

ESC.(APE) ONLINE

01x00 - "Initiate"

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UNITED KINGDOM

FADE IN:

EXT. SPACE - NIGHT

The blackness of space, peppered only with sparse twinkling of distant stars.

A flicker of purple light, followed by a loud SHWUMP. The sudden arrival of a lone craft - the *Grover*. A battered, well-utilised, freighter. She sports signs of a recent skirmish: damaged hull-plating - flickering red / orange embers. A stippling of smoke plumes evident along the starboard side. What remains legible of the ship's markings denote a logo: a red triangle with "North" stencilled centrally, and "Holdings", subscript along the bottom edge.

NORTH, inside his craft (therefore not yet visible), presents the occasional affectation of a New-yorker, mid-to-late-thirties...

NORTH

Yessss!

He's heard to FLICK some switches, composure returning.

NORTH

(half to himself)

OK sweetheart, what's the damage?

Some more CLICKS.

AUTOMATED VOICE: GROVER

Shields 18%. Hull integrity 23%.

Cargo intact. Hyperdrive operational. (beat) Range 18AU.

(beat). Scanners critical.

Countermeasures damaged. Launcher systems destroyed. Continue?

NORTH

Hmmm. 18AU?

TAPS on a keyboard. TAP-TAP-TAP. Beat. SPACEBAR.

A discouraging computer-says-no BONK replies.

AUTOMATED VOICE: GROVER

Galactic route planner inoperable.

NORTH

Of course it is.

Two more purple flashes light up the sky: SHWUMP-SWHUMP.

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Apidea a black corvette, yellow banding, reminiscent of a wasp: piloted by DOGGER (mid-20s). And *Zborul*, another corvette, though sleeker in design: STENK (30s) in command. *Zborul* is white in colour, with a single, thick, band of red running its length. Both vessels are scarred from battle. *Zborul* visibly moreso. A discussion starts, slightly distorted over the comms.

STENK

Boo. And. Ya.

NORTH

Dogger, Stenk. Glad to see you made it. Any tails?

A pause whilst Dogger checks some scanners.

DOGGER

No. (beat). (A relieved LAUGH).
We're good.

The two ships start to align themselves with the *Grover*, drifting slowly together; into a friendly grouping.

STENK

I cannot believe that worked.

DOGGER

I can't believe North didn't get us all killed.

NORTH

Heyyyy. What's that supposed to mean?

DOGGER

(sarcastically)
Nothing boss. Rock-solid plan.

NORTH

We got what we went in for didn't we? And back out in once piece.

DOGGER

One piece?

The three ships continue to steam and HISS, all in a pretty sorry state.

NORTH

Close enough. Way I see it I took just as much damage as you guys. Likely more!

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DOGGER

Sure. And maybe you've got the funds for repairs. Not so much this side of the partnership.

STENK

We sell the hyperium. Make enough in our cut to more than cover overheads, right?

NORTH

That's right Stenk. Should be sitting pretty in no time. We **do** need to get the goods transferred, scrubbed, and off to a trade-hub soon as, but. Or we don't get squat for our troubles. Any word on Cole?

STENK

He should have been right behind us. (beat). Can not we go straight to market now?

NORTH

If you want to fly one of **your** freighters into Station - jammed packed with hot Commonwealth swag... be my guest.

DOGGER

(LAUGHING. Some drones BEEP in the background)

We'd be taking our share of the profit up-front though, before you shoot off. Just **in case** you didn't make it, of course.

NORTH

Natch.

North and Dogger CHUCKLE.

NORTH

Got a spare freighter, a few million creds, and planet-sized cahoneys, Stenk?

SILENCE.

NORTH

We stick with the original plan, then. And Dogger... will you keep your damned bots off the comms channels, please?

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STENK

Yes. What grown men do in privacy
of own ship one thing. Not on
comms, though, comrade.

North and Stenk now CHUCKLE.

DOGGER

Don't give up your day job
Stenk.... I am a bit more beat up
than I'd have liked, though, North.
Do we really gotta go so far as
Jaunope? And what if Cole doesn't
make it?

NORTH

The heist we just pulled and now
you wanna play it safe? Now?! If we
offload at any of the Omega hubs
we'll get.. what?... a third the
price of Jaunope?

Dogger and Stenk GRUMBLE agreement over the comms.

NORTH

That's not going to cover anyone's
repairs, let alone run us a profit.
(mockingly)
Or maybe you'd like us to plot our
way to a nice safe trading station
in the Alpha sector instead?

DOGGER

Obviously not. No need to be a dick
about it.

