

**X6: Awakening**  
**sample chapter**

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“Every day  
I say  
I wish  
I’da been grown  
In a Petri-dish  
‘Cause if  
I had  
I’d never’ve  
known  
Just how I  
Came to be  
So alone.”

-Inky Blackspot  
“So Lonely (Being the Smartest Man On Earth)”  
from Inky's Last Stand XIII, Live At The Apollo (2073)

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It was a bachelor pad furnished in the neoVictorian style. Bioluminescent composites advertised their usefulness in the dim light. It was all very modern and hip, a gen prior. The soap bubble apartment structure had been grown during the boom, a decade after The Big One, when the San Andreas fault finally shrugged its shoulders and dropped old Los Angeles into the ocean.

Beyond the domed panoramic windows lay the San Fernando sprawl at night. Glittering and endless, it clung to the folds of earth like a colony of deep-sea creatures on the ocean floor. It buzzed with a singular potential: to keep on growing.

On the hills, great houses, some standing a century or more, twinkled at a lower frequency. The grandest of those gazed west past the spit of imported Mexican sand named Hollywood Beach.

Here and there, jumpJets traced arcs through the sky. Below, ground traffic crawled along, as always.

Sunken in the spiraling center room of the apartment lay an enormous circular bed. On it, a large man. Edsel. He slumbered, heavily, as if he might roll over and cause any number of Lilliputian extinctions with his crushing bulk.

To be clear: He was a big black man. Heavy with muscle but not defined and veiny. Not like the bodyBoys who hung around the fitness center downstairs, popping themselves with hypermones and touching up each others hard to reach spots with depilitStix. This man's physical strength was hard won both personally, and genetically. His face and head bore marks of past damage, but few wrinkles. He was perhaps sixty years old and quite handsome. Middle-aged and aging well. But that's not what you'd notice first.

The white sheet that lay across his waist floated in the air like a cheap ghost costume.

The door to Edsel's apartment slid open with the faintest electromagnetic "hmm?", then closed, answering itself with a "mmm."

Something or someone slipped inside. A living shadow distorted like waves of heat off asphalt moved toward the foot of the bed. On the face of the sleeping giant, the faintest of smiles crept.

The shadow paused, as if considering its quarry, then climbed under the sheet and began to grapple with the tent-pole it found there.

Edsel spoke, "Hey baby. Gonna take forever if you do it that way."

The shadow slid up from under the sheet and seemed to envelop Edsel's face, blotting it out with distorted reflections and liquid swirls.

With a crackle of static the shadow became fabric and flesh. A woman pulled a black hood from her face. A gorgeous woman. Her name was Syd.

Her face was framed on one side by hair that shined even in the dim light with weight and luster. An asymmetrical cut, recently clipped to the wood on one side and the back, colored with layers of opalescent multicolor dye, as was slightly ahead of the fashion at the time.

She was almost forty, still a kid, but of that Pangaeaic racial mix that you couldn't guess her age if she was a hundred-and-forty. The combination of slightly thin yet wide set features, big almond eyes, and full red lips added up to make a face anyone and their mother could love. You wouldn't have to carry a shock bat to walk through Chang-Gong Market with her - but you'd love that face all the more for it.

Syd's perfect lips moved, "I'll get the drop on you yet."

"Nice suit."

"Yeah, well, it cost enough. Didn't help did it?"

She began to peel it away from one shoulder. Edsel slipped a sledgehammer of a hand inside and helped her along.

He smiled and said, "Get rid of it."

She was on the thin side but strong, with small-ish round tits and a healthy ass and thighs. A body type less and less common those days. A body, the wiser among you would agree, impossible for man to improve upon whether by science or art.

Blood rushed to Syd's face as the suit dropped from her shoulders. She loved this man. She could have her pick, and she was more than satisfied with her choice.

Syd ran a hand over Edsel's recently shaved scalp and said, "You need some new lines. The ones you've got are as old and beat up as your face."

"They worked on you."

Her smile widened further. After a moment she peeked under the sheet then said, "I don't care how long it takes. I'm going back in. If I'm not back in a week send help."

Syd disappeared under the sheet. Edsel smirked, "You got that red-head from Diki's number?"

Edsel laughed and cried out at the same time, in a way few will ever see a man like him compromised. There was apparently some use of teeth under the sheet. He then groaned softly. In an instant, the humor drained out of his face replaced with pleasure. His eyes rolled back, trying to get a good look at the backside of his skull.

