



Illustrated by Josh Meehan

# The Old Man

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**Rich Larson**

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“So the fed solution to one convict escaping is releasing another.”

They watched as the gleaming white pyramid of cryocaps rippled and rearranged itself, pulling a particular prisoner to the front on magnetic rails. A spidery robotic arm jerked the blue-lit cryocap out of its slot and set it in front of them with a thud that echoed to the vaulted ceiling. Technicians wearing baggy white safesuits scurried forward.

“It was not a decision we made lightly, warden. This is our best chance of tracking him down. He knows the swamps better than nearly anyone else.”

“Knew them a decade ago. Is what you mean.”

“Things change slowly in the South, warden. Some things, not at all.”

A technician plugged her smartgloved thumb into a particular socket, and the cryocap turned

transparent. Inside, prisoner 110924 drifted in a burnt-orange suspension gel, tethered by tubes snaking into his long bony limbs and down his throat. His shaven head knocked up against the top of the cryocap. Six years of cold storage with minimal rethaws had sapped some mass, whitening him to muscle shrink-wrapped over bone, but he was still gigantic, still imposing.

“What makes you so sure your boy here goes with the gameplan? Doesn’t try to skate as soon as you drop him in the swamp?”

“We’ll rig him out with a tracker and a biobomb. And keep a close eye on him.”

“Some people would rather get their head blown to bits than live the rest of their life in a tank. You can dream in cryo, you know. And this asshole, he’s not having good ones.”

The cryocap began to drain, sluicing suspension gel into a sticky orange puddle on the ferrocrete floor. The tubes retracted, wriggling out from the prisoner’s flesh like tapeworms; he convulsed as the last one slid out of his cock. His dark skin had paled, gaining a grease-yellow tint underneath.

“We’re going to commute his sentence if he succeeds. But his real motivation will be intrinsic. Psychologically speaking.”

“You’re going to tell him dead or alive, then.”

Two technicians helped the prisoner to a gurney that flexed itself up to the correct height for him to sit. His eyes were still gummed shut. The thaw had been started remotely six hours prior, but full muscle function wasn’t slated to return for another two. The prisoner eased himself down like an old man, gripping the edge of the gurney with long ink-laced fingers.

“Yes. And we’ll expect dead.”

A technician approached him with an injector, and suddenly the fingers were around her throat. Her safesuit inflated, punching him backward onto the gurney, and he nearly rocked it over. The other technicians scrambled for the restraints.

“Guess there’s no love lost between them. With how it all ended.”

“You’re putting it lightly, Warden. We downloaded some of those cryo dreams and the AI reached the same conclusion we did. Ezekiel here wants to kill his own pa more than he wants anything else in the entire goddamn world.”

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A body slit open and steaming in the back of a refrigerated truck. Blood turning to slippery slush on the dull metal floor. Copper smell clinging in his throat like it wouldn’t ever leave. The Old Man’s wild eyes roving, his voice booming, *we are the instruments of God*.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, Ezekiel.”

Zeke dragged his head up. They’d stood him under a skinspray nozzle long enough for modesty, coating him in ragged black fiber that felt like cobweb, and they’d clamped his hands. Now he was in a folding chair, two men looking at him from across a bolted-down table.

One was familiar: the warden, but aged, deeper trenches around his mouth and a crooked nose that had been straight before. The other had an artfully gashed suit, smug eyes dotted with circuitry, and Zeke could hear the Old Man’s voice sneering in his head: *G-man, spook, puppet, sniveling government puppet*.

“You must be wondering why you’re thawed,” the spook continued. “Seeing as your next physical isn’t scheduled for another eight months. It has to do with your daddy.”

That made sense, even in Zeke’s cryo-muddled head, because everything had to do with the Old Man. He was the black hole at the center of the Universe, eating and eating. Zeke felt a familiar bubbling in his gut, hot sick hate churned together with more fear than he had ever admitted to anyone.

“Mass cryo failure in the LCI, so he was in transit to a slam in Angola,” the spook said. “But something happened while they were crossing marshland. He got free. Now he’s gone to ground in the southeast bayou. That’s home territory, for him. And for you.”

Zeke saw it all crystallized in an instant. “And ain’t nobody know.” He forced the words up a raw throat.

The warden shot a surprised look sideways, but the spook just smiled. “Officially, he’s already safely back in the tank. It’s not a good look, otherwise. The most notorious homegrown terror-

ist of the past fifty years shaking loose just like that.”

“So why you thaw me?” Zeke asked, because it seemed important to get it from the Spook’s mouth.

“To help us recapture him. Quickly and quietly.”

“I get what?”

The spook leaned backward. “We take you out of the tank,” he said. “Commute your life sentence to twenty years in genpop, if you can go that long without killing anyone.”

Zeke set his clamped hands heavily on the table, ignoring the sting. “Recapture, you said.” He peered deep as he could into the spook’s wired eyes.

The spook gave his chimpanzee smile again, all teeth. “If something were to go wrong, and he were to be killed in firefight, the deal would remain unchanged.”

