

The Agency

Series 1
Episode 4

'Initiation'

By Kiran Evans

"Everyone, this is your captain speaking. My name is Captain Robert McCowden, welcome aboard the Eliza. We are set for our journey to Zahar, Kroni Major and will be leaving in less than half an hour, so please be seated and prepare for take-off. Expected date of arrival: the 29th of December 2198 UPA Standard Time. It's gonna be a very clear six months, so relax and enjoy the journey."

The agents listen to the announcement in the ship, waiting to depart from Fu-Sang 5. Razor is particularly anxious as he's never left New Tokyo; he's never been to another city, let alone another planet! He sits in a very large, luxuriously comfortable seat with Agent Merkolov to his right and Agent Sharkew next along. Agent Merkolov turns to Razor after the announcement and taps him on the arm.

"Hey," he says in his unmistakable Russian accent, "If I'm calling you 'Razor', you'd better call me 'Merko' and Jerome likes to be known as 'Shark'. Takes less time to say," he chuckles.

"OK, Merko," confirms Razor, cheerily. There's a ping sound and a light comes on above the passengers' heads, signalling them to fasten their straps. All 30 passengers synchronously pull a strap from behind their right shoulder and click it below their left leg, doing the same for the opposite side, creating a tight and secure criss-cross of straps over their bodies. After he's strapped in, Razor ponders the whereabouts of his old gang, that is, if they are still alive. He turns to Merko, "What if I change my mind?"

Merko looks confused, "You signed the paper, Razor. No going back now. Don't worry, we'll take good care of you, but you'll probably not be coming back to this old planet."

"Why's that?"

Merko smiles, "You've had an upgrade of your life, Razor. Why would you want to come back? There's nothing for us to do here anymore. We've got Centurion under control again, so we don't need to be here," he pats Razor on the arm, "Everything is going to be amazing, Razor. Once we land on Kroni Major I'll let you know exactly what we're gonna do with our lives while we're there."

"But that's six months away!"

"Yeah, except you'll never notice the journey. We're gonna be asleep for the entire thing. Once the captain fires up the engines, that's it." A large boom sound followed by equally audible rumbles triggers the passengers' seats. "Just like magic." All the seats fold back so the passengers are lying down. They slide backwards into a capsule and, just before his head goes in, Merko says to Razor, "See you in six months."

Slightly panicked, Razor's seat enters the capsule and his eyes stay wide open, fear on the forefront of his mind. The inside of the capsule is completely light-less, making Razor believe he's gone blind. He feels the ship rising from the dockyard and begins to sweat, worrying that the sleeping process Merko told him about was failing in his capsule for some reason; that he'd have to be awake for six months in the dark.

Before Razor tries to escape the sealed capsule, a cold gas shoots into it with a loud hiss that almost deafens him. In the least comfortable position of his life, Razor fails to struggle as his body goes numb and he loses control over it.

Not long afterwards, the gas suddenly dissipates and Razor regains control over his limbs. He

can feel the ship descending; maybe there's a problem with the engines. Razor begins to worry that he'll never actually get to Kroni Major safely and just as he fully regains consciousness there is a click, a beep and then whirring as he begins to slide back out of the capsule. The room is still completely dark once the seat has folded back into its sitting position. *Must be a power issue*, thinks Razor, then all of a sudden he notices that he feels slightly heavier than he did a couple of minutes ago. He hears Merko and Shark breathing heavily next to him, as well as the other passengers around him doing the same, forming some horribly discordant choir of groans.

The room begins to slowly light up and another ping sounds as the captain's voice can be heard over the speakers again.

"Just let your eyes adjust to the light, everyone. I hope you all had a comfortable flight. We didn't encounter any issues on the way here, so without further ado: welcome to Kroni Major! We've landed at the Zahar Shipping Terminus with a total journey time of 193 days, 19 hours and 4 minutes. Thank you for flying on the Eliza; I've been Captain Robert McCowden. Now enjoy your time in the most beautiful city on the planet!"

Once the room is fully lit and everyone's eyes have adjusted, Razor turns to Merko once again, "Did we just travel six months through space?"

"Yup," replies Merko, "Didn't notice the journey did you?"

Razor shakes his head.

Merko laughs, "Told you so!" He turns to Shark, "You OK?"

Shark nods, "Ahh, yes!" He replies, relishing the blissful feeling of unstrapping himself and stretching his arms and legs out.

Merko unstraps himself and commands, "Let's go."

Razor struggles with the clips but eventually manages to break free of the straps and stand up, collapsing as soon as he does so.

Merko and Shark burst out with laughter but Razor groans with pain and annoyance.

"You've gotta let your legs adjust a bit, Razor," says Shark, struggling to calm his laughter, "Hold onto the seat and just stand there a bit for five minutes or so. We're not in a rush, so take your time."