Here was a medieval fortress of a man that anyone - no matter how highly modded, enhanced, or heavily armed - should want to stay on the good side of, rendered in a moment utterly defenseless.

There had only been one other person who could do this to him, lost decades prior. The impossible bliss at having found this feeling again was apparent on his face, the gentle placement of his hands, the increasing arch of his back. It was palpable, disrupting the air around his massive shoulders and chest as he inhaled.

A hollow thud emanated from outside the window. Edsel could feel the air being sucked from the room in his inner ear. His eyes ticked toward the cityscape beyond the bubble window. Then everything went white. A muffled thunderclap followed. But the sky outside was clear.

Edsel rolled them both onto the floor, sheet and all, shielding Syd's body with his own. The great arched window rippled and burst inward. Flying shards of silicynt shifted in mid-air from solid, to liquid, then gas, rendered harmless. Edsel had grown up in a different time. The meat that covered his skull had met that unfriendly and outmoded substance known as glass in the past.

Syd slid out from underneath him pulling on her hood and becoming shadow once again. She retrieved Edsel's old Syrian B-9 auto pump from under the bed in a blur of motion and precision. She rolled across the floor letting off two bursts. Clouds of metal spheres ripped through the apartment.

*Wow. This girl, Edsel thought. But what the hell is she shooting at?*

It was then that he saw their movement. Whatever they were wearing it cost even more than what Syd had on. Their armored suits reflected their surroundings, if not perfectly, to good effect. It was the best cloaking Edsel had seen outside of a sciFi vidy.

They were mercs. Well financed ones.

There were at least three of them. The one nearest did not conceal what he was carrying: a massive old riot control rifle.

*Non-lethal, my black ass.*

Edsel hit the edge of the emperor-sized bed with his shoulder and brought himself to standing with all the effort it would take you to scratch your nose. The bed went up on end and flying in the attackers' direction.

With a hiss-splat a compression charge in the forward merc's weapon launched a mercurial glob which distended as its velocity increased, then blossomed into a glittering web of beaded net, a less colorful vision of the city lights beyond. The net's eight weighted points hit the bed as it flew through the air, wrapped around it, and constricted until the bed burst and pink foam oozed out.

Edsel leapt onto the crushed bed, sheet finally falling away, seeming to grab it with all four - undo that - five limbs at once.

As its reputation always had, Edsel's still erect penis was preceding him.

Edsel sort of rode the bed as it slammed into the first merc and laid them flat against the floor. Edsel swung out from above the merc, pivoting on the heels of his palms, and landed with both bare feet where the man's helmet should be, driving all his weight down.

A helmet, a skull, and a translucent floor panel beneath all cracked simultaneously.

*One down. Two to go.*

Edsel glanced at Syd.

Syd dove over the couch as it was hit with glowing yellow rounds from the second merc's assault rifle. They were shooting tranqers. Dope darts the color of piss after you pop your daily vitis.

*So they're not here to kill us,* Edsel thought.

Then his chest was on fire. He looked down. Glowing liquid oozed from half a dozen shallow wounds, yellow tendrils spreading outward beneath his skin.

It was no more dope than Edsel had put in his own blood stream on any given Thursday night back in the '50's. But that was a long time ago. Edsel dropped to one knee, propping himself up with a fist.

*That's what I get for thinking. Three minutes. Maybe less. Then sleepy time. At least my hard-on's going away.*

The second merc approached the couch cautiously. Had he hit the girl?

Syd's blast from the auto pump ripped a hole through the couch and didn't quite cut the merc's legs off completely at the ankles. His body armor was good but there was reason those old B-9's were illegal.

The merc dropped, his shouts muffled behind the faceplate of his helmet. Syd was reflected in it. Shimmering, doubly distorted, two yellow tranq hits on her right shoulder. Then there was the big black hole of the B-9's barrel. A flash. Then the reflection was gone, along with the faceplate and most of the face behind it.

Syd tried to raise the gun at the third and last remaining merc as he strode quickly but calmly toward Edsel. But the weapon felt too heavy to hold aloft. Her eyelids fluttered behind the hood of her suit. The third merc turned casually and put two more darts in her and she dropped just as quickly. The merc continued toward Edsel who remained down on one knee. Edsel had never seen a real living possum but Gramma had taught him how to play like one.

Edsel swayed drunkenly feigning a stronger reaction to the tranqers, then launched himself suddenly at the merc. Edsel got both hands on the merc's rifle and shoved upwards. Whatever held the merc's helmet on snapped. The helmet flew away, bounced, and spun on the floor.

