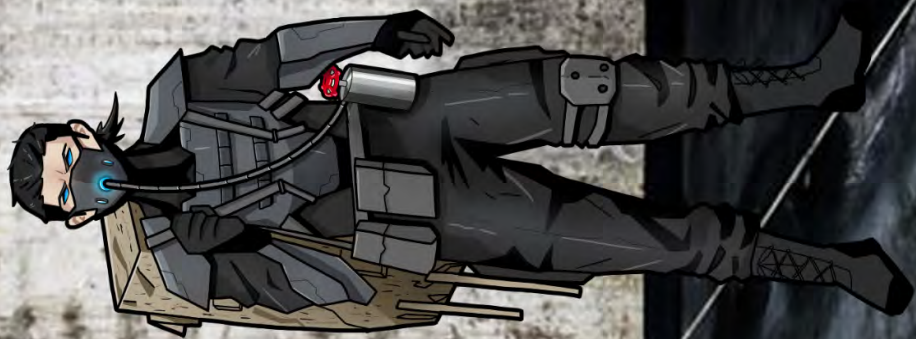
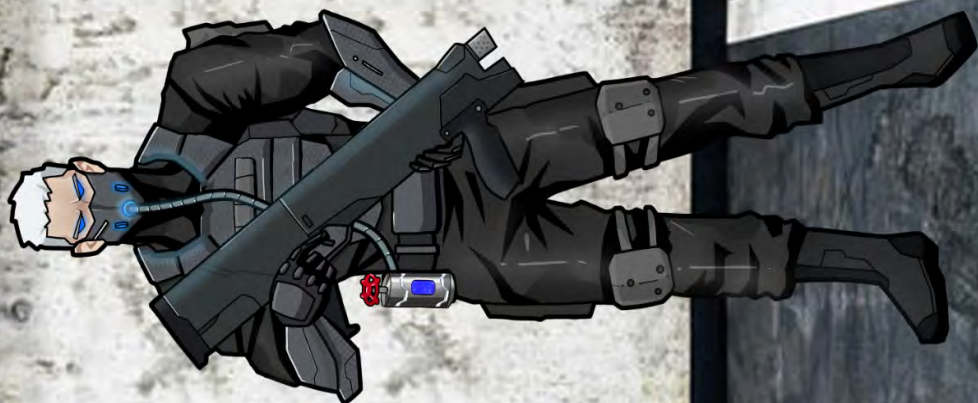
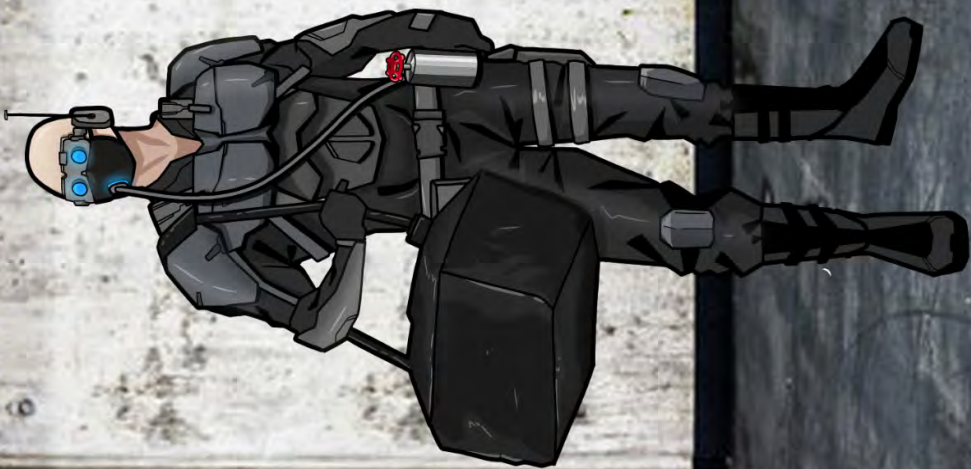


MOMENTUM BY: CHRIS X





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“It’s really clear that the most precious resource we all have is time.” - Steve Jobs

EARTH:

For the fourth time this week, I step inside my favorite dive bar. The bartender nods and hands me a shot of cheap whiskey. I make my way to a certain corner while taking note of all the other lowlifes huddled under the smoke and dim lights. Some well dressed intellectual with an unfamiliar face smiles at me.

