

KLAYTON PRESENTS A CELLDWELLER PRODUCTION:

BLACKSTAR

ACT ONE: PURIFIED



WRITTEN BY

JOSHUA VIOLA

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE BANE OF YOTO*

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BLACKSTAR

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It came from the sky.

Some called it the Smash Down, others the Great Collapse.

Some gave it names based on their beliefs -- the End, the Apocalypse, and the Judgment.

By any name, it was the same event -- the moment of impact. The moment Solaris collided with our world and the earth went dark.

The few who survived came to call it the Blackout, and that was the name history remembered.

Tides surged. Skies darkened. And civilization perished beneath its flames. But from the ashes, survivors rose and rebuilt.

Now the privileged dwell in Central - Earth's last city. The others, kept away by Central's great walls, cling to harsh life in the Outlands.

Despite their differences, they share the same struggle. All seek to reclaim what the Blackout stole from them: Humanity's lost past and glories.

And so it was that Re:memory was created to give birth to Retros: memories from another time and place fed directly into the minds of the survivors.

Of some of the survivors . . .

For only citizens of Central are granted access to Re:memory's Retros.

Everyone else relies on the black market.

Everyone else relies on Reapers to patch-in and steal.

Everyone else relies on Rezin.



SHUTEMDOWN

REZIN RACED, SEARCHING FOR shadows in a city that had none.

★ ★ ★ ★

The decryption had gone well, but they all did. This one was no different from any other, from any of the dozens of others he'd decrypted since he learned he could bypass systems.

Patch-in, decrypt, make the take, and get out.

That was the pattern.

That was what he did.

That was who he was.

That was what had made him rich.

That was what every decryption he'd ever made had been like, and this was the same...

Until it wasn't.

★ ★ ★ ★

Rezin knew as soon as he patched into Re:memory that this was going to be a big job, one with a big payout. He could tell – he'd always been able to tell. Ever since the first time he discovered that something within himself let him decrypt Re:memory — the storehouse where they kept the material most worth reaping — Rezin knew to make the take and get out without getting caught.

Before the Blackout, reapers, or as the old world called them: hackers, used their hands to bypass systems. They relied on analog keyboards and some street smarts to penetrate security. But in today's world, ever since the giant

rock Solaris punched a hole in the earth and gave birth to the Blackout, everything's changed. Central's systems had to evolve. Today, they are faster, stronger and smarter. Reapers have to augment themselves with a chip and cerebral implant to get through.

Reaping used to be work. Now it's an art form and Rezin its greatest artist.

But Rezin couldn't always pick what he took, couldn't always choose what he got. He'd be even richer if he could. People had lists of wants, and their friends had lists of other wants, and they all had money. If Rezin could have picked his gets, scoured for specific Retros, he'd have had it even easier than he already did.

If he could have patched-in remotely from his digs, he'd have done that, too, but he had to be *close*, close enough to touch the outer walls of some of the poorly secured facilities he'd decrypted.

With Re:memory, he had to be even closer. He had to be inside the building.

Which was not hard –Re:memory belonged to everybody in Central, or so Kaine, Central's leader, told the city's citizens.

Nobody completely believed him, and most people didn't even partially believe him. But it didn't matter. There were booths and kiosks for the general public, private rooms and even, some said, opulent suites for the wealthy. And whether in a booth or suite, a small fee let the visitor tap into the "Retros" - remembered treasures of the forgotten past - and lose themselves for an hour or two - longer for the wealthier - in other times.

Some said that the memories fed to them through the taps in the kiosks and suites were as false as the lies that led customers to the storehouse: not memories at all, but artificial experiences manufactured at the command of the leadership, and used to distract the public from the more awful aspects of their present. Not a real memory in the place, some insisted.

Rezin knew that wasn't true.

Others said the memories the public was allowed to tap were only the most innocuous, diverting, pleasing memories. Nothing too strong, and nothing that could short anybody out. They said, too, that the selection queue of accessible memories that customers could choose from wasn't even the tiniest fraction of what Re:memory held, not even a hint of the treasures and dangers the storehouse contained, and that they were withheld from the public by the city's leadership.

