



SEND IN THE CLOWNS
by Daniel Charles Ross

I ain't even crazy about this, man," Madison drawled. He swiped his cheek with the make-up sponge and it smeared dull paint across his face in fierce green and black tiger stripes. There were other patterns approved by headquarters, but Madison was a traditionalist and he had painted tiger stripes on his face for field missions since Vietnam. He could do it in his sleep, and according to his first wife, he had. He wasn't going to stop now. This was an established occupation that went back literally centuries, and Madison intended to respect its traditions.

"There's no crowd control, no air support—and no damn leadership." With comically wide eyes, Madison tilted his head in the direction of their team leader, a spanking new and youthful kid who had arrived only the week before. They got younger all the time in this line of work.

"There's no damn leadership, bro. Write it down: No. Damn. Leadership. You heard it here first." Madison daubed more paint on his forehead. He needed more at the hairline every month, seemed like.

Landry's chest heaved with a quiet chuckle. These two had been on many hot, complex missions together. Deployed many times, sometimes leading, sometimes

following, but always ready to go, always ready for anything. Landry knew exactly what Madison meant.

“I hear ya, bro, but it always like that on the first mission in new geography,” Landry said. The team had only arrived at their current coordinates by private train about 40 hours before, yet the compound had been offloaded, established and was already functioning for 25 hours.

Landry finished reassembling his pristine rifle and drove the bolt home with a brisk slap, like a doctor awakening a newborn baby. It made the reassuring, plasticky crack that a properly assembled piece will make, and Landry smiled. The weapon was a gleaming thing that had been used thousands of times, but it looked like it had just come out of the Cosmoline grease new rifles shipped in.

“Not the kid fault,” he continued. “Me’n you, we are the old dawgs, and we been around so long when we leave they need to name a building for us or somethin’. But Paxson new. He need this show to put some notches in his own make-up case. Ain’t his fault he just got out of the academy.” Landry looked around to see who was listening, but the teammates all were doing their own things, dressing for the bug-out and preparing their gear for what was to come. Of course, they never knew what was to come on a good day. Few new missions were perfect on the first day, especially on new ground, and today was the first day.

Landry lowered his voice a click and leaned in.

“I blame that punk-ass Hendershot.”

Edward Thomas Hendershot was the ringmaster of this little circus of theirs. His

subordinates did not revere him. He came to their team under a cloud. Word was he'd been with another unit, a transport got tipped over, and folks got hurt in his first and only field mission in the lead. Now he did what he could just to stay in the spotlight, and he had this new kid, fresh from leadership school, to be the tip of his spear.

Madison grunted in agreement, pushing the sponge slightly off its intended slide across his forehead.

"*That* guy," he said. Madison lifted his chin into the light and peered closely in the magnifying mirror reflecting the deep cleft in this broad terrain. He could hold a pencil in that chin. He poked at the crevasse with a white Q-tip draped with olive drab green paint.

Madison's eyes swiveled to lock on Landry's reflection in the makeup mirror. "He was a bad-ass in his time, though, Hendershot. That's what I hear." He put the sponges in the tray in the same receptacles from which they had been drawn. It didn't do to mix colors just because you were too lazy to put stuff back where it went. He grabbed his towel and wiped his hands clean of random paint, then pulled a paper bib off his uniform. Madison hated paint on his uniform. Made you look like you worked in the motor pool with the scrubs who got washed out of front-line duty, or else they never had it in the first place. Madison knew and believed that every job in the company was important, that every member of the team rowed in the same direction toward overall success. But he also knew the facts, and the facts were that Madison and his team was counted on to kick off the show every time, to lead the team into the mission.

If they failed at the start, the entire mission was in danger of failure too. If a motor

pool scrub failed, they just drew another vehicle.

“You know he’s the Hero of Detroit, right? Hendershot? That’s no shit.”

