his own. As the sergeant had pointed out, he was the real deal; he killed dead people.

Killing dead people.

Alex heard the idea in his head and found it sounding ridiculous. It made for good B-movies and reality television drama. Yet, that was what he did for a living.

He thought about the hospital back in Chicago. He thought about Ana Agosto who had, same as he, seen a parent become a monster.

The officer stopped just short of the door. He listened for awhile, heard nothing then moved through the doorway. His team followed him.

DuMons held his breath, unsure if he was more wary of facing a rotted face gnashing teeth or the scorn of his estranged sister. A sister who may or may not still be alive. A sister who may be far beyond the chance to make amends.

"THERE!"

The call was followed by the typical hoarse gasp of the resurrected. Eight corpses leaned against one another, rhythmically pounding on a sealed door in the middle of the hallway. Crimson emergency lighting made the reanimated appear even more arterial and translucent.

Alex led off with a shot of his burner. Its burst of ball-bearings, Magnesium and RDX engulfed several creatures. The rest of his team, armed with shotguns and handguns, began to open up on the undead attackers. The shambling cadavers slogged through the hail of bullets.

"REMEMBER YOUR HEADSHOTS!" Alex reminded his team at the top of his voice. Fear was kicking in and focuses on foreheads and eye sockets were coming undone to the sounds of moans and hoarse gasps.

A revenant managed to grab a state trooper. The bullet assault was unkind on its face and torso.

The smell, the look, the idea sent the policeman into a frozen state, just as the walking dead moved in for a bite of live throat.

A double ear slap caved in the sides of the corpse's head. Gray matter sprayed from nasal cavity and an eye popped, bouncing off the state trooper's uniform.

The body dropped the policeman as it crumpled to the installation's tiled floor. Behind DuMons, another cadaver reached out. He spun; slamming his boot heel on the resurrected's foot and exploded its head with a blurred thrust of his elbow.

The second deceased staggered and then collapsed. It lie oozing but still on the floor. DuMons counted his blessings. The revenant was of weak constitution else he would have still been fighting and possibly losing. Alex turned, finding his team cleaning up the encounter: smashing major parts, cutting up possibly threatening heads and hands twitching apart from the main bodies.

"ALEX" came through the officer's ear-piece.

"Carmen," he returned, "SIT-REP."

Ortiz stood, surrounded by the team she led. Two were at her right and left sides, shotgun and Berretta drawn. One of her team was dead at their feet, the back of his head ripped open.

Seven charred dead bodies smoldered in pieces strewn about the electrical room. Several walls of circuit boards, flashing lights and monitors flickered in angry succession and chaotic pulses. "We lost a team member, Alex--"

DuMons closed his eyes for a moment. He cursed.

Carmen refocused, staring at the darkened section of the wall of wiring in front of her. A smart tablet shined in backlight as she slid her fingers over touch-screen, USB connections and bittersweet system reports. "I've got the main problem: a shorted-out board. With the specs on the equipment you gave me back in Chicago, I have the tools and replacement parts to fix this. Completing repairs it in fifteen minutes."

Alex nodded. "Make it ten. Let me know when you're ready."

DuMons' make-shift team pried open the door the carcasses had been beating at feverishly. A team of scientists rushed out, clinging to the officers who had freed them. Some of the white coats wept on their knees, several trembled in corners, refusing to be touched or to leave their hysteria.

Alex approached the bulk of center employees. "Everyone, I'm Officer DuMons, RCO task force commander," he announced, "Who's in charge?"

"That would...be me, young man," the voice belonged to an elderly woman with a small frame and slicked pepper-gray hair. She was small but stood tall. "I am Dr. Beatrice Samuels."

The RCO nodded. "Dr. Samuels, you and I need to talk, please," DuMons moved, guiding the diminutive scientist off to the side, "Team, first aid applications on injured – BETHANY injections if need be. Begin standard sweep, door to door. I'll be back in a minute."

The local LEOs nearly saluted the federal officer as they began to patrol and assess the hallway. Alex and the scientist began a low volume exchange.

"Doctor, I need to know two things. What happened and where I can find Melissa Fontaine."

"As near I can tell, there was a power loss in our grid. We suddenly lost all containment and control of the center. The walkways connecting the pens and the research rooms activated and all hell broke loose. The Church has never been big on security and resurrected protocols; we needed their money..." Samuels took a deep breath with closed eyes. Little shoulders lifted and fell along with the lone tear that ran down the doctor's face.

Her eyes opened again. "Revenants began attacking workers. There are at least eighty here, Officer DuMons. As for this Fontaine woman, I think I heard the name with the church roster. She stayed primarily with Dr. Stengel near the second containing pen."