NORTH

Cos we'd be as well to just dump
the load here and save ourselves a
schlep if you do?

STENK

Hehehe - load.

DOGGER

Fine. I'm going to get started on
repairs whilst we're here, then, at
least.

NORTH

Good idea. You do that.

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A pool of little pyramid-shaped drones pour out from the *Apidea*, and start to busy about on the exterior; welding arcs popping about the fuselage.

STENK

What if Cole does not make it,
though?

NORTH

You have met the man, right? Yay
high. Flies a big-old gun-metal and
orange frigate.

Stenk LAUGHS slowly.

STENK

Hehehe. Point.

NORTH

He'll be here. Just get prepping.

A purple flicker, farther out, punctuates the darkness as if in response. SHWUMP! A frigate appears - matching North's description to a tee, and almost his freighter-class *Grover* in bulk! Cole's ship, the *Deke*. Remarkably, it shows none of the signs of a fire-fight so evident on the others. COLE himself something like a mild Canadian accent, in his thirties by the sound.

NORTH

Ahoy there. Nice of you to join us.

COLE

Miss me, eh?

STENK

Always, comrade.

DOGGER

As did every blaster, beam weapon,
and missile the Commonwealth threw
against us... apparently.

COLE

Were you worried? I haz mad skillz.

NORTH

What kept you?

COLE

Stopped for T'mortons. Then a wash-
n-wax. Was I supposed to have got
you guys fries or something?

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NORTH

Wiseguy.

The Deke continues slowly, but steadily, towards the group.

COLE

What's the play?

NORTH

Patch the worst, most obvious, damage up. Get the booty off my boat, into your hold, and be on our merry way to Jaunope. ASAP.

DOGGER

Or sooner.

COLE

Plan. I can start on the transfer ops straight up.

NORTH

You need fixed up at all?

COLE

Nope. I'm good.

NORTH

(after a flicker of surprised hesitation)

Right.... In that case, I'm going to let my drones do their thang, and get some rack-time. Dogger, Stenk you need any numbers?

A brief pause of silent calculation.

DOGGER

Nah. I reckon we're covered.

NORTH

Colour me completely unsurprised.

DOGGER

I'll donate Stenk a few bots if it turns out he needs any more.

NORTH

Groovy. Cole - all the access clearance you need, yeah?

COLE

Affirmatron.

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NORTH
OK. Hold the fort.

COLE
Yessah, master boss sah.

Everyone LAUGHS.

NORTH
Cute. Catch y'all in a few cycles.

Repair drones now fan out from the *Grover* and get busy. Then her cabin lights extinguish. Similar drone activity begins on the *Zboral*. The *Deke* maintains her casual inbound glide towards the *Grover*. The hum of activity drops away into the distance.

FADE TO BLACK:

SHWUMP!

DOGGER
Uh. Guys? Friends of ours?

STENK
Nuh-uh. Incoming!

DOGGER
No-no-no-no-no!

STENK
Zborul sensors detect battlecruiser class.

DOGGER
Cole, they're right on your tail.

STENK
And launching fighters!

SOUNDS of a skirmish begin; the regular ZAP-ZAP-ZAP of the battlecruiser's weapons, along with more random PEW-PEW from returning fire.

There are intermittent CRACKS and FIZZLES of shots hitting targets.

STENK
North! Get back online! The *Grover* is sitting like duck!

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DOGGER
(droids beeping
frantically in the
background)
I'm getting pounded here! I gotta
bounce.

STENK
Dogger. Don't you dare! Cole tell
him. Cole!

The WHUM-WHUM-WHUM of a tractor beam starts.

STENK
Cole? (beat) What in hells are you
doing!?

ZAP-ZAP-ZAP. The battlecruiser shots land this time with a
very loud, and clear, THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

AUTOMATED VOICE: GROVER
Warning! Warning! Warning! Shields
5%. 3%. 1%.

ZAP-ZAP-ZAP. THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

AUTOMATED VOICE: GROVER
Shields depleted. Hull integrity
failing. Damage critical. Damage
critical. Damage critical.
Launching escape capsule.

SHWOOOOOSH!

ZAP-ZAP-ZAP. THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! A massive EXPLOSION. Then a
fade away into SILENCE.