Zeke clenched his fists tight, letting the clamp sting him over and over like a Gulf jellyfish, but there was no way to test if he was dreaming or not. Could be he was still floating in the tank. If it was a dream, though, it seemed like a good one.

“Yeah,” he said. “Deal.”

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Finally warm again. Zeke felt the change, felt familiar damp heat creeping into the flyer’s open fuselage, as they headed south. His skin prickled with almost-sweat, and the fresh scar tissue where they’d welded a little cam to his cheekbone started to itch.

The back of his head itched, too, and ached fiercely from the tracker/biobomb insertion. They did that with a big needle that reminded him of killing catfish, finding the little hole in the skull and sticking the wire in. The technician, jittery on something, had told him it would blow his head clean off if he tried to run.

Zeke knew better. The Old Man had caught a spook once and took off four of his fingers with pliers before he triggered his biobomb. There’d been a smell of burning meat, and the spook had slumped over right away, but his head had stayed in one piece.

Down below, Zeke saw the bayou spread out like mottled skin, poisonous green canopy and water colored like the dull gray sky. Some things were different. New powerlines, it looked like, sutured through the vegetation. And in the far distance he could see the floodwater had encroached, taking new chunks out of the coast, Houma and New Orleans long since swallowed.

He heard the Old Man booming in his head: *and the waters will rise, and the storms will come a gain and again, until we loose the Devil’s hold on this country. Either we purify these lands, or the floods will. You hear me, Ezekiel? You hear me, Elijah? You hear me, Elim?*

Zeke figured he would always hear him, even after he killed him. He looked at the sealed matte black case where the spook had promised him a shotgun with rib barrel and tac barrel, a snub-nosed handgun, hydrophobe-coated cartridges and plenty of ammo for both. He fantasized sticking the .22 up under the Old Man’s thick jaw, so he couldn’t speak, and it must have showed because the guard slouched across from him tensed up.

“You sweat a whole lot,” Zeke said. “Must make them hands real slippery.”

The guard’s knuckles were white around the grip of his rifle for the rest of the trip.

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They dropped him and the black case as close as they could to the Old Man’s last triangulated position, and as the flyer droned away, Zeke felt a little bite of electricity from the cam under his eye. Maybe checking the calibration, maybe just a reminder that they would be watching. The spook would be watching.

He sloshed his way to higher ground, sucking down another deep breath of the pungent air, tasting the mélange of moss and rot and mangrove flowers, all scents he’d thought he’d lost forever. He could hear the buzz of insects, the splash and slither of a lizard or a baby gator.

Zeke dragged the case onto a humped root and palmed it open. He outfitted the Mossberg, ribbed barrel for now, and loaded it with buckshot. The .22 went into his waistband. He filled the pockets of the fatigues with ammo, then went through the rest of the case.

He pulled on the hydrophobe jacket and put the MRE bars in the pocket, left the sleeping roll, headlamp, and fuel cell. Grabbed the knife, left the multitool. From the aid kit he took cling-

wrap, using it to seal the tops of his boots, and all of the painkiller patches.

Everything else went back in the case, which he dumped in the first pocket of quicksand he found. It sank fast. He remembered coming home from fishing, when him and Elijah were young enough that the Old Man still towered over them, and Elim was still a baby. Zeke had been chasing Elijah through the cypress trees, and then suddenly he hadn't, slipping hip-deep into a soft pale mud his older brother had danced right across.

*Put yourself in there, you can get yourself out*, the Old Man had said, squatting down with the catch still writhing raw and pink over his shoulder. *Wail on like that, though, something gonna eat you first.* Zeke had stopped wailing then, but the tears and snot kept dripping down his chin, and the mud kept sucking at his skin. He'd looked at Elijah for help, but Elijah only crouched there with the same horrible blank look on his face as when he picked legs off beetles, and then him and the Old Man had left.

Even after Zeke had realized the mud could creep to his belly but no higher, after he'd finally figured to tip himself backward to lever his legs up, finally knotted his slippery fingers into a tangle of roots, it still took him hours to get out. Hours of wriggling and fighting and biting back sobs in the dark, listening for the splash of waking gators or the bone rattle of the ghost Elijah had sworn to seeing behind the outhouse.

The Old Man had been waiting for him when he slopped free, stepping out from behind a tree only a stone's throw away, shotgun hanging in the crook of his arm. His eyes were rimmed red. *If you done called even once, even one damn time, I'd have got you out. Forgive me, Ezekiel. Forgive me, I wronged you.* And he'd carried him home, letting him wrap his skinny shaky arms around his neck.

Zeke was careful where he stepped now. He slung the Mossberg over his shoulder and followed the water. Mosquitos were breeding in silvery clouds along the bank, so he paused long enough to plaster his exposed skin with mud, careful not to cover the cam.

The sun was out now, poking its fingers through the tangled branches overhead and gleaming off dirty puddles. Looking for footprints was useless here; the swamp swallowed them fast as you made them. But there were other ways people left traces.