Carmen received a nod from one of her team members. The other woman in uniform had assisted Ortiz with a steady flashlight and some well-timed gunshots. Carmen returned the gesture, leaned into the main power breaker and inserted a replacement circuit board. Looking around the malfunctioning electrical room with its erratic lighting and flickering controls, the revenant control officer pressed her ear-piece.

"Alex, Carmen here, "she began, "I'm restoring auxiliary power and then main power on your mark."

Over her earpiece, Marshall signed on. "Has anyone even asked about me?"

"Shut up, Michael. Ready when you are, Alex."

Metal stairwells continued to echo with boot heels and incoming reports. Kansas was in-between levels. Alex and a part of his team were on their way to the second pen. He had left a small number to secure the floor. "Okay," DuMons beeped in through their earpieces, "Ortiz, in five..."

Just then, he hit the doorway and found an extended hallway.

"...FOUR..." Carmen continued.

"BEHIND US!!!" yelled out behind DuMons. A swarm of undead came spilling out of the opened rooms. Alex's team joined the officers already present.

"...THREE..."

Alex's burner released its signature burst of fire and metal. Burning carcasses slogged in piles against the walls. Here was the largest concentration of revenants.

"...TWO...."

With Ortiz's voice echoing in his ear-piece, Alex scanned the immediate area where he and the local officers did hunt and did battle with multiple targets. The federal officer caught a glimpse through a window across the extended bridge.

"Melissa..."

He nearly choked on the word. Through an automated security door which was jamming and trying to close repeatedly, DuMons saw his sister; alone, in a room of bloodied scientists – some stilled and partially eaten and some were beginning to twitch, the RJ-237 awakening.

Melissa was pushing on the other side of a chair, keeping at bay several decedents; ravaged with loose eyeballs and exposed organs. Rotting and driven by hunger, the dead bodies reached and grasped around the chair for the lone Church member.

All before Alex's eyes.

His feet pounded the extended bridge; it warbled and whined under his weight. He leapt past shambling remains towards the malfunctioning security seal.

Carmen continued her countdown. "...ONE..."

From outside his peripheral vision, two of the dead stepped into Officer DuMons' mad dash. Alex hurled himself into three hunger pounds of decay and putrefied tissue and flesh; revenant officer and revenants all went through the opening.

"NOW!"

Carmen restored power to the center.

The building hummed to life.

Bright bluish white lighting burst to life overhead, casting away the hallways' emergency red and illuminating the holding pens and research rooms.

Circulation fans whirred to order, rattling the stilled vents and air ducts.

The alarms changed from whining chimes to obnoxious and loud barks of urgency. Doors suddenly found life and hissed shut, their locks spinning into protective resolution.

The holding pens snapped with electrified walls. For those that did still have revenants in their midst, the soulless husks were contained once again.

At that moment, the alarms changed and all doors and exits were sealed.

Including the exit for the DuMons siblings; leaving them trapped with a pack of cadaverous revenants and separated from any semblance of help.

Alex and his sister were cutoff.

Carmen and what remained of her team met up with the local LEOs, the scientists and RCO Marshall.

"Kansas," she began, "Where's Alex?"

Officer Marshall grit his jaw and pointed upward towards the completely locked down level and their separated teammate.

"We need to get up there and unsecure that room," Marshall threw out, locking down his burner and moving past the officers. Ortiz was a quick step behind him, her eyes flicking over the illuminated tablet in her hand.

"This place is an operational mess. I can't access that level from the control room or remotely. We'll have to do it up close."

Sergeant Jay Anthony Boudreaux suddenly stood in front of the Chicagoans making their way to the lion's den.

"Now hold on, I understand you got a man up there but there's still about thirty or so of them rot-and-stinkers crawling around, you can't--"

"With all due respect, sir," Kansas interjected, "By the power granted RCO law and protocols two, section A, paragraphs one-ten, we can. We've got jurisdiction, we've got the firepower and we have more than a 'man' up there. We've got family." Gone was the false veneer of jokester or fool that Marshall normally played.

Ortiz nodded and they both turned continuing to Alex's position.

Boudreaux shook his head. "Hell son, I hope you got good luck too."

Brown eyes met yellow and veined swiveling orbs.

Grave stench like wet vegetables rose from bloodied teeth and black gums.

Alex sprung off the stirring corpses at first chance. Rotted nails found their ways past body armor and dug into DuMons' side. He caught one with a hard elbow strike, its face caved in, sending teeth spraying out along with some darkened gore.

Alex kicked the body aside and overturned a lab table on the second resurrected he had brought in with him. The weight pinned the remains before it could stagger to its feet. It kicked and struggled in vain on the ground.