Edsel felt sick. Maybe it was the dope. Maybe it was the guy's face. It looked to have been burned off then inked an impossibly dark black. More: it was the smile that face wore. Bright white teeth like the host on The Big Wheel. For a moment Edsel could hear the cheesy theme music, the desperate roar of the crowd. He shook it off and kept pushing forward.

The merc's smile persisted, grew even, as Edsel slammed his skull into it over and over sending a couple big white teeth flying.

The merc's blood was getting everywhere. Edsel kept pushing the merc back to where the window used to be. A warm gust of wind blew into the apartment bringing desert visions into Edsel's mind. He was really starting to feel the dope from the tranqers now.

The merc wasn't big but he was unbelievably strong. Modded, sure, like everybody else with decent credit those days - but Edsel had never come across someone quite like this. Neither man released their grip on the rifle. The merc's knee hit Edsel in the delicates. It hurt. Edsel swallowed back bitter vomit.

The merc laughed, then spoke, "I hated to do that Mr. Kincaid. I'm really a big fan of your, eh, body of work. I've got a playlist all your old viddies."

He had the voice and tone of a man in a toothWhite ad. No, the host on The Big Wheel.

A lunatic mob screamed in Edsel's brain. His stomach tried to jump out of his mouth.

Edsel was rare to lose his cool, but he was now. He swung the rifle out over the street below, the merc still clinging to it. Edsel slammed the man against the building as hard as he could, several times.

The merc hung on to the gun like he was stuck on with geckoGum. His wet, featureless, tattooed face still smiled.

He spewed a burst of black liquid, spit some out, and said, "Wow you are strong! Never been modified? Not even...?" The merc nodded toward Edsel's groin.

Edsel made another weaker attempt to shake him loose. The merc just bounced gently off the side of the bubble below this time. He then carefully adjusted his grip on the rifle.

The merc's armor reflected a distorted inverse of the sprawl beyond. His right shoulder appeared to be dislocated, hanging by the meat. His hips were twisted in a way that could not have been healthy. He looked down at himself then back up at Edsel and spoke.

"Nah. You're all natural aren't you? Old school... Anyway, looks like I've got to call it a night and go get fixed up - hey. Easy there..."

Edsel swayed precariously. He ground the side of his bare foot against the sharp edge of the window coping and steadied himself.



Edsel spoke slowly, through a fog, “Who wants me bagged up, why?”

“Sorry. I can’t give you that information right now. Literally. Short term memory is something my employer finds less than desirable. Technology, huh?”

From Edsel, “I could still... kill you.”

“I get it. And I wouldn't take it personally... You are truly some kind of specimen, Mr. Kincaid. Can I call you Edsel? Had we met under different circumstances I'd have asked for your autograph. Funny how things go. Jeez, you are really a lot tougher than I, well, anyone anticipated.”

The merc glanced around and then down past his broken body, then back up at Edsel and said, “This has been a real pleasure, though. Seriously.”

With that the merc released his hold on the rifle and dropped. Edsel fought to keep his balance. Maybe it was the dope, but Edsel swore that smile twinkled on the way down. An image of a cartoon cat popped into his head. Edsel couldn't place the memory.

The merc hit the side of a lower bubble, slapped his hand down, broke into a controlled slide, skidded up over the gleaming surface and was gone.

Edsel dropped the rifle and staggered into the bathroom muttering what sounded like, “Purple, purple, purple...”

An overturned drawer clattered onto the white floor. A pharmacopia of pods and pills scattered about. A scrip bottle broke open releasing a wave of red spheres. Edsel found what he was looking for and slumped to the floor holding a packet of purple hypods between his thumb and forefinger. With some difficulty he cracked out two and popped himself in the neck.

Luckily he was sitting by the toilet. He leaned over and heaved toward it a couple times as he threw himself toward Syd.

Edsel struggled to crawl over to Syd. He pulled back the hood of her shadowSuit, placed the purple hypod's membrane against her neck and popped the purple pod.

Syd came to with a spasm that pitched her body forward and vomited on the floor. She opened her eyes and in a pinched whisper asked, “Are we all K?”

“They're gone. I think we're safe.”

“I’m gonna be sick some more on the floor, sorry... I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Syd’s body began to convulse some more. Edsel picked her up and carried her to the bathroom. She looked very small in his arms.