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EXT. HOWLAND IV / MINING OUTPOST - NIGHT**TITLE: SEVEN YEARS LATER**

A belt of asteroids, loosely locked into the gravity well of Howland's fourth planet. A toothed bucket of a mining vehicle hews into the brown surface of the nearest asteroid. The design precludes the likelihood of any pilot: no cab, no suggestions of crew quarters, no windows, nor exits. A utilitarian device, its paint scuffed and stained from a hard life. As the bucket pierces the crust, there's a brief reveal of glowing purple rocks beneath; scooped from the mantle, then swallowed up into the belly of the machine. The miner pauses, as if regarding some potential threat. Still some hundreds of kilometres away, a dented green container - identified by graffiti scrawled along its side in white: *Valkyrie* - floats by. Debris. The miner turns back to its task, taking another lumbering hack into the surface.

Beyond, in the distance, transport ship *Uxbridge* waits; little more than a huge metal cargo-hold with a hyperdrive and a cabin bolted on. Throughout the asteroid belt exhaust trails, the flickers of manoeuvring jets, tiny exposures of purple rock, all indicate a slow, steady, traffic: mining vessels ferrying between select asteroids and the *Uxbridge*. The ore being aggregated there.

A pair of nimble-looking fighters fly by in parade-ground formation; sentry duty.

Finally, overseeing security, looms Sector Command Ship (SCS) *Juno*. An enhanced destroyer-class, this menacing vessel looks distinct from the rag-tag hive of the mining operations. External markings are few, and subtle, but on its metallic-grey hull there can be found some faction logos: N-Corp. A design clearly reminiscent of the earlier North Holdings motif. An evolution of the former, or an appropriation of some form; the red triangle, a single 'N' central, 'Corp' now the subscript text.

INT. SCS "JUNO" / BRIDGE - DAY

The bridge appears modular in design, consisting of low-walled hexagonal pods arranged concentrically - facing what is effectively a massive shared display. This display currently shows the mining operation outside, with various telemetry overlaid: some internal (shields, power, location, time), some external (ship labels, the *Uxbridge*, projected trajectories)

The Commander's pod is most prominent.

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Commander MAPLIN (late-40s), sits in his chair - rank denoted by the insignia on his uniform. He's humanoid, but not human; a Proxer, like all the bridge crew. Maplin presents as a fairly clean-cut example of the species. His face has a slight greenish wash to it. No tattoos, scars, or tribal markings. Clearly a military man, but the eyes fail to conceal his current situational boredom.

Like everyone, he sports a neat band - a combination e-wallet and comms device - on one wrist; currently devoid of any markings. Similarly compulsory, a clearly digital name tag adorns his breast: 'MAPLIN', in easily legible white letters, a serial number in less clear, minute, white below. All this - in his case - on an illuminated blue background.

To his left stands Lt. PAYTON (late 40s), just arrived. A Proxer, too, of course. A pinker skin-tone, but similarly uniformed, rank denoted, wristband, 'PAYTON' and serial number. Again, white on blue.

PAYTON

Sir.

MAPLIN

Ah Lieutenant. How goes the..
(waves).. operation?

PAYTON

All good.

MAPLIN

Really? "Good", you say?

Maplin still looks out over the enterprise despite addressing his lieutenant. Payton seems to pay the slight no mind.

PAYTON

A figure of speech, sir. Sentry fighters report no sign of any trouble. Loading operations are on schedule, and nearing completion.

MAPLIN

Why are we here?

Payton stands respectfully, deferential, and silent.

MAPLIN

Why send a Federated Union **Sector Command Ship** - albeit with only a caretaker support crew - to oversee... this? This... PFTH!

Payton takes a second before replying.

"01x00 - Initiate"

PAYTON

A display of might, perhaps? The galaxy's citizens must feel we are able to defend them if we're to maintain our hard-won advantages, sir. Our presence alone may ward off pirates and opportunists. Doubtless even that token visibility reassures our peoples.

MAPLIN

I do not enjoy being a token, Lieutenant. A pawn on a game board. Someone's political gesture, or facade.

PAYTON

Yes-sir.

MAPLIN

And this rabble aren't "our people". They are not beholden to the Federation banner, or deserving of our protection.

PAYTON

Of course, sir. I understand Wonsu Cole has... feels he has... a certain obligation to the group. Past association.

MAPLIN

And you've seen the progress reports? (waving) Not the security arrangements. The yield. The hyperium ore.

Another pause from Payton.

PAYTON

Yes, sir.

Maplin finally turns to Payton as they speak.

MAPLIN

I've never taken you for a fool, soldier.

PAYTON

Off the record?

MAPLIN

Off, as you say, the record.

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PAYTON

We **could** go beyond the current remit. Invest our own resources. Fully commit to the efforts here. Bring in machinery, call back ships from the factional front... hypothetically.

MAPLIN

And?

PAYTON

Not wishing to second-guess the Wonsu, of course.

