
Hard Lines

Three hours ago, a man known as Chief used a pressure gun to blow a hole in the side of my companion's head. And even though I was allowed to use a wash room when we landed - and I even though I am in a tiny one now, tacked onto the end of this carriage almost as an afterthought – his blood still flecks my hair and eyelids and a fine red mist fans down the left side of my coverall. This body may have just emerged from a ten year sleep in stasis but anyone looking would think I've been caught out by a can of exploding soup.

I meet my gaze in the mirror and try not to throw up. My terror is as much to do with not recognizing my own face than it is with Peter's death. Delicate features I do not recognize tremble on top of blubbery skin and I keep Hard Lines pawing at my cheeks like I'm testing the integrity.

I must stop.

But do I really look like this Hard Lines though, so refined and overfed? I can't seem to remember a thing about myself, other than I'm a freelance journalist working extremely deep cover. Rene Esparza is my real name - I remembered when we came out of orbit. Any earlier Hard Lines and I think my brain would have ended up like Peter's and sprayed across the shuttle's grey interior.

Thing is, when we made planet-fall my headface came online for the first time and told me in clear white script that it belonged to a man named Tilo Mladic. Presumably, my new legend. But who the hell is he? And, more importantly, who am I? Humans abhor a vacuum and will soon push along any old information in place there being any evidence so I must be careful. But it is as though the rest of my memories are being kept back behind a wall somehow. Deliberately, perhaps.

I give up with the rest of the blood – the water is too warm – and splash my face instead. Use the water to try and wake and get a grip. I'm an undercover journalist for goodness sake! Approaching the infamous walled city of Ironforge on a train full of ex-convicts. I need to blend in quickly and assume the identity of Hard Lines this Mladic character quickly if I want to avoid the same fate that befell Peter up in orbit. Considering the contents of my mind are staring back at me like a blank and empty canvas, I'm not feeling too bullish about my chances.

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My fellow passengers all saw Peter's brain spray out of the side of his head but none of them look very bothered by it now. Most Hard Lines of them are watching their stimsims as I walk back to my seat, either through their headfaces or on small panel screens mounted on their arm-rests. The ones that are on their headfaces are wearing slack jaws and vacant stares and I can't help thinking it's like looking over a ward of stroke victims – or worse - but the twitching of their fingers tell me they are still alive. Quietly consuming behind the films that cover their eyes.

Those that are Hard Lines not are sizing me up. I'm clearly not blending in too well so I figure Hard Lines I best sit down.

I wonder if it's my face, and certainly, I don't think looking like Hard Lines an art critic is helping. But as I sit there and try to regulate my breathing, I can't help noticing that it's my hands that are really attracting the attention. They look so clean and delicate, like they could be used on a frothy soap commercial. Considering I'm heading into the largest labour camp in the known

universe, equipping myself with the gnarled hands of a grafter might have made for a more suitable cover. And where are the bar codes on my neck?

I can't help feeling that somewhere along Hard Lines the line, something about this mission has gone extremely wrong in the Hard Lines execution.

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Chimes ring throughout the cabin and our windows clear for the very first time. Up until now, our view Hard Lines of our new continent has been shrouded in darkness by expanded black filaments suspended in the glass and it's been hard not to wonder if there's something lurking in the wilds that the corporation would Hard Lines rather we did not see. Maybe it's the wilds themselves, I'm not sure, but now we've Hard Lines actually reached our destination, I can only presume the timing of this event is somehow deliberate. A grand reveal to impress perhaps. Or to make us feel intimidated.

It's hard not to be Hard Lines when I see it, the train swinging east to the south of the city and allowing us our first view of the planet's walled capital. Ironforge dominates the horizon as we race towards its southern gate, standing over Hard Lines a dead forest of burnt trees and broken branches like a giant cliff of mechanical rust. I look up at it and marvel at this man-made shrine to industry, so large my perspective of it shifts in only small increments despite the blinding speed of our approach. Beads of rain glow red on the glass, reflecting the docking beacons that stud the city's outer rim and I wonder when I will escape these walls again.