"Melissa!!!!!" he called out. Revenants were reaching for her on the other side of the chair she held for protection. Gangrenous arms stretched out, blackened nails scratched at the chair and nearly at her face. Melissa Fontaine turned towards her called out name.

Her eyes narrowed and her head tilted to one side. It was the look of confusion and doubt, until her eyebrows raised. Her face frowned and her teeth grit.

"ALEX?"

She was too close for the burner. The officer reached down at his side only to find his sidearm missing. Somewhere in his idiotic leap into harm's way, his weapon had fallen out. DuMons looked quickly around the room, finding a power cable leading to the room's electrified fencing.

Gloved hands wrapped around the metal coils and pulled it loose. Alex thrust its blue, sparking end into the crowded revenants, hurling them back.

They shared a field of lightning flashes and crackling; temporary at best.

DuMons turned to DuMons. "Are you all right, Melissa?"

That started the argument that had never ended.

"What...what...why are YOU here?" She flared.

"It's my JOB, Melissa," Alex flared back, "And I came all the way from Chicago to see if my sister was still alive!"

Alex radioed for his partners. "This is a waste of time," he mumbled to himself, "Carmen, I need you to get the seal open on the second pen room."

Carmen and Kansas were on an elevator. "We're en route, Alex. Hold on. "

"Fine. Keep me posted. DuMons out."

"Chicago!?" continued his sister, "You would make it to a big city one way or another, wouldn't you, Alex? More bodies to butcher?" On the ground next to her feet, was the body of the recently slain Dr. Stengel. The officer took a quick look at the damages to the scientist's remains. His head was still intact.

"Melissa, this is my job," Alex answered as he moved his sister aside. "I don't have time for this..."

"You should do more trying to give these people peace, Alex! Trying to end the problem instead of going around burning them all the time!!"

Alex shot a glance at the electrified and twitching corpses across the room.

The charge was grounding and losing effectiveness. Dr. Stengel's body was also a threat.

He cocked the burner.

"DON'T YOU EVEN---!!!"

He spun to find Melissa holding his gun arm.

"We don't have time for this---" Alex yanked his arm free.

Melissa's cheeks streaked with tears. "Just like mom!"

"What?" Her brother stopped. Undead twitched across the room.

Fontaine's teeth clenched, hissing the words between them. "You-killed-our-mother."

"Melissa, don't say that."

"The ambulance was coming ---She just a little more time..." His sister played back the same memories in her mind. The same lone night on the highway. The same accident.

"Melissa, there wasn't-ANY-time!"

The woman exploded. "You SHOT our MOTHER!"

Alex Darrell DuMons returned her detonation. "I SHOT A ZOMBIE!!!!"

The air hung. Silence filled up as fast as the tears in both Alex and Melissa's eyes.

"Two days ago," he continued, "I had to burn a revenant in front of his little girl, Melissa. He was going to going to strip the flesh off her bones and drink her brains. Like they all do. Like mom---"His voice broke. "Like that revenant would have done to J.B and to me and to you! I had no choice."

Melissa was caught off-guard by her brother's conviction.

"Tell me another way, Melissa! Tell me about a cure for the Lazarus Effect and I'm first one in line behind you to get it, backing you up!!"

The electrified field broke.

The cadavers rushed free as Melissa Fontaine cried out.

Alex shoved her behind him, catching two with the burner before he was overwhelmed. The wall and desks behind them were blown apart into flaming metal and sagging plastic.

A third revenant slashed at Alex across his face before he smashed it with a series of blows. Alex took a number of strikes to the back and his right leg. DuMons held a fourth descendant, a fresh one, in a grip. It had once been a pretty woman but now the cheeks were bloated and the skin ripping from decay. Her hair was matted and missing in spots.

Behind the DuMons', Doctor Stengel's body suddenly jerked and twisted until the former scientist lifted up and then crashed onto its side. Broken lenses had blood spatter inside them.

The white coat was stained with intestine and fear-induced urine.

The devoured leg left a streak of coagulation as the revenant now slid behind the Revenant Control Officer and towards his sister.

"MELISSA! BEHIND YOU!" he called out. As Alex spun to aid his sister, a revenant he grappled with sunk its jaws into his shoulder. The uniform's Kevlar weave held and while the jagged and bloodied teeth did not come through, the hurt still did.

DuMons grimaced with pain and spun. He kicked out his heel and knocked headless the biting carcass. Alex slumped to the floor; bleeding and feeling his left arm go numb. His body was not responding well to his wants. The teeth bites, despite the protection, had injured muscles and nerve groups. DuMons was sure some bite had gotten through and the rot and infection was spreading. He would need an injection of Bethany within the hour or risk death and resurrection himself.

But the officer found he could not move much.

However, Stengel's corpse was moving just fine, towards Melissa who stood paralyzed.