MAPLIN

(lazily)

Of course.

Maplin turns his attention back to the display.

PAYTON

There really isn't sufficient untapped ore remaining in this entire sector for operations to be viable any longer.

MAPLIN

Indeed. I agree with your astute analysis of the situation, Lieutenant. A token.

PAYTON

If I may, Commander. I have my orders.

MAPLIN

Your dedication to Duty is commendable.

Dismissed, Payton nods, and exits.

INT. SCS "JUNO" / CORRIDOR - DAY

Three male figures rush conspicuously, unnaturally, down the corridor; out of place despite their N-Corp coveralls. Two Proxers - KIERAN (approx 30), slightly androgynous, but otherwise the archetypal male hero - MAC (25). And the more squat, bulbous, form of a Nozz; JAY-GEE (indeterminate, non-humanoid, age).

"01x00 - Initiate"

Mac and Jay-Gee enjoy a yellow backlight to their ID tags; Mac's reading 'Mac-Daddy192' in full. Kieran's moniker, however, set against a traffic-light-red background.

JAY-GEE

Should just be up here, Captain. On the right. No, the left. Right. Definitely the right.

They turn a corner, to the right, and come to an abrupt halt - a dead end. Jay-gee shrugs apologetically. Kieran returns a warm smile, placing an encouraging arm on his shoulder. Mac gets the drop on them, checking his bearings in a flash, and sets off back the way they came. Kieran nods to Jay-Gee and they make to follow, but Mac holds the lead by a few paces.

JAY-GEE

(hesitantly)

Are we sure this is a good idea?

Kieran casually activates his wristband without breaking step, or looking down to it.

KIERAN

(surreptitiously)

Hear that? Even our... ever-intrepid... Nozz thinks this is an unnecessary risk.

Mac ejaculates over his shoulder.

MAC

Jay-Gee's a muppet, though.

KIERAN

Yet here he is - covering **your** arse as we infiltrate an SCS class warship. Maybe you should think a bit more highly of him if we get manage to get out of this alive?

MAC

Wouldn't count on it.

KIERAN

Don't be so pessimistic. We'd know all about it if they'd detected us. It's certainly an unexpected course of action. Plan does have that going in its favour.

MAC

No, I meant about revising my opinion on deek-of-the-week.

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NORTH (OVER COMMS)
Maybe we can cut the chatter,
gents?

They proceed a few more steps in silence - reprimanded -
before turning a corner.

INT. SCS "JUNO" / TERMINAL - CONTINUOUS - DAY

This little section of corridor ends at a computer terminal.

KIERAN
He has a point is all. We've got
nearly a full hauler's worth
already without this score. You
know... the one suddenly under
Federal lock-and-key?

NORTH (OVER COMMS)
Business - life itself - is
fundamentally risk.

KIERAN
If I'd wanted drawn into the
factional warfare, I'd just have
enlisted you know?

NORTH (OVER COMMS)
You're failing to consider the long-
game. **I** see an unexpected
opportunity to expedite our
organisation's strategies here.

KIERAN
Hmmm.

Mac reaches the terminal, bringing the group to a halt. He
investigates it visually, CLICK-CLICKING his tongue. Drops to
his haunches. A second later the CLICKING stops.

MAC
Ha!

He SNAP-SNAP-SNAPS his fingers towards Jay-Gee without
looking up.

MAC
Interface. Now.

Jay-Gee complies, fishing in his satchel for a device. Mac
looks up just for long enough to receive it. Kieran motions
at Mac as if prompting the expected 'Thank you'. Mac gives a
SNORT, turning his attention back to the equipment.

"01x00 - Initiate"

KIERAN

(to Jay-Gee)

Don't pay him any mind. Evidently his mother didn't love him enough when he was a baby. I appreciate having you here. This cloak-n-dagger commando stuff is a little out of my comfort zone.

NORTH (OVER COMMS)

You might be the best young pilot I've seen in a long time, Kieran. But you do lack a certain vision. What's the story, Mac?

MAC

If he'd any "vision" p'raps he'd have kept his own organisation afloat. Instead of running things for you?

Kieran throws Mac a hurt / dirty look. Mac connects device and terminal with a CLICK

MAC

I'm in.

Kieran GROANS, shaking his head.

KIERAN

You're such a cliché.

Mac turns to Kieran, flicks against his red-backed name badge, and back to his task. The device starts to display a progress-bar.

MAC

And you're a dinosaur.

KIERAN

Kay. Aye. Ess. Ess. There's a certain... elegance... to simplicity, you know.

MAC

Hmmm.