He found the first one at head-height, a splintery knob where a cypress branch had been torn free. By the look of the branches around it, four feet, good length for a spear once it was stripped and sharpened. The Old Man had escaped unarmed and fixed that soon as possible, knowing someone was coming after him.

The Old Man would be ready.

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Dusk was falling when Zeke came across a shack. Its plank pathway was all but gone, only a few rotted fragments poking up from the water like broken bones, and the porch was half-swallowed. Zeke looked over the soggy timbers, the battered roof snaked with retrofitted cables. Someone had peeled off the solar pad, leaving a square of corrugated tin with less rust than the rest. The one window was shattered.

Not so different in shape from the house where he grew up with his brothers and the Old Man and sometimes the pale thick-boned woman with weary eyes who they had to call Nurse, never mama. Theirs had been built better; the Old Man was thorough in everything he did, precise. For a moment Zeke's mind overlaid the ruin with pieces of memory, seeing:

The welded metal T off the porch where the Old Man dressed deer, hanging them by their hooves and then slitting them open with his long knife. Elijah had always watched, fascinated, for the moment when the skin of the belly split and the entrails spilled out as shiny pink ropes. Zeke had liked it better when the Old Man hung a tire for them to swing on.

The spiny dish mounted on the roof, stealing signals from a pirate satellite, filling their lone tablet with the web and the outside world that had bored Elijah and had never seemed quite real to Zeke. But Elim had devoured the information from the time he was little, and the Old Man had approved. *Y'all three need to learn all you can*, he'd said. *Learn the truth, and learn how the enemy lies. The climate cycle bullshit, the border closing, the homeland protection drones. Learn all you can before they seal off the web, too.*

A noise came from inside the shack.

Zeke dropped low, hands already moving to swap for the tac barrel. He brought the scope to his eye but saw only shadows through the broken window. He circled closer, using the spindly trees and rising fog as cover. The sound came again, something scraping on wood, and the sagging door to the shack moved just slightly.

Zeke thumbed the safety off. He felt a low cold throb at the back of his skull. His heartbeat was slow, like he was back frozen in the tank, and his hands were steady. He crossed the space in three bent-low strides, angled out of sight of the window. Paused there against the splintery frame of the porch. A muffled thump came from inside, and the door shuddered.

From this close, a round of buckshot would shred right through. But it would be loud, too, and Zeke had to be sure. He swung himself onto the porch and shouldered the door open in one motion. He saw a flurry of white and gray; half his brain had it down as a male heron while the other half was clearing the room, corner to corner. Floor rotted out, aluminum cans floating in puddles, overturned rocking chair covered in green moss.

Empty. The adrenaline kicked late, and Zeke's hands shook a bit as he turned back, realizing the heron hadn't bolted through the open doorway, hadn't taken the window either. There was a reason. One of the bird's wings was crumpled against itself, but the other was fully extended, all taut skin and straggly feathers, pinned to the back of the door with an oxidized knife. The dangling heron twitched against the wood and gave a weak caw.

He ducked away from the door, his heart thumping fast now, nowhere near frozen. The blood rimming the metal was coagulated black, but the Old Man wouldn't have set bait unless he planned to tend to it. Zeke went to the window and peered into thickening fog. Could be the Old Man was out there somewhere, watching the shack with his wild eyes.

Zeke kicked through the trash, staying low, scanning for bullet boxes or old casings. If the Old Man had left the knife stuck, it meant he had something better now. The thought twisted Zeke's stomach with fear. He gave a disintegrating cabinet a kick; the soggy wood crunched inward. Then he turned back to the pinned heron.

First thing he'd ever killed with his hands had been a heron. He remembered that now. The Old Man had set a length of razorwire out behind the house, for when the enemy finally came looking, and one morning, Zeke had found a big gray bird tangled in it.

*Sometimes a body does nothing wrong and they get hurt anyways, the Old Man had said. But what we're doing, Ezekiel, is more important than one heron. One hand here, one hand there. Pull down hard as you can.*

Zeke put the stock of his shotgun against the base of the pinned bird's neck. It wasn't bait, or at least it wasn't only bait. It was the Old Man guessing who'd been sent after him. The heron gave another low caw. Zeke ran his fingers down its feathery head, but he didn't twist. That would all but confirm the Old Man's suspicion, and Zeke didn't want him to know. Not yet.

He looked into the heron's filmy eye a moment longer, then slunk out of the shack and closed the door carefully behind him.

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An overgrown coypu was nosing its way along the bank; Zeke pictured it skinned and skewered, roasting over a sputtering fire. He'd hunted plenty of river rats when he was young, especially during the days or weeks when the Old Man disappeared and left Elijah in charge. Remembering the taste made his mouth water, but he let the coypu go and fished an MRE bar out of his pocket instead. No unnecessary noise or light until he had a fix on the Old Man.