Ten minutes later, the team leave the ship with the rest of the passengers, stumbling through the exit. The light from outside the ship almost blinds Razor as he steps onto the alien planet.

"Oh damn, that *stinks!*" Razor wretches and covers his mouth and nose with his hand, hit by the stench of the polluted city.

"Yeah," sighs Shark, "You're lucky New Tokyo runs on green power. Don't worry, though, once we're away from the dock the air should clean up a bit."

Razor doubts Shark's sincerity as he begins to regret taking the job.

"Ah!" Shark points to a line of vehicles side-on to them, "That's our ride!"

Razor and Merko follow Shark to a large, grey van with a slight blue tint and the R.H.I.N.O. logo stuck to the side of it: a rhinoceros head with the five letters underneath in a bold font. The van itself is much like a prison van, driven by a very large woman with lengths of dark red, matted hair, failing to form any sort of style. She holds a plastic cup of brown liquid and is sipping it cautiously. Razor watches as she dips her finger into the cup and scrapes out a soggy lump of something vile. Almost puking at the sight of her and the toxic odour of the air, Razor hauls himself towards Shark and Merko who help him inside the back of the van.

"'ight back der?" Says the driver, her voice raspy and low – and far from intelligent.

"Affirmative," replies Shark.

Razor sits uncomfortably in a mostly metal chair, welded to the wall of the back of the van. Merko and Shark sit opposite him on identical chairs. The van pulls away from the dock

and slowly taxis its way out of the area onto a highway, its engine rumbling and growling as the driver slams her foot to the floor.

"Is it always like this?" Asks Razor.

"Mmm, not always," replies Merko, "But there is a lot of it."

"So what are we doing? Where are we going?"

"We are going to meet our boss, and I suppose he's your boss now too. He is going to introduce you to the agency and then we can be promoted as a team."

"That way we'll have the man-power to take on more complex missions," adds Shark.

"What do you mean, 'more complex'?" Enquires Razor, wondering why they are so excited to be 'promoted'.

"Well," starts Merko, "We have been working for the agency for a few years now and it does get boring, so we asked the boss if there is any way we could... you know... shake it up a bit. R.H.I.N.O.'s looking for more agents, so he said we should form a team, so here you are!"

Razor still looks bewildered, "So you only came to find me because you were low on staff? Not because my sister wanted me home?!"

"Whoa, whoa! We could've looked on an entirely different planet! Shark sees your sister on a regular basis – being her brother-in-law – so he told here about the agency recruiting people. She told us to try and find you so we went to Fu-Sang 5 and found you in New Tokyo. You're lucky you were being monitored by the local R.H.I.N.O. force!"

Razor's heart sinks at the revelation that his ultimate stealth skills obviously hadn't paid off. Nevertheless, he is delighted that his sister *does* want him home.

About half an hour later, they arrive at the Zahar R.H.I.N.O. headquarters. Shark opens the back door to the van and the agents climb out. As they head towards the building, Merko turns to the driver and gives her a thumbs up as she pulls away. The building itself is a very tall tower block, consisting of grey concrete and pale-blue-tinted glass. The exterior walls of the entrance block are almost white as they've clearly been cleaned more than the rest of the tower, and Razor, still struggling to forget the smell of the spaceship dock, deduces that Zahar is by nature a very dirty city.

The team walk into the building empty-handed, another thing Razor was surprised at when they left Fu-Sang 5: they didn't take anything with them; they were told to leave everything except their uniforms behind. Inside the entrance hall is a large, square desk with seven people sat in front of screens in a linear row. Shark approaches one – a woman with very short, bright green hair and glasses not quite big enough so she'd have to hold onto them by hand.

"Hello," she says in an awfully synthetic tone.

"Hi," replies Shark, "We have a meeting with Mr Calvin."

"Can I take your names please?"

"Yes, we're Agent Jerome Sharkew, Agent Archie Merkolov and Agent Martin Gladius."

There is a painful pause as the woman taps frantically on her desk.

"Okay that checks out, but can I see some identification please? From all of you."

Merko, Shark and Razor pull out their ID cards and hand them to the receptionist.

She gives them a half-arsed glance then replies, "That's fine. If you'd just like to head up to his office on the 23rd floor he's waiting for you now."

"Thank you," says Shark. He hands Merko and Razor their cards back and instructs them to follow him. They stroll across the concrete floor towards a row of 4 lifts and Shark pushes all the buttons to call them. The one furthest to the right pings first and the steel doors slide open to reveal an empty, cubic room inside, grey like the rest of the building. Merko and Shark step inside, but Razor is reluctant to follow.

"Err, what is this?" He asks.

"It's an elevator," replies Merko, "It's gonna take us up to the top rather than taking the

stairs. Amazing inventions.”