JAY-GEE

Doesn't it never worry you? One bad day and you could lose everything?

Mac halfheartedly chastises Kieran; sing-song - more focused on the terminal, truth-be-told.

"01x00 - Initiate"

MAC

Single trace of your warp vector's
all it would take.

JAY-GEE

Yeah. Someone tailing you.

KIERAN

Agreed. Be pretty dumb to make
unnecessary, high-profile, visits.
Or advertise in **enemy territory**,
for example.

JAY-GEE

What about... what about someone
just stumbling onto it?

Kieran LAUGHS, a kind, gentle laugh.

KIERAN

Space is big. Really big. The odds
against are **literally** astronomical.
Lots of room to squirrel the high-
importance things away for
safekeeping.

MAC

(distantly, still on the
terminal)

Doubtless safe from any and all
forms of destruction. So just the
Alpha sector, really.

KIERAN

Still. Big enough.

MAC

Old-skool. Ask him what the
preventative measures are if
someone does blunder across his
stash, Jay.

Jay-Gee shrugs - a sign for Kieran to go on. The latter
obliges, smiling.

KIERAN

If one **were** to invest in such an
approach? Combination lock.

Jay-Gee looks shocked. Mac LAUGHS with no real humour. Jay-
Gee taps his ID badge, with it's yellow background.

"01x00 - Initiate"

JAY-GEE

We'll stick with team-Rough-Rider,
thanks.

KIERAN

Each to their own. (indicates the
scene around them). Kinda the whole
point, eh?

INT. SCS "JUNO" / BRIDGE - DAY

Payton passes one of the outermost pods. He stops. Takes a
step backwards.

The occupant - slim, red-haired, angular - Leading Hand EZRA
(25) notices. She turns her attention to him with a
deferential, quizzical, look.

PAYTON

Leading Hand. What is that?

EZRA

Sir?

PAYTON

Your display. We appear to have
some irregular comms transmissions
emanating from near the hangar bay.

Payton approaches, pointing. Ezra reviews her work, tapping
her controls, pulling up more detail.

EZRA

Yes. I... That could be possible,
sir.

PAYTON

Warrant Officer Kestry!

KESTRY (OS)

Sir!

Ezra continues to review, clearly distressed by the
oversight.

KESTRY arrives (late 20s); no-nonsense, the uniform failing
to hide an obvious lethal intensity to her build. Of those
seen on the bridge, only she has a weapon visible - a blaster
holstered on her hip.

PAYTON

What do you make of this?

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Kestry regards the readouts.

With dread, Ezra interrupts; pointing at a new file: corridor footage of Kieran, Mac, and - most conspicuously - the very alien shape of Jay-Gee.

EZRA

Sirs?

They all regard the footage.

PAYTON

(to Kestry, ignoring
Ezra)

Get a five-man team together and
get down there, stat.

Payton storms off towards the Commander's seat to inform him. Kestry waits a fraction longer, shoots an angry glare at Ezra, then marches in the opposite direction: comms hand to mouth, the other on her holster.

INT. SCS "JUNO" / TERMINAL - DAY

Mac remains on haunches, face towards the terminal, his back to the others. Jay-Gee hops nervously from foot to foot.

KIERAN

Maybe head back a bit, keep a
lookout?

Jay-Gee nods, trundling off in compliance.

KIERAN

C'mon Mac. How much longer?

Mac reiterates his humourless LAUGH.

KIERAN

Mac?

The LAUGH repeats. Identical. Detached.

NORTH (OVER COMMS)

I think you're out of time, guys /
Mac?

Kieran shakes Mac's shoulder. Nothing rouses him. The LAUGH repeats.

KIERAN

We've got ourselves a problem here,
Chief.

"01x00 - Initiate"

INT. SCS "JUNO" / BRIDGE - DAY

Payton is back by Commander Maplin's station.

MAPLIN

And where, precisely, are our
uninvited guests?

PAYTON

Leading Hand Ezra, on-screen.

A sizeable portion of the main display reacts to mirror Ezra's: the initial corridor footage, paused, in one of the windows shared. In another an interactive floor-plan - Kestry and five more Security personnel, clearly labelled. They're rapidly closing in on the first "hostile" marked; a corridor over from the two remaining by the terminal.

EZRA (OS)

They're cut off from the hangar
now. No hope of escape other than
straight into the arms of our
security team.

INT. SCS "JUNO" / CORRIDOR - DAY

Jay-gee hovers nervously by a doorway. After a moment a decision is made. Tapping a panel, he closes the door. HISS. And lumbers off back to the others.

END OF EPISODE

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