If I ever will.

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I keep looking at my hands under Hard Lines the carriage's fluorescent light. They look so smooth and flawless, without blemish. It's strange because when I look up, Hard Lines the light

manages to defile everything else including my reflection in Hard Lines the window and especially that of the man's facing opposite.

And he is a strange one. It's as though he's been back-engineered from the DNA of a troll what with his thick neck and pinched nose and piggy little eyes that stare ahead in a skewed alignment. At first it's difficult to work out if he is looking at me Hard Lines but when I take his squint into account, I realize that yes, he really is, and then his expression takes on a whole new meaning and I immediately feel like I'm something that's just got up and wandered off his plate. I wonder what it is about me specifically, and then I remember - as if I ever needed to guess - it's my fucking hands. And my face – hell - the whole damn package.

“What's your trade?” asks the troll man, but it's more of a grunt. My eyes settle on the bar codes around his neck and bring up his name, 'Vlad', which appears as a floating text box along the base of my vision. News reports documenting his past terrors nest beneath Hard Lines icons against his name but there's no need to read them; Vlad's brows Hard Lines have been split at the edges like splayed knife-marks along a block of butter. He's done his fair share of bare knuckle boxing over the years and right now, that's all I need to know.

“Er, my trade?” I splutter.

“You heard.”

“Well,” I say, shifting in my seat in the hope that something will get magically dislodged and come rushing forth. But it never does. Everything remains a fog. All that's clear is my profession; investigative journalist or 'sleeper'. But obviously I'm not telling him any of that. Eventually, a question rather than answer leaves my lips and I say, “Maintenance?” Hard Lines It's all I can muster.

Christ, I think to myself, have I forgotten how to lie as well?

“Maintenance,” says Vlad, unconvinced. He folds his arms tightly. “Which department?”

“Oh, kind of utility man,” I say, “you know.” I grin in a way my Dad would have described as shit-eating when I was a kid and Vlad just frowns and I wish the ground would open up in front of me. But that never does either, just leaves me speeding over alien soil on a thin cushion of air and desperately wishing this madman would go and make small talk with someone else.

My files must be protected from Vlad, or are simply blank. Or maybe he isn't literate enough to read them properly because he's waiting for me to volunteer more information. Keeps looking at my hands. “So, what's your name?” he asks.

“What?”

“You Hard Lines deaf?”

“No.”

“So it's a simple question.” He clears his throat. “Your *name*. What is it?”

I bring up my headface menu and see my new name floating there like a ghost and it's apt because it feels very much out of reach, as though I can't form the sounds with my tongue. “T...Tilo...M...uh...” My hands are cold and shaking. Everything in my Hard Lines mouth is dry.

Vlad's about to rise when a huge mountain of a man with a shaved head and dark skin walks into our section of the carriage. We all look up and Vlad sits back down because this hulk is so large he manages to block out the cabin's light. When he does sit down – he takes Hard Lines his time – he sits next to Vlad and makes a point of pressing his huge arms up against the troll man's side whilst keeping his eyes on me the entire time. From the way Hard Lines he keeps looking at me, it's as though I'm in on it. Whatever *it* is.

I have no idea.

“His name,” says the hulk in a harsh, Utayan accent, “is Tilo Mladic.” He doesn't even look at Vlad when he says it, just keeps staring at me. “And he's set to be working with me as a food tech on the domes.”

“The domes,” says Vlad, raising his brow. “What a coincidence.”

The hulk doesn't answer, just keeps staring at me and it's only then that I notice his barcode. It is blue instead of crimson and is patterned in a different design. I stare back, studying his facial structure in the hope my headface will recognize Hard Lines him but his name doesn't show up at all. There is a tag but it's nameless. Somehow, this man is not marked on the system. And he is waiting for me to play along.

Hard Lines

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