He'd circled for hours, moving steadily outward from the shack but had seen no more sign of his quarry. Now the sky was turning black, and the gators would be awake, the bigger ones sloshing out of the water to go lie in wait trailside. Even armed, Zeke didn't want to chance across one in the dark, and he figured the Old Man didn't, either. He found a tree with a sturdy crook high enough off the ground and slid his knife under the bark to check for bugs. Nothing that bit.

Zeke clambered up the tree and unslung his Mossberg, hanging it from a branch above him. He held the .22 in his lap as he leaned back against the trunk and closed his eyes. He'd been run-

ning on purpose and rage and the post-thaw amphetamines they'd dosed him with, but now his atrophied muscles were burning with exertion. His skeleton felt heavy.

Zeke drifted between dreams and memories. Being back in the bayou had tapped open the oldest of them, before they were so full of blood. Sitting on the porch with his brothers in the evening, the Old Man reading from the Bible or *The Tempest*, glow from the tablet screen attracting little winged beetles. Zeke and Elijah and Elim would play a game while they listened, the one where they broke down and built up whichever gun the Old Man picked from the bolted locker. Zeke was usually first to have it memorized, and then he would have to do it with Elim covering his eyes from behind and Elijah jamming a sharp knuckle under his ribs.

There had been other games, too, hiding games and fighting games Zeke once assumed all children played. The see-nothing game, where they had to pretend the Old Man's visitors were invisible, whether it was the ex-soldiers with bristly beards and shifting tattoos or the dark-eyed families who stayed in their attic for days or weeks. Those sometimes spoke to each other in a throaty language, and the women always wore cloth over their heads.

Zeke's breathing quickened as his mind dragged him forward to the day it stopped being games. The Old Man hadn't been one for birthdays, but Zeke had done the math since and knew he'd been fifteen when it happened. Elijah seventeen, Elim twelve. The three of them had been out hunting when the drone hummed overhead. Everyone had belled out in the mud, no hesitation, because that was what you did when a drone or flyer went over the bayou. Once the sound subsided, they kept going.

Zeke had bagged a lynx that day, came up on it quiet as smoke and deaded it between the eyes, a shot that made Elim sing aloud and Elijah glower for hours. He carried it draped across his bony shoulders, not wanting to soil or tear the pelt on brambles getting it home. Every so often he rubbed his face in the soft fur, ignoring the stink of gases leaving its slow-stiffening body.

They'd been nearly home when a thunderclap shattered the cloudless sky. Loudest thing Zeke had ever heard. A smell came, too, something metallic that stung the inside of his nose. The birds went silent. Elim started to run, started shouting *orbital, they hit us with an orbital, they killed everyone*. Then Elijah ran too, and Zeke left the lynx in the dirt to keep pace.

Ten years later, Zeke could still see it all etched across the insides of his eyelids. The smoldering branches as they got closer, the gushing steam that scalded their exposed skin, the gurgling hole where a few scorched fragments of wood were all that was left of the house. Bits of blackened bone, too, because a trio with sad eyes and uncitizen brandings had been staying in the attic, and the Old Man had been home repairing the roof.

He remembered fear, sicker and deeper than he'd ever felt it before. He remembered grabbing blindly for Elim and Elijah so they wouldn't disappear, too; Elim clung back and after a moment so did Elijah. They'd been huddled like that when the Old Man limped out from the steam. Coated in soot and blood, clothes singed to ash, a deep furrow showing part of his shinbone.

*They put a damn tracker in him*, he'd said. *Missed it in all the scars. God damn them. God damn them*. His eyes had been wild for the first time, then, but Zeke didn't realize it until later. He'd been too shocked, too wracked with relief and awe. *We go to war now. You hear me, Elim? You hear me, Elijah? You hear me, Ezekiel?*

Zeke pushed the muzzle of the .22 against his head, like he could force the memories out, but memories like that never left. Only burrowed.

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Morning came quickly, streaking the sky with filaments of red. Zeke roused from half-sleep to rub warmth back into his stiff limbs. He licked dew from the leaves above him and ate another MRE, folding the wrapper carefully into his pocket. Then he retrieved the Mossberg, worked the handgun back into his waistband, and climbed down. Set off again.

He moved through the bog like a ghost, smooth and quiet, but bits of bad dream still clung to him. He'd dreamed concrete cube bunkers and dingy apartments, the places they'd shuttled between after their home in the bayou was sat-bombed. Cities that had been only names to him before: Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago. Colder and colder, but he hadn't felt it at the time. He'd had a flame burning in his belly.

Zeke remembered the first op best. Sitting in the back of a truck with a black S&W bullpup, one he'd taken apart more times than he could count, resting across his knees. His brothers almost invisible across from him, wearing chamsuits that rippled light and then dark and then back again as the truck rattled down a row of street lamps.

One of the Old Man's ex-soldiers had made a last minute protest, hissing *they're only kids, Christ's sakes*, and Elijah had given him his deadead look while the Old Man said *they look like they only kids?* The words had filled Zeke with a fierce pride that ached the back of his throat. When the truck stopped, he'd felt more trembly, and queasy, like he needed a shit.