“You must be Niel.” I ignore his attempt at a handshake.

“You must be Marvin?”

“You can call me Marv.”

“Marv, I hear you’re the best.”

“Just tell me the job.”

He shuffles in his seat. I can tell I’m making him uncomfortable, good.

“Straight to business... I like that.” He reaches into his pocket.

My fingers instinctively twitch for the iron strapped to my side but my gut tells me there's no way this scrawny pencil pusher is about to pull a weapon, so I sip my whiskey instead.

Niel pulls out a small inhaler and I laugh. I didn't mean to give the poor kid an asthma attack.

“What if I told you, this was the future?”

“An asthma inhaler!?” I chuckle.

“Not Exactly.”

I grab the small metallic device and look it over.

“It looks just like what my little niece uses.”

“Go ahead and try it.”

“You think I'm that dumb? Take drugs from some stranger in a dingy bar so I can wake up with my kidneys missing.”

“Dawn told me you might say something like that.”

That's right, this is Dawn's contact. She's a ride or die. She wouldn't waste my time.

“Fine, I'll do it but you take it first.”

“There's only enough for one person.”

“Well isn't that convenient? What does it do?”

“It alters your perception of time. Only briefly, the whole thing will be over in a couple seconds.”

I stare down at it. What's the worst that could happen?

“I've done a lot of sketchy things in my day so I'm pretty sure I can handle whatever you've got in here.”

I put the device up to my lips, press the button, and inhale; instant regret.

My eyeballs nearly pop out of my head and my brain hits the ceiling. My lungs burn and then my entire body goes numb.

Niel's stupid face is stuck in a permanent smile. I look around the bar and my heart nearly drops. Everyone is frozen in time, stuck in motion. Beer floats in the air, a dart gently glides towards its target.

"What.. the... hell." My words linger in the air. Niel, still smiling, throws a pen at me. It slowly spirals and I catch it with ease. My arms move through the air as if it's water. Somehow slow and fast at the same time.

Suddenly, my brain feels like it's been hit by a semi-truck and thrown in a pool. My body goes from invincible to mach-speed hangover in seconds. I mumble something and collapse into Niel's arms.

When I come to, half the bar is standing over me.

"Welcome back." Niel laughs.

"You bastard. You should've warned me about that!"

"What the hell are you guys doing over there?"

"Take that shit outside!"

I turn to Niel. "Lets go outside."

We step out and the harsh sunlight fries my eyes.

"Here, I'll text you with a time and address." He hands me a retro cellphone.

"You still haven't told me what the actual job is."

Niel sighs, hesitant to tell me the truth.

"This drug... I made it."

“You!? You’re a doctor? You look like you could still be in high school!”

“I’m a neuro-scientist and yes, I graduated early.”

“You graduated early and ended up making drugs?”

“Not drugs. Life changing pharmaceuticals!”

“So why do you need me?”

“Most of my research is funded by the government and they’ve seized my work. They’re doing these tests on people... weaponizing it.”

“Of course, what did you think they were going to do? Give you the Nobel Peace Prize for a new drug?”

“I was trying to improve lives, not take them.”

“So you want me to do what? Steal it back?”

“Destroy the lab and steal a few samples.”

“You realise... I’ll have to kill people to do that?”

“You don’t understand. Imagine an army of people hopped up on this stuff, there would be massacres. They’re injecting it into prisoners just to see what happens, sending people into comas, trapped in a body that doesn’t age.”

“Ok, ok.” The kid was getting worked up.

“It won’t be easy so I’ve put together a little team. You, your friend Dawn, and two others.”

“You got Dawn to come out of retirement!?”

“She was expensive and the one thing she wanted ... was you.”

Dawn hasn’t worked since we robbed that bank in Shanghai. She’s been straight for years and wouldn’t break bad unless... unless this kid has deep pockets.

I smile. “What’s the pay again?”

Two weeks passed before I got the call. My wristpad starts beeping while I'm knuckle deep in a greasy burger. Niel's annoying nervous voice pops into my ear.

"Everything's ready. The deposit will be in your account by tonight. Write down the time and address then destroy this phone."

The night before, I barely sleep. I show up at an empty street corner unsure of what to expect. I've never done a job where I didn't have all the details first. But for half a million dollars...