Rezin knew that *was* true, and didn't even come close to describing just how rich in memories the storehouse was.

The memories beyond the queue were, after all, what were making Rezin a very rich young man.

And they were what he was after today.



He wished there was a selection queue for his targets. It would be a dream just to scan the contents, pick his takes, reap them out and sell them.

But once patched-in, whatever it was in him that let him bypass systems only worked if Rezin let the process guide itself. He knew what people wanted, and he knew what he could get for a good Retro. There were customers in the city, but there were customers in the Outlands too, he knew, and sometimes he could play them against each other.

Depended on what he got. How things used to be *done* was what the Outlanders wanted – practical, usable Retros.

Everybody had too much of *now*. Nobody wanted any more of it. How it used to *feel* was what most of the city's Retro-collectors desired.

“How they made crops grow,” was the top want in the Outlands, so Rezin had been told by his fences.

“The last good day before the Blackout,” or, from darker-souled customers, “The opening moments of the Blackout,” were requests Rezin had heard more than once from customers in the city.

Not all of his customers were predictable, either. Though he hadn't worked with them directly, the fences the Outlands used to move Retros beyond the barriers that surrounded the city told him that some in the Outlands wanted former feels. And he'd found a few in the city, richer than most, and far richer than anyone in the Outlands, who'd paid and paid well for schematics, plans, instructions from the past.

But it was tricky selling such things in the city – he made sure that the people he dealt with would keep their newly acquired Retros quiet for a while after the transfer. That rule held for former how-it-used-to-feels as well as former how-it-was-dones. Anybody doing business with Rezin was somebody who knew how to keep quiet. That was how Rezin kept from getting caught.

Until now, he thought as he rounded a corner still too close to the Re:memory building and spotted two Scandroids gliding fast in his direction. Rezin scoped out the area, brushing away curly locks of brown hair from his pudgy face. He backstepped, dodged and danced his way through the few people on the boulevard, ducked down a sideways, fighting hard to keep from looking to see if the Scandroids followed. He walked fast without looking back or up, but not fast enough to attract attention.

When he did, he was pleased to see no Scandroids.

Pleased but not relieved.

He wondered if he would ever feel relieved again.

He doubted it.



He'd patched-in smooth as glass, no problems, just like every other patch he'd ever made. He'd done it from the north wall of the Re:memory building - he hadn't worked that wall in awhile.

To anybody paying attention, he'd have looked like anybody else. Maybe a little better - maybe a *lot* better. Rezin didn't like attracting attention but he didn't hide himself under a rock either. Reap in plain sight was the way he saw it. Not too plain today - he was making the bypass from inside a booth rather than a kiosk.

He took his cares. Never patch from the same spot twice in a row. Don't always use a booth - reaping from a kiosk was tougher, and not just because others could see him. Bringing out the Pulsar in a kiosk was tricky. But he had to have the Pulsar so that Re:memory's systems had something to feed the stolen Retros into without a trace. And to the system, the Pulsar registered the same as Rezin himself did on those occasions when, as protective cover, he purchased a Retro or two from the queue and lost himself in the same dull pasts accessible to *anyone*.

Rezin wasn't just anyone - and the Pulsar let him be more than that.

Most important of all, whether in a kiosk, a booth, or leaning against a wall at a low-secure facility: keep his eyes open and fight for all the focus he could while the decryption was taking place. The reaping wanted to take him over, drop him down into Re:memory or whatever he was decrypting, carry all of him along with it while it went after whatever it was going to get.

But he couldn't get too comfortable or he'd lose himself in memories of the past.

Memories of his first Re:memory reaping.



IT SEEMED LIKE JUST yesterday, Rezin remembered, since he found himself reborn into a dystopian utopia. Since his new life as a reaper began:

The world Rezin awoke to startled him.