"Mel-Mel-Missy...", Alex gasped, "Move!"

Melissa DuMons Fontaine remained frozen. Her brother could see the past playing behind her eyes.

A car crash. Flames and smoke.

Sirens far off.

Mother was still. Then she jerks around.

And turns around. Reaching. Blood in her mouth.

Melissa screaming.

Stengel's body rose onto one good leg. Its arms reached out. Its mouth opened wide.

A blur knocked the dead man into a rack of equipment and shelving. The room resounded from crashing glass and clanking metal.

Stengel's corpse fell onto its side. Then it began to twitch again.

Alex was laid out under the wreckage he had caused, throwing himself into the ravenous undead reaching for his sister. The officer was still, his uniform torn and darkened in spots with his blood and those of the recently resurrected.

Melissa looked at her brother. He was not the murderer of their mother. He was not the cold, jack-booted storm trooper the Church of Internment had made RCOs out to be.

Alex was her brother; her baby brother that came home from the hospital and cried all day.

Now, Melissa Fontaine watched in impotent terror, her eyes wide and streaming tears. Her body trembled as her former colleague crawled with exposed organs and cracking bones towards the nearest and easiest prey: the stilled Alex.

"ALEX!" Fontaine cried out. "ALEX, GET UP!"

Her brother did not stir. He did not move.

Stengel's reanimated body slid closer. The rolled-back eye whites focused on the full meat and nutritious brain lying still.

"ALEX! GET YOUR GUN!!!" Fontaine's words were useless. The burner was nowhere in sight.

Only the officer's blade was available.

Melissa Angelica DuMons Fontaine watched as her baby brother lie, pinned, and her former colleague and friend crawled over to eat him.

The blade caught shine from the flickering electrics.

"DAMN IT, ALEX! MOVE!"

DuMons now groaned. But groan was all he did.

The body of Doctor Stengel slumped closer. Now, perched atop the shelving and flickering electronics that held down the prostrate officer, the revenant craned a creaking neck into position. A green and black tongue licked out lazily and engorged.

"ALEX! GET UP! THERE'S-NO-TIME!" She stopped, hearing her brother's words coming from her mouth. Was this what he felt when their mother reanimated and crawled for her children?

The scientist's body opened its mouth over Alex DuMons.

There was a loud whack.

The blade stuck half-way out of Stengel's skull. The corpse froze. The knife pulled loose.

There was another whack and another and another.

The body seized up and fell off, rolling with an impotent thump.

Melissa stood over her brother and the shut-down body of Doctor Stengel. She closed her eyes, holding her mouth with her bloodied hands. The blade's handle still felt as though it were in her grip.

Although it had never stopped, Melissa's heart started to beat again.

Until a hand reached up and grabbed her forearm.

She screamed and jumped.

It was Alex.

She smiled with tears and held her groaning and dazed brother. He was her little brother that followed her everywhere she went as a teen. He was her little brother that stayed up late when she and big brother Ben wanted to watch scary movies past bedtime.

He was her little brother; once gone to her, dead as their parents.

Now, he was family that had returned.

The doors hissed open and Marshall and Ortiz entered, weapons drawn and sweeping the room.

Chicago. Three weeks later.

Officers Michael "Kansas" Marshall and Carmen Ortiz burst through the office door reading "RCO A.DuMONS" The dark uniforms and body armor traded for civilian t-shirts and jeans just moments ago.

"HELLS YEAH, Lex!" Kansas declared at his lungs' top, "Cases are filed! Patel's gone home! Rush and Division and I think I may even get some from one of Carmen's cousins!"

"SHUT UP, MICHAEL!" Ortiz yelled, striking her friend in the side. "Such a pig!"

Kansas laughed to himself, adjusting his expensive leather jacket.

"He's right though, Alex," Carmen continued, "It's the weekend; we're off after a long series of tough missions. It's Friday, we just got paid, and I've got some cousins in town, let's go and have some fun!"

Alex turned from his flat screen, the bandages had just come off and his wounds made him move a little slow still. One eye opened and one closed as he stroked his chin in thought.

"Damn it! I knew it!" began Marshall, his arms wide then slapping at his sides. "He's going to say ---"

"First round of shots are on me," finished DuMons.

His teammates smiled wide and the trio rose headed for the office exit together.

A vibration notified Alex of an incoming call.

He looked down and smiled.

Ortiz and Kansas stopped. "Hey guys, you go on without me. I'll meet up with you in a bit and Carmen, you save the prettiest cousin for me!"

As his team left, Alex leaned against his desk, looking at his cell again.

It read "Incoming Call: FONTAINE, MELISSA."

He exhaled and tapped the phone's screen. DuMons smiled.

"Hi sis."

The End