A black van suddenly whips around the corner and pulls up in front of me. Its doors slide open and Dawn's beautiful smile greets me.

"Look who it is!" She pulls me into a hug and slams the door shut.

"It's been awhile."

"Too long."

Dawn and a bald man with tattoos welcome me into the massive van. "Here's your gear." She hands me a black dufflebag.

I take a seat and open it up; a bulletproof vest, strap on armor for my limbs, and a gas mask connected to a strange canister. "What the hell is this?" I hold up the makeshift breathing device.

"Strap it around your mouth like this." She puts hers on and shows me how to adjust it.

The respirator fits snugly over my mouth. A thin tube rides down my chest and connects to a small metal canister on my hip.

“Turn the red valve when we tell you to. Take a deep breath, then turn it off. We only have about 8 minutes of this stuff so use it wisely.”

“This is that slo mo stuff?”

“Yea.”

“You want to get high and rob a lab?”

“There’s no other way four people can pull this off.” Dawn hands me a semi-auto rail gun. “Here, use this, it’s a compressor railgun with a hundred rounds of sliver shot.

“Wait a second... This is hardcore gear! I thought it would be a couple geeks and doctors. What kind of resistance are you expecting?”

Dawn smirks. “High risk, high reward, right? We’re robbing NeuroTech.”

“No way. Drop me off here.”

Neurotech, the biggest brain interface company on the planet. Their technology is used all across the globe but everyone knows their real money comes from government contracts; war machines, experiments, assassin AIs, and bio-engineering. There were even rumours about cloning and downloading the human brain. All their bases are heavily monitored and protected by an elite private military contractor, DSC, Diamond Security Company.

“Diamond! You want to go up against Diamond?”

“That’s the plan.”

“This is a suicide mission!” I shake my head. “We’re going to need even more gear than this. We need heavy duty, high caliber weapons, and probably explosives.”

“We have explosives but we’re going in quick and light. When we’re done, we blow it up on our way out.”

The driver yells back at us. “Hey guys we’re coming up on it now.” He straps on his gasmask.

Dawn looks back at me. “Marv, you can leave if you want. Just get out and keep walking.”

“You know I can’t just leave you like that.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

The van stops and we all hop outside. Four armoured criminals dressed in all black. Armed with oversized high powered weapons and gas masks strapped to our faces.

Neurotech Facility #3, a maze of office buildings towers above us. Below it, an underground fortress filled with laboratories, factories, and warehouses. Hardened ex-soldiers patrolling the halls, eager for action.

Dawn, late as always, starts telling me the plan as we’re walking up to the entrance. She points to the tattooed bald man. “Me and Serg will take point, you and West follow us. We’re heading to Lab 7F. Hit your gas on the way in. Just one breath, hold it. Then take the lead while you’re moving fast. We’ll leapfrog like that, taking turns hitting the gas.”

The facility guards see us walking up and call for backup. They fire off a few warning shots. “Don’t move! Stay where you are!”

Dawn aims her railgun and squeezes the trigger. The machine hisses and sends several long metal needles flying towards the guards. Their bodies nail to the cement wall behind them. She kicks in the doors and looks back at me.

“Hit the gas!”

“Shit.” I fumble for the valve then finally turn it. Cool air floods my mouth. I breathe it in and hold it down in my lungs.

This time the punch isn't as hard. My eyeballs tighten as I exhale and time slows to a crawl. I look to my right and West is halfway inside, moving at a dreamlike speed, slow and fast, offbeat like stop motion.

West lunges into the main entrance shooting at anything that moves. The railgun's high speed rounds sail through the air almost as fast as us. They slice through skin and bones, creating slow geysers of blood.

I step inside, amazed by the floating river of bodies. The drug fades and the world returns to normal speed. Instantly, the walls and floor are doused with red.

Dawn and Serg come glitching in, their motions sped up and blurry, too fast for my eyes to process.

"You gotta stay with me!" West shouts. "You didn't even fire one shot!"

"I'm still adjusting!"

"Get it together!"

"I got it!"

Ahead of us, Dawn and Serg create a whirlwind of blood and thin bullets, a trail of bodies nailed to walls, ceilings, and floors.

"Hit it again! Let's go!" West turns his valve and takes a deep breath.