But that had disappeared the instant they pulled their hoods up and spilled out onto the street. The prisoner transport, stalled right where the Old Man had said. The guards, dropping their vapor pipe and fumbling for their weapons, clumsy how the Old Man had predicted. Zeke had put two rounds in his target's chest, and it felt no different from shooting deer. Elijah had downed the other and then Elim had stuck the breaching shotgun up to the lock and blown the transport doors open.

Zeke remembered the rush, the sick feeling washed away by cold clear adrenaline and knowing that he was doing God's work. He'd helped round up the driver and the guards and search them for phones and sidearms. The Old Man had gone into the back of the transport and come out a moment later, hauling a woman whose face had been beaten to one pulpy mass of bruises because she knew things the government didn't want her to.

As the Old Man helped her down, Zeke's chamsuit had started to glitch, flashing bright acid yellow, and he'd ripped off his hood to find the override switch. Only for a second, but when the Old Man noticed he pulled out his needler and fired a single flechette into the kneeling driver's head.

*Never show your face*, the Old Man had said. *Never, you hear me? That one had a wired eye. Look.* So Zeke had looked, and seen a single spark jump from where the Old Man's flechette had sheared its way through the lense, through the wiring, through the soft eyeball into the brain. Zeke remembered a trickle of vomit had escaped his lips at the sight, but he'd kept his hood up and breathed rancid air until they were back at the hideout.

*You did me proud, Ezekiel*, the Old Man had said later, after they'd all taken turns showering in the rusted tub, washing away the stink of fight-or-flight sweat. *And what we did tonight was more important than one government driver. His soul is in God's hands, not ours.*

Zeke was still half in the memory as he caught a faint smell of ash. He followed it until he found the charred twigs and powdery traces of a fire. Squatting down, he sifted through the remains with his hands. Still warm. Overhead, another stump where a cypress branch had been, this one cut cleanly. Too long and flimsy for a weapon, but a good length to probe for gators.

Zeke headed toward the bank, toward the shallow point he'd seen yesterday. The Old Man was finally making a move.

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The algae-skinned water moved slow and no higher than the waist, but there were other deterrents to crossing, and Zeke kept his ears pricked as he pushed through the swaying rushes. It was safest to wait until noon, when the fog peeled away and the gators were lazy and sunning themselves. But the Old Man had never been scared of gators or anything else.

Zeke moved slowly, eyes screwed up against the fog, and when he caught a glimpse of a familiar silhouette, his heart nearly stopped. Then it sped up, pounding against his ribcage as the mist parted. Tall as Zeke himself was, built with the same thick bones and corded muscle, near identical to him or to Elijah or to Elim had Elim finished growing. The Old Man had his own way of moving, though. Even half-naked, wading through green scum. He moved like every step had been planned for a hundred years and nothing could stop it.

Zeke raised the shotgun. Through the scope, he saw the Old Man's face, ridged brow and angular cheekbones and deep-set eyes. Aside from the gray scruff of beard, it was like seeing his reflection. He'd once thought all brothers looked alike, and all sons grew to look like copies of their fathers. Zeke flicked the safety off. His finger caressed the trigger.

From this distance, the buckshot would drop him even if it didn't get penetration. If the Old

Man got back up, it was another easy shot, and if the Old Man thrashed and bled enough in the water, he wouldn't need it. The Old Man would never know where the shell came from. Or who it came from.

Zeke clenched his teeth, then lowered the Mossberg and slid forward into the scum. Cold water crept past his wrapped boots, clinging at the knees of his fatigues. He wanted the Old Man to look him in the face when it happened. He wanted him to know who and why.

The Old Man moved slow and steady toward the opposite bank, and Zeke followed. Orange fabric flashed through the mud the Old Man had plastered over his peeled-down jumpsuit, and in the knotted arms Zeke saw a battered pistol handle. He was using the stripped branch to check depth as he went. Zeke kept one eye on the Old Man, one scanning the algae for the raised nodes of an alligator's scoots. Birds were warbling, hopping into the water, a good sign.

The gap shrank. If the Old Man went for his pistol, he would have to take the shot. But he would get close as he could first. The water rose to Zeke's waist, still cold enough to bite. Mist swirled overtop of the thick green scum. He'd spent his whole life following after the Old Man. For a moment it felt as if he was a child again, as if Elim and Elijah would be coming behind with the fishing gear.

He tightened his grip on the shotgun. Only yards away now. He mouthed the words: *turn around, Old Man, look at death how Elijah did, look at death how Elim did.* He imagined the Old Man's jaw blown off before he could reply, his head torn open by the buckshot.

The birds had stopped warbling. Zeke realized it in the same moment the Old Man did, and the Old Man pivoted in the same moment a gator erupted from the water. Green froth flew into Zeke's eyes; when they cleared all he could see was the pale pink flesh of an open maw, impossibly wide. He dove backward as the jaws clacked shut in his face. He squeezed the trigger.