“Isn't it dangerous?”

“You didn't have a problem with the spaceship, and that's *much* more dangerous.”

“Yes, I know,” snaps Razor defensively, “But I couldn't see how high we were going when I got on that.”

Merko sighs and pulls Razor in by the arm.

“It's not that bad,” Shark attempts to reassure him as he presses the number 23 on the wall panel. The doors slide shut again and the lift jolts upwards, then accelerates smoothly towards the 23rd floor.

“Okay,” says Razor as he adjusts to the new sensations, “I'm here now. I'm doing this.” He takes a deep breath, “When do I get to see my sister and my family?”

“Soon, Razor, soon,” says Shark, “But we've gotta get this sorted first. Then we'll visit your family. I promise.” He looks directly into Razor's eyes, who gives in and trusts Shark.

“Okay,” Razor confirms, still nervous to be in the lift.

At the 12th floor the lift grinds to a halt and the doors slide open. A woman in a white lab coat steps inside and her face lights up as she notices Merko.

“Archie! Oh my goodness, it's been so long! How have you been?” She passionately hugs Merko, her question muffled by her voice buried in his shoulder.

“Ha, ha, good!” He replies, slightly taken aback.

Once she lets go she breathes out and smiles at him again.

“Uh, guys this is an old friend of mine, Lucy,” says Merko, “Lucy these are my colleagues Jerome and Martin.” He points at Shark and Razor respectively.

“Yes,” she says, shaking Shark's hand, “I think we've met before. But you,” she looks to Razor and shakes his hand, “are new to the team, right?”

“Yeah,” Razor nods.

“So where are you headed?” Asks Merko.

“21st,” she says as Shark presses the number 21, “Gotta pick up some scalpels. We're dissecting a dragon in there but we haven't got anything strong enough to cut through the scales. The guys on 21st 'll have some. You know, what with all the torturing and stuff that goes on in there.” She winks at Razor whose face is creased in confusion and mild terror. “Ha ha! Just kidding,” she jokingly punches Razor in the arm.

“Ow!” He exclaims.

“Oh, come on,” says Lucy, “You're supposed to be big boys!”

“He got shot there, Luce,” says Merko.

“Oh,” she says, her smile diminishing, “Sorry.”

“Don't worry,” says Razor, “I've had worse.” He tries to soften the blow so she smiles again; something about her makes the whole lift light up.

When they reach floor 21, Lucy steps out and smiles at Razor, then waves to everyone else. “See you soon!” She bounds away down the corridor as the lift doors close and it resumes its ascent. Shark nudges Razor with his elbow as he catches him daydreaming.

“Don't get too attached, Razor. She'll run away before you get her number,” says Shark.

“Ha!” Merko laughs, “Ain't that truth! She hops from one man to the next! So glad I never fell victim to her ways.”

“Psh, yeah right,” says Shark, sarcastically.

Merko shoots an angry look at Shark who smiles back. Merko does his best to resist blushing, but can't hide his embarrassment.

A loud creak and judder slows the lift to a sharp stop which jerks the agents into the air. The doors struggle to slide open with a scraping sound and reveal a carpeted corridor with timber

supports and oak doors, each with their own brass label. Shark leads the way as he marches towards their boss' office (the door at the very end). Razor figures that this floor is reserved for the very top people in R.H.I.N.O., his new boss included. Shark knocks on the door and unlike all the other doors in the building it swings open into the room to reveal a very tall, middle-aged, Caucasian man with an enormous smile on his slightly flabby face.

"Hello Jerome!" He yells with such enthusiasm he almost knocks Shark to the floor, "And my trusty agent, Archie!" He shakes Merko's hand and yanks him into the room before he can reply, then pulls Shark in with him, leaving Razor stood quivering in the corridor. "Now," he begins, his voice deep and very well projected, "You look like a new-born baby!" He laughs way too loudly, definitely shattering a window somewhere.

"I'm not." Says Razor, flatly, killing the man's laugh.

"Uh, I see. Well, you'd better take a step inside before I lock you out!" He tries to keep a straight face in order to intimidate Razor, but can't help cracking under his own amusement. Razor steps over the threshold and into the office, unable to form an opinion of this ridiculous man. The enormous room looks much like Merko and Shark's office back on Fu-Sang 5, but several times larger. The desk is about twice the size but with room for only one person and the bookshelves are so extensive they may as well be a full library.

"Right then, boys, please take your seats," booms the man, "I hope you're ready for this."

"We certainly are," replies Shark.

"Well then, you seem *very* keen! But first things first," he turns to Razor, "My name is Calvin Calvin... and you'll never guess my middle name!" He gestures for Razor to guess.

"Err... Bob?" Razor replies nervously.

"Ha! A sense of humour, I like that! What was your name again?"

"It's Martin. Martin Gladius."