This time I knew exactly where the valve was. I turn it and suck down the cold steam.

A guard bursts out from one of the offices and screams into his radio. "They're coming from the main entraaa..." His voice deepens and slows to a crawl while his finger slowly points towards me and West.

My nerves settle, I exhale, and get to work.

The railgun's hiss sounds like a jet engine in slow motion. Its slender metal nail lifts up the heavily armed soldier with ease and slams him into the wall behind him, 6 feet in the air. His body hangs limply from the wall.

We follow Dawn and Serg's trail of destruction. West must have military training because his precision is second to none. He mows down guards at full throttle, running on walls, using his super speed like he was born with it. All I have to do is look out for surprises and double tap anyone who manages to take a shot at us.

My gas wears off just as we get to an elevator. "I feel like shit!" I try to catch my breath and stop my heart from racing.

Dawn and Serg come flying at us and rip open the elevator doors. They leap down and disappear into the darkness below.

"Wait, what are we doing?"

"Attach this to the cable, no gas for this part." West tosses me a yellow clamp.

It lands in my hands and before I can ask any more questions he jumps. I leap in after him and soon all four of us are sailing down the dark elevator shaft.

Alarms and sirens are blaring. Lights strobe and the whole building seems to come alive around us.

We slam into the elevator on it's way up and Dawn looks at her wristpad. "We're not low enough!" She points towards the empty space next to us and leaps off. As she falls, she jams the device onto the new cable and it slows her down.

"You guys are nuts!" I shout as I follow her lead and ride the next cable down.

When we arrive at the right floor Dawn uses a searing hot knife to cut a hole through the elevator door and turns back to us all.

“Ok, get ready. Step in and take a big hit. This is a long one!”

“I’m pretty sure this stuff is frying my brain.” I take a big breath of fresh air before jumping through the hole and turning the valve again.

The red lights and blaring sirens slow down, filling the halls with a dim ruby glow and an eerie pitched down tone.

We blur and stop motion our way through the lab, nailing the security guards to walls. West hops on their floating bodies, launches himself through a glass window and tumbles into Lab 7F.

“Everybody out!” Dawn screams, her speed returning to normal.

The scientists put their hands up and plead for their lives.

“We’re not here for you so don’t make this bloodier than it needs to be!”

West points his gun at them. “Don’t make her say it again! Out now! We’re taking this whole building down!”

The workers scream and trample each other on their way out.

“Here” Dawn points towards a wall of refrigerators filled with metal canisters. “Empty the shelves and let’s go.”

I shovel the canisters into West's duffle bag while Serg plants a homemade explosive.

"Be careful with those!"

"You want to switch? I can hold a bag!"

"Hurry up and stop arguing. They're coming!"

We fill the bag and join Dawn at the door.

"Wait." She holds us back and watches the soldiers advancing on our position. When they are just around the corner she tosses one of the small canisters towards their feet and shoots it.

The metal sliver hits the can and it hisses cold air up into their faces. They scream and distort, confused as the gas speeds up their movements. Dawn holds down her trigger, sending a few dozen slivers into the glitching mob of soldiers.

"Turn your valves all the way."

"What?!"

"We're using the rest of the gas to get out!"

"You want me to huff this all the way outside!?"

"Up the elevator shaft and right out the front door!"

Dawn smiles and hits her valve. "This should be fun!" She speeds up and takes off down the hallway with West and Serg behind her.

I stare down at that stupid red valve, hoping for another solution. Any choice in the matter goes out the window as soon as I hear the homemade explosive start beeping.

I grab the valve and loosen it all the way. Thick cold vapor shoots up the tube and down into my lungs. The dense air seeps into my blood and the experimental drug flows through my body.

The entire lab is frozen, motion and noise at a standstill. The only sound is my breath as I exhale slowly. To my side, I hear a soft rumbling and turn to see the bomb swelling like a balloon.

Fire shreds the small metal container and before the cloud of heat and shrapnel reaches me, I start running.

To my surprise, my feet seem unaffected by gravity. They propel me into the air and send me spiraling down the hallway.

I bounce sideways and upside down away from the slowly encroaching ball of flame. The labs are torn apart and send shards of glass flying towards me.

Dawn grabs my hand and tosses me up the elevator shaft. She follows me in and we run up the wall with fire and debris nipping at our heels.