The shotgun's boom deafened him. A chunk of the gator's snout detonated in a cloud of red, spattering Zeke's face, and a tiny shard of bone or deflected buckshot buried searing hot in his chest. The gator thrashed. Zeke got a glimpse of the Old Man through the spray, enough to see him drawing the pistol. Zeke pumped the Mossberg, braced the stock on his shoulder, fired.

He didn't see if it landed; the gator was surging at him, yelping through its shredded snout, the intact teeth glinting sharp. Zeke hurled himself to the side, pumping again. Before he could pull, the gator twisted around and its tail took his legs. Zeke crashed into the water. Scum filled his mouth and nose; he could feel the gator moving, but he was blinded by bubbles streaming past his eyes. He came up choking, spinning to face.

He found the gator drifting limp. There was a spread of bullets lodged along its bony head. The third had blown clean through the eye socket, leaving a ragged red tunnel on its way to the gator's brain. Zeke raised his shotgun again, scanning the opposite bank, but the Old Man was gone. He watched the tree line until the gator's limbs started to twitch.

Maybe just the last few dying nerves. Zeke didn't take the chance. He fired a last shell into the top of its flat skull, reloaded, and slogged his way to shore.

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Once the adrenaline ebbed, the bit of shrapnel lodged under Zeke's collarbone started to sting. He found a hump of semidry ground and peeled off his coat and shirt. With his chin to his chest he could see the nub of distended flesh, seeping blood around a sliver of gray buckshot. Zeke took a breath, then wormed his finger in and pulled the fragment free. He patched the wound with clingwrap and slapped a dermal painkiller to his neck.

As the drug flushed cool and tingly through his body, he stripped bark to bed a fire, moving on automatic. The Old Man had downed the gator. Only needed three shots to do it, and any one of them could have gone in his head instead. That meant the Old Man still wanted something from him, even though it felt like he'd already taken it all.

After the first op, they'd started to blur together: usually in the night, with gear, sometimes in the day wearing plain clothes. Taking and leaving packages in specific places. Breaking into buildings. Planting a bomb in an autocab. Holding up a morgue to carve a data implant out of a corpse's leg. Rescues that were sometimes more like kidnaps. Government reports that called them terrorists, raw reels that called them the Insurgency.

The Old Man sleeping less and less, his eyes always bloodshot and his late-night rants slurred from his medications. Elim chewing through the pillowcase he used to hide sobs. The Old Man interrogating a spook in the bloodstained bathtub while Elijah recorded without trembling even once. Elim refusing to watch, even though it was the same spook who'd authorized gas attacks in Aztlan. In the night, Elim sitting up and whispering: *we never had a mother, Zeke, we're seedlings, and he grew us like this, grew us to be just like him, see?*

Zeke fed twigs into the flickering flame, coaxing it to life. He peeled off the spent derm and replaced it with a second. He couldn't remember what they'd been trying to do on the night Elim died, but he remembered the escape, dragging Elim across the tarmac toward the getaway van and leaving a dark smear behind. The Old Man had helped load him into the back, where there was an Asclepius unit waiting to scan the injuries. Zeke had held Elim's hand while he cursed and choked and the unit unfurled over him like a white plastic squid.

Two gunshot wounds in the chest, one where his hipbone met his thigh. Bright blood leaking onto the dull metal floor as the van pulled away. Zeke had already been moving to hook himself up for transfusion, how they'd done a half-dozen times before, when the Old Man shook his head. He'd tapped the screen of the unit, so Zeke could see the glowing red fatality prognosis.

*Elim, you're going home*, the Old Man had said, in a voice thick with tears. *May the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you, and give you peace, and may you dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

And then, before Zeke could say *wait* or *I love you, Elim* or anything else, he'd tapped the screen again. The Asclepius had rolled Elim onto his side and plunged a precise needle into the back of his neck. Like killing a catfish. Zeke remembered sitting paralyzed on the floor of the van while the unit worked, slitting Elim's body open with a gush of steam, bagging and sealing the organs, sluicing the blood with a horrible sucking sound.

*Has to be done*, the Old Man had said. *Might save any one of us. It's just a body, now, Ezekiel. His soul is with God.*

Months later Zeke had noticed a fresh scar on the Old Man's chest and realized where Elim's heart had gone.

Zeke shook himself. He unloaded the shotgun and used it to prop up his coat by the fire; it could maybe pass from a distance as a sitting silhouette. Then he took the .22 from his waistband and left the warmth and light behind. He found a place to watch and wait.

\* \* \*

The Old Man came from the opposite direction Zeke was expecting, so quiet he nearly missed the footfalls. Zeke waited a heartbeat, then swept out from behind the mangrove. The Old Man stopped, arms akimbo, his pistol tied in its makeshift holster. He didn't try to turn around.

"Put a cam on you," he said. "And a mic?"

The Old Man's voice had changed. It didn't boom and roll like thunder. It was hoarse and strained and, for the first time, old. Zeke aimed for the dead center of his shaved head.

"I prayed they would send you, Ezekiel," the Old Man said. "Prayed and prayed, and here we are."

"Hands," Zeke croaked.

The Old Man put his hands on his head, joints popping.