"Well, Agent Gladius, let me tell you something. Here at R.H.I.N.O. we live and work by only three rules," Calvin looks to Merko and Shark who roll their eyes, "Number One: don't break the rules; Number Two: obey Number One; and Number Three: do as you're told."

"They seem very generic and made up on the spot," replies Razor, more sarcastic than he intended. He looks to Merko and Shark who are both shaking their heads.

"Every time," says Merko, disappointingly.

"Okay, okay, okay," says Calvin quickly, grinning, "You got me. We do actually have an official code-of-conduct." He goes behind his desk, opens a drawer and pulls out an enormous hundred-page file. He whacks it on the desk with a loud thud. "Here it is. You need to read it, memorise it and stick by it for your entire employment here, you got that?"

"Yes," replies Razor, slightly bemused at the sight of the file.

"That's 'affirmative, Mr Calvin'," corrects Calvin.

"Affirmative, Mr Calvin," confirms Razor.

"Right then, boys, now we've got that sorted let's get to business. Agent Gladius, I sent Agent Sharkew and Agent Merkolov to find a new agent so that they can take on bigger missions. They had to find you themselves so they knew what you were capable of. I assume that you are all familiar with each others' capabilities as agents and as New Humans." The agents look at each other, worried, "If not, then you will be finding out pretty soon as I've got a mission for you already."

Shark and Merko's eyes light up.

"You need to complete your team."

"What?!" Merko and Shark exclaim simultaneously.

"Three is not enough," explains Calvin, "How are you supposed to do a mission with three people? In complex missions, each agent must have a partner so you three need to find another team member." He wags his right index finger at Merko and Shark, "You two decide who's pairing with Agent Gladius and who's getting the other one while I introduce him to Agent Indigo."

Shark and Merko give each other a look of regret as Calvin leads Razor out of the room.

"Now, Agent Gladius," he says, "R.H.I.N.O. is split into four divisions. I am everyone's boss, but you are now going to meet *your* division's boss," he knocks on the first door on the left and pushes it open, "This is Agent Samantha Indigo, head of the Komodo division."

Inside the office is a short, dark skinned woman with very deep purple afro hair. She smiles brightly at Razor and comes around her desk to shake his hand. "Hello!" She beams, "You must be our newest addition, Agent Gladius!"

Razor nods.

"I'm Agent Indigo, head of Komodo. I'm in charge of the teams that operate in this division. I understand that Agents Sharkew and Merkolov recruited you, is that right?"

"Uh, yes... I mean, affirmative!" Confirms Razor.

"He's a fast learner!" Says Agent Indigo to Calvin, who gives a look of approval then exits the room. "Well, now," she breathes out heavily, "I think we'd better get you all sorted. I just need to give you your paperwork then we can get onto your first mission." She returns to her desk, beckons to Razor to take a seat and pulls out a form from under her desk.

"Should I fill this in?" Asks Razor as she hands him the form and a pen.

"Yes please," she replies kindly, "We need your medical details before we set you on a mission."

"This all seems a bit rushed," replies Razor.

"Well," says Agent Indigo, "We're in a bit of a sticky situation at the moment. There's a lot of speculation about the agency going around and people are getting a bit restless, so we're trying to recruit as many people as quickly as we can."

"What kind of speculation?"

"Oh, nothing major, just the usual out-of-hand conspiracy theory. They think we've got things locked up in our labs without their permission. You can rest assure that we haven't."

"But I heard there was a dragon being dissected downstairs. Floor 12."

"Ah," she stops, "You shouldn't have. Don't worry; you're never gonna get involved in this anyway, we're just a bit understaffed."

Razor shrugs it off, but plants the conversation at the back of his mind as he picks up the pen. "Err, this is a bit complicated," says Razor, perusing the form.

"What's the matter?" Asks Agent Indigo, snapped out of a daydream.

"I don't know any of this stuff."

"Well, just put 'NO' for the stuff you don't know and sign the bottom."

"I don't have a signature."

"Well, just make something up," replies Agent Indigo, becoming frustrated.

Shark and Merko burst through the door just as Razor finishes up his 'signature'.

"We're going to a fight club," Shark bursts out.

"You're not supposed to talk about it," says Merko, "It's the first rule."

"I thought the first rule was 'Don't break the rules'," jokes Razor, which sets off the laughter of the other agents.

"You think you're gonna find an agent in a fight club?" Says Agent Indigo

"Affirmative, Indigo," replies Merko, "There's been some reports of someone... special down in the Linga district. They say he's been 'terrorising' fight clubs so we'd better take a look. By the way, I'm with you, Razor. Shark's gonna take on the new guy."

Razor looks to Merko, "Affirmative."

"Let's go," instructs Shark and the agents leave Agent Indigo's office, heading back to the ground floor.