Landry snorted. “Yeah, I heard that crap.” There is only one difference between a war story and a fairy tale. Fairy tales begin with *Once upon a time*, and war stories begin with *This is no shit!*

Like all so-called legends, this one often grew with every telling, and in this unit, it was told frequently. It was the best sort of legend, too, a story that illustrated the kind of sudden heroism from the most unlikely person that makes such stories even sweeter; the kind of story you never expect is going to be about someone you know, just some intrepid, larger-than-life person who was somehow better than you. But Hendershot was not the kind of person most people sought to mimic. That didn’t diminish the glory of the tale even a little bit, and in fact, it made the act so much more important.

Hendershot’s team had been in Detroit for a fast in-fast out trip supporting a larger unit that wasn’t even a part of their company, as a favor. Just a short trip, just a few hours, and they’d be on the plane and soon back in the club swilling dollar happy hour shooters and already telling lies about it. But things get out of hand at the damndest times, and things got out of hand as things will in Detroit. When a containment failed, the story went, it was Hendershot who saved the day, out on point alone, keeping those animals at bay in a tight spot with nothing but a commanding voice, a busted chair and a pistol without rounds until reinforcements arrived. He’d been a tiger among tigers, according to witnesses, and no one got hurt.

“That was a long time ago, and he immediately retired, as they say, ‘undefeated.’”

He been coastin' on that one moment of hilarity ever since." Landry smiled. "What he done lately? He got hisself important, got a clean uniform and got promoted out from actually havin' to do shit. Him and his butt buddies, all hangin' around tellin' us what to do. Fuckin' clowns." Landry stood and automatically yanked sharply downward on the bottom hem of his uniform blouse, pulling it taut with a soft pop.

It was nearly showtime and the tension was mounting in the space set aside for their mission prep. Landry looked out and up into the top of the tent and cocked his head to one side, listening to the distinct sounds of air support beginning to show up overhead after all. See, that was the thing about rumors, about taking things at face value. There was going to be air support after all. This was a business where "face value" had an entirely different meaning.

The logistics boys were beginning to stir now too, working their way among the throng and slinging their distinctive sing-song cadence. Guess Madison had been wrong about that, too. Maybe he'd be wrong about their unshaven new leader.

Outside, announcements were being made. Inside, troops were getting ready to deploy. The tension was thick in the tent now, with the crescendo of background noise fighting for prominence over a raucous ceremonial band playing too loudly and, as usual, slightly off key.

Landry tugged on his backpack and adjusted its weight on his shoulders. It wasn't heavy, but Landry was a creature of habit and the straps had to fall *just so* and align perfectly with the outer seams of his uniform pockets. It had been the same way in the Marine Corps. You show respect for your uniform, for your gear. Take care of your gear

and your gear will take care of you. Those lessons carried over from that job to this one, and had served him well.

“You know, we just mercenaries anymore,” Landry said with some resignation. It was the sound of a man reconciled to his fate in life, his place in line, his likely dearth of impact on anything important.

“What are you talking about?” Madison asked.

“I mean, man, we do this job for money, you know? We do this just for the money. I pull on my uniform, I put camo on my face, and get in the vehicle and I perform as directed. For the damn money. That makes me a mercenary. And sit you in the vehicle alongside me, that makes you a mercenary, too.”

“All right, number one, you’re crazy,” Madison said, “Number two, this is a job for which we trained and in which we excel. This is no different than when you was doin’ them damn pushups in the Marine Corps, no different than when I was in the Navy makin’ fun of you jarheads on the boat. Service is as service does, big boy. We put the uniform on, we do what we are told, and we cash our checks.”

“We got Direct Deposit.”

“I know, knucklehead, try to keep up. I’m saying this is a job just like those other ones. And until they put our names on the building and we can make any changes we like, we do what we are told and we cash our checks.”

Landry looked him and smiled.

“Yeah, I know. Direct Deposit. Numbnuts.” But Madison grinned back at his friend. They came in together as a team, and until last week, Madison always expected

they would go out, finally, whenever the Big Man called, as a team.