His body was numb. His vision blurry.

A large neon sign swayed back and forth. Exposed wires clasped its bottom right corner, keeping the sign stable atop a pile of debris. Sparks burst with each oscillation, the bright light piercing Rezin's brain. He blinked twice, his eyes adapting to the flickering fluorescence that cut through the shadows entrapping him. His vision focused, allowing him to read the neon lights:

OLD DETROIT

2 MILES

Rezin did not know this place.

This was not his home.

He was a visitor here.

But where was here?

Was this a dream?

A dark liquid dripped from a collection of rusted pipes in the ceiling onto his forehead. Rezin brushed the water away and sat up, the numbness in his body replaced by the aching pain of broken concrete jabbing into his legs.

This was no dream. This was real. And then Rezin realized where he was: the Undercity. A place buried deep below Central where the old world still lived. A place where the dregs of society from both Central and the Outlands came together for business and other, more illicit, activities. Rezin didn't know why he had awakened here. But if he wasn't being held against his will, then he had to find a way out.

A melodic noise crept up from an alleyway in the distance, its tone filled with power and vigor. Rezin rose and followed the sound. He trudged through puddles of mud and water dotting the street before him. Bodies laid stretched out across the pavement in terrified poses. Some of them quivered. Some did not. Rezin wasn't sure if they were dead or alive - and he had no desire to find out.

The sounds grew into an energetic harmony as he drew closer to its source. Sounds of music, he knew. Rezin placed a hand against an embankment for support and felt the dry texture of paper against his fingers. He looked up and saw hundreds of posters smothering the walls, all of them displaying the same message:

SCANDROID - A NEW WAVE OF SOUND

This was not an advertisement for the machines that held order in Kaine's Central. This was something else. A duo. A musical group. One that reveled in defying Central by calling themselves the very thing that governed the city above.

Rezin studied the two figures on the posters. He admired the front-runner's sense of style. The lead singer sported a red mohawk. A symbol of defiance. Rezin ran his fingers through his own short, dark hair. A symbol he would make use of someday soon, he thought.

Shouts of excitement came from around the bend. Rezin pushed himself away from the wall. He didn't have time to waste. He had to find a way out of this place.

A voice overcame the shouts in the distance and synced to the music:

I've been dreaming of a savior

To pull me from this lowly place

She's analog and digital

Halo of light around her face

The words cut into Rezin's mind and he saw:

Her face against the pavement, eyes losing their light.

Rezin shook away the visual.

What had he just seen?

Who was she?

He wasn't sure. He was only certain of one thing: he needed to find his way out of this place. Find his way to the surface.

Rezin emerged from behind a support wall and entered a large chamber. A group of onlookers, all of them dressed in unkempt garb, gathered at the base of a wooden stage in the middle of the room, their arms outstretched to those adorning the dais.

Rezin recognized one of them. The figure from the poster. The man with the red hair.

The crowd writhed together like a single organism, hammering the street with the soles of their feet to the same rhythm emitting from the stage. A beam of light cast down upon the performers revealed something beyond the fluttering onlookers. Rezin pushed forward through the congregation. Their stench was unbearable, he thought, and he tried his best to avoid physical contact with as many of them as he could.

The red-haired man continued his melody:

The path becoming clearer

The light cut through the shadows, displaying a large steel door at the other end of the room. A young man, not much younger than Rezin, stood against the exit, bobbing his head at the performance. Rezin approached and ran his hands against the door's cold surface.

"Good show, huh?" the young man said with a loud voice.

Rezin nodded. But he wasn't interested in the show or what the young man had to say. He only cared about finding his way out and, he hoped, discovering why he ended up in the Undercity in the first place.

He pushed gently at first, but the door did not budge. Rezin readied himself for a second, more aggressive, attempt before the young man's laugh stopped him.

"You new here or something?"

Rezin ignored him.

"Well you won't make it out that way. Central sealed us in from the outside. Only way out is through the tunnels in Subterra. But you're safer here, trust me."

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