"Look at me," Zeke said.

The Old Man turned, and from close up, Zeke could see new lines carving his face. For so long it had seemed like he would never age. Zeke let the .22 drift from one sunken eye to the other. He could feel the cam on his cheekbone humming. He imagined a dozen spooks cutting into the feed, crowding around screens to watch.

"I hate you," he said.

"I heard such," the Old Man said. "And that hate'll eat you alive if you let it."

"You ate us alive," Zeke said. "You got Elim's heart beating in you right now. Only good part you do got." He breathed in deep. "You was just waiting for a reason to cut him up."

"I knew Elim wasn't gonna make it," the Old Man said. "Too gentle. You knew it, too. Coulda

been that night, coulda been a different night. No difference.”

“Elijah,” Zeke said. “You made him a monster. He never had no choice in it. Neither of them got a choice.”

“I know,” the Old Man said. He paused, eyes slick with tears. “But I did love them, Ezekiel.”

Zeke fired. The bullet cracked the air, splintered the trunk behind the Old Man’s head. “Don’t tell me no lies,” he snarled.

The Old Man’s mouth moved, and when the roar in Zeke’s ears subsided, he heard the words. “I done a lot of wrong things, Ezekiel. I have sinned. I have sinned against you a hundred times over. I am ready to die.”

Then he lunged, and for an instant, Zeke saw Elijah and Elim in his face, and it made him slow to the trigger. The Old Man bowled him over, his long arms impossibly strong as they knocked the shot askew, pinned him down. Zeke felt the .22 fly from his grip and hit dirt. He jackknifed upward, trying to catch the Old Man’s chin.

Air. The Old Man was quick, too quick, and now his hands were around his throat squeezing. Blackness seeped into Zeke’s peripherals. It constricted around him like rubber. He connected with a knee; the Old Man grunted, held on.

“But not yet,” the Old Man said. “Not just yet.”

He drove his thumb under Zeke’s eye and crushed the cam.

\* \* \*

Zeke was adrift. He knew it was the painkillers: the Old Man had stuck derm after derm to his bruised neck, enough to turn his limbs distant and his head cloudy. Sometimes it felt like he was being dragged. Mostly it felt like he was floating in the dark, back in the tank. He saw things from a distance. He saw the refrigerated van. He saw the alley. He remembered.

He remembered something had come unglued in Elijah after Elim died. Zeke had noticed the change in his face, first, in how he gave up the too-wide smiles or exaggerated frowns that he once used to try and put the other insurgents at ease. His face had gone back to being perfectly blank. Then other things: The hours he spent lying flat on his back, whispering to himself. Maimed insects hopping and buzzing in the screen of the window. Unplanned casualties on ops gone wrong.

Zeke had tried to talk to him, tried to use soft words like Elim would have. Elijah had listened, calm and patient, and at the end of Zeke’s rambling, he’d leaned close and said *that lynx was mine, Zeke, and if Elim weren’t out with us I woulda killed you way back then*. And he’d smiled his too-wide smile.

Two nights later, Elijah had disappeared and so had a needler plus five full cartridges. *Bring him back, Ezekiel*, the Old Man had ordered, in his room where the scrambler was always humming in the corner, turning their voices untraceable. *And if worst comes to worst, get rid of his body. Nobody can find his body*.

So Zeke had gone after his brother, following a trail of corpses. First a metrocop with his helmet cracked open and a neat semicircle of flechette wounds in his chest. Then a man and a woman tangled together in a dumpster; from the smell at least one of them had shit themselves dying. Then Zeke had followed the sound of screaming to a nightclub a block over and shoved his way inside through a stream of fleeing revelers.

Pounding music. A dozen more bodies crumpled in corners or slumped on the bar under the pulsing grid of holos. Blood and spilled drinks slicking the floor. Through the fire exit, in the back alley, Elijah pissing on the wall with the needler hanging loose in his grip.

*Don’t get twisted, Zeke*, Elijah had said. *All them souls in God’s hands now. Right?* He’d turned around, stuck the needler up under his chin. *Clones, though. Clones don’t got souls*.

Clone. Zeke had recognized the word from hearing it muttered behind his back. It had never meant anything to him.

*Elim tried tell you*, Elijah had said, checking the weapon’s cartridge. *But the old man got his hooks in you deep, Zeke. Elim was too soft and I was too hard, but you was just right. Turned out just like him. You can kill and you can cry about it*.

Then Elijah had swept the needler up. Zeke remembered diving backward, the .22 barking

twice from his hip, and seeing Elijah's body smack the pavement. But he'd managed to keep his hold on the needler, and he said *you ain't stealing this one, Zeke* right before he put it up to his own neck and unloaded a full scatter that nearly took his head off, shredding everything but his spinal column.

A hacked autocab with all its cams disabled had raced police sirens to the alley and won by a hair, and Zeke had taken Elijah's body to an incinerator owned by a sleepy woman who asked no questions. He'd washed the blood off himself. Then he'd scoured what was left of the web to discover what his brothers had already known, maybe for years: they were not the Old Man's sons. They were his copies.