Madison stood and pulled on his helmet. When he picked up his weapon, the buckle of the strap rattled against the plastic stock. That kind of noise was unprofessional and wouldn't do. He reached into the gear locker at his feet and withdrew a roll of clear plastic tape. He pulled off a long piece and wrapped it noisily around the buckle a few times, then bit the strip with his teeth and pulled it from the roll. He smoothed the tape edges down on the buckle, insulating it from the stock against which it lie.

With a last look at his face paint, he nodded once into the mirror and took a deep, calming breath.

“All right, then. Let's hit it, bro,” Madison said.

Madison closed his footlocker and walked over to his place in the stick of other men, mounted up in his vehicle and secured the safety straps. The movements were automatic by now, long practiced and never deviated. Train like you fight and you will fight like you train. It was an axiom for a reason.

He thought about how long he'd done this job, like he always did before a mission started. He'd been in uniform a long time, first in the Army, then in the Navy, now in this unit. Every job had been different, but each had been compelling because of that. A boy grows up wanting to be only a handful of things: a policeman; a circus clown; a soldier; a spy, and time flies past so quickly when you're having this much fun. Madison suddenly felt fulfilled. It was a grand life he'd had. But he coughed, explosively and deep, into his hand. He looked around and no one had noticed. Lots of guys had colds and even flu, but the show still went on.

A bit of thick spittle laced with blood had landed in his hand and he wiped it casually on the red stripe of his uniform pants. Nothing to do about it now but his job.

Nothing to do about it at all, doc said.

Another new kid released the nearly invisible plastic wire that marked the threshold and it dropped into the dirt. Where did these new recruits come from all the time? Madison wondered if these newbies really were that young, or if he was just getting older. He hoped it was the former. He dreaded it was the latter.

Paxson arrived and took his place on point in front of his men, ready to surge upon Hendershot's command. The boy did cut a decent figure in his brand-new, never-been-dirty uniform, alternating stripes and all. Madison respected that Paxson seemed to hide his fear well, even though his fear probably was palpable. This was his first mission. In a sudden, unexpected turn of fatherly affection, Madison hoped it wouldn't be Paxson's last.

Outside, Hendershot stood proud and ramrod straight in his sleek traditional uniform, ceremoniously formal black and white and top hat, at home in the court of the Crimson King, showing not a wrinkle nor a speck of lint. He looked around with his gigantic smile—those couldn't possibly all be his own teeth—and he began his pitch.

“Mesdames et Messieurs, Meine Damen und Herren, Ladies *aaannd* Gentlemen ... Children of all Ages!”

In the air above the floor, trapeze artists swung into action to provide air show support to the troops on the ground. An enormous mechanical effigy of a monarch draped in blood-red robes appeared under a spotlight and turned on a hidden axis toward

Hendershot, nodding slightly and waving a giant's baton in his direction. At his feet scampered human knaves, fools, and fawning supplicants. The Crimson King commanded the mission to begin.

Nothing left to it but to do it. Paxson slung his rifle across his chest by the sling and draped his legs over a tiny white minibike, revving the miniature engine with a high-pitched *zing!-zing!-zing!* The brass band music infused the troops with energy and barely restrained excitement. They were spooled up and good to go.

Goddamnit, *now* it was a party!

Landry and Madison hunkered down in their command car, a red plastic body on a torquey electric golf cart chassis. A white star and a few faux rank stripes were painted on the door. Their pink plastic weapons stuck out of the windows at odd angles and bushy red Bozo fright wigs stretched out from under hot pink helmets like tumbleweeds of fire. Hendershot droned on in the background.

Paxson heard his cue, spun the minibike's throttle wide open and hit the tent flaps at full speed, blasting them wide.

"Break a leg, bro!" Landry said, fist-bumping with Madison. Landry drove the clown car's accelerator to the floor. The clown troops burst through the curtains of their tent into a blinding white spotlight and the deafening roar of 11,733 paid civilians as Hendershot drew his biggest breath.

"Welcome to the Greatest Show on Earth!"