For the first time, Zeke had seen it all clear. The Old Man had grown them to be disposable soldiers and blood banks and organ farms. He had sacrificed Elim and Elijah, and he would sacrifice Zeke, too. Then he would grow new clones, free new allies, shed new blood. He would never stop devouring.

Nothing on the web had said if clones had souls or not, so it was impossible for Zeke to know if his brothers were with the Lord or the Devil or nowhere at all.

He had gone back to the hideout in a trance, cold all over from fury and anguish, reloading his gun with trembling hands. He'd been heading for the Old Man's room when gas canisters smashed through the windows and spooks wearing raid gear filled the hallway. He'd been so close to making sure the Old Man never sacrificed anyone ever again.

\* \* \*

"Not much time, Ezekiel," came the Old Man's voice. "Them drones coming soon."

Zeke dragged his eyes open. He was curled in the dirt; he could sideways-see the Old Man crouching over a sleek black case streaked with mud. It hissed open, and the Old Man retrieved a sharp-hooked neurotool that he brought in close enough to blur. Zeke barely felt it go in, only a dull pinch and then rasp when it twisted. He heard a soft electronic bleat as it found the tracker/biobomb in his skull.

Zeke's teeth knocked together from some brushed nerve as the Old Man slid the neurotool back out, now stained dark red with a glint of circuitry at the tip.

"The Insurgency ain't all gone," the Old Man said. "They rigged the cryo failure. Transport breakdown. Hid the kit for me."

Back to the war. The Old Man was going back to the war, and he thought he could drag Zeke with him. Zeke watched as the Old Man plucked the spook hardware off the end of the neurotool. Instead of crushing it between his fingers, he transferred it carefully to an injector. Zeke tensed.

"They gonna be waiting for us up north a ways," the Old Man said. "You can go with them. Or you can go around them."

Zeke punched his heel into the Old Man's shin. As he buckled forward, Zeke came off the ground, smashing an elbow into his chest. It was weakened by the drugs but still had enough force behind it to empty the Old Man's lungs. Zeke felt a hot wash of air across his face as he swiped the neurotool off the top of the black case. The hooked end gleamed sharp.

Zeke imagined digging and dragging, opening his jugular, making sure no more lies came out. He looked at the loaded injector. The Old Man twisted his head, and Zeke saw the guide mark dotting the flesh behind his ear.

"Why?" he asked, hoarse through a raw throat.

The Old Man choked. Wheezed. "I can't give you all them years back, Ezekiel," he whispered. "Can't bring your brothers back neither. I can do one thing, though. I'm gonna take the tracker to that shack and burn it down. The DNA traces won't tell them nothing. Spooks gonna think it's you."

Behind the clingwrapped wound in his chest, Zeke felt something deeper that hurt a hundred times worse. He pictured the Old Man dousing the shack's walls with gasoline and lighting it. Sitting down in the center, waiting for the flames like a Buddhist monk's immolation. For an instant Zeke was an exhausted child, and all he wanted was to wrap his skinny shaky arms around the Old Man's neck and be carried.

Then his mind leapt ahead. He bared his teeth. “Could be they think that, yeah,” he said. “One body, though. They gonna think I burned and you got away.”

The Old Man slowly nodded, and Zeke saw it all crystallized.

“You think I’m gonna take over for you.” Zeke tightened his grip on the neurotool. “You think if you do this, I go to the insurgents and tell ‘em how you laid down your life for mine. How you was crucified. And then I keep your war going another fifty years.”

“That ain’t what I—”

“So maybe I don’t go north,” Zeke snapped. “Maybe I never tell the insurgents nothing. People still gonna find out the Old Man escaped. People gonna think he out there somewhere like a bogeyman. That way you ain’t ever gotta die. You get to be legend.”

The Old Man shook his head. “Ezekiel, I want you to be free. I want to give you choice.”

But there was no choice. There was no way of knowing the Old Man’s mind, if he was telling the truth or if he was manipulating him one last time. Zeke looked down to where the sharp hook of the neurotool was just barely embedded in the Old Man’s skin. The blood beading there was bright red, the same blood he had flowing in his own veins whether he wanted it or not.

As the distant hum of drones filled the sky, Zeke stared deep as he could into the Old Man’s eyes, searching for his soul. He saw nothing but himself, adrift in the dark.

*Rich Larson was born in West Africa, has studied in Rhode Island and worked in Spain, and now writes from Ottawa, Canada. His short work has been featured on io9, translated into Chinese, Vietnamese, Polish and Italian, and appears in numerous Year’s Best anthologies as well as in magazines such as Asimov’s, Analog, Clarkesworld, F&SF, Interzone, Strange Horizons and Lightspeed. He was the most prolific author of short science fiction in 2015 and 2016. Find him at [www.richwlarson.tumblr.com](http://www.richwlarson.tumblr.com) and support his writing via [www.patreon.com/richlarson](http://www.patreon.com/richlarson).*