

Stan had always self-identified as a stork, but he had come to realize, in his old age, that he was more than likely descended from the *Threskiornis aethiopicus* species of ibis—the African sacred ibis. This transmigration made no great difference to him; he'd still collect his pension.

Stan had passed the civil service exam online, with help from a contract hacker. He figured that exhibiting the resourcefulness required to pull something like that off had to count for something. Anyway, no one had ever complained about his work after he got the job.

He liked to drive the mail truck.

He wore the hat, and the weird socks, pulled up over his long, slender legs. His beak checked the windshield as he rolled over potholes, or turned too quickly inside the tiny cabin. His articulate wing tips quickly sorted the mail. The families on his route always smiled and waved when they saw him ambling down their street.

Stan glanced in his rearview mirror and inched back onto the road, rolling slowly toward the next mailbox. His next package was too large to fit, so he extricated himself from the vehicle and made his way up to the residence's front door.

"What in the hell are you supposed to be?" asked the resident when he opened the door.

"A bird, sir," Stan sighed, leaving aside for the moment the question of his exact, accurately identified species. The debate was all too familiar.

"Fucking liberals," the man said.

"Indeed, sir," Stan replied, and walked back to his mail truck. He didn't feel much pride as a bird on a normal day. It was hard for him to get worked up over verbal abuse. If the man tried to assault him it would be a federal crime. And Stan was more than capable of defending himself. Anyway, this was his job.

Stan's tall knees bucked against the underside of the mail truck's dash as he pulled back onto the highway towards town. He adjusted the small fan mounted over the mail tray and hummed to himself an original composition that he planned to commit to tape some time in the following week.

Friday was payday.

So be it.

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Stan never tampered with the mail. He did his job. It was the same every day. Mostly he kept his head down and avoided fraternizing with the other mail carriers. After some bad experiences early in his career he realized this was best.

On a typical day he went home after work and hit the Doritos pretty hard. Often he'd just sit there in his La-Z-Boy until it was time for bed. Sometimes he'd even wake up there in the morning. Most of what he needed when he woke up was within reach.

It wasn't strictly necessary to speak to anyone at work. Most days he didn't. Most of his conversations occurred between himself and the people who lived on his route. These conversations were by necessity short. The nature of the business dictated that soon Stan would have to move on to the next house. Still, he remembered most of their names, most of the time.

Stan thought that there must have been a lot of people out there living their lives in a similar fashion. Maybe, sometimes, they got lonely. He'd never know, and he didn't particularly need to.

He didn't really feel lonely. It was true that he was unique. Most storks (ibises?) didn't bother to live to his age, never grew to his size, or for that matter ever acquired human speech. He wasn't sure he'd want to talk to them anyway. He found that he didn't have much in common with other members of his species. It was better to keep himself at a remove from the goings on of the stork world.

That was what he told himself as he drove the mail truck down the street.

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No, he was serious. There was another he had tried to be friends with, before college, but it hadn't worked out. Part of why he left town. He didn't like to think about that time. Nowadays it was Doritos and the mail truck.

And his music. When he wasn't snacking or asleep he tried to set down his ideas. His equipment was primitive, but he found he had no aptitude for operating complicated machines. He pressed the record button and played his guitar.

He didn't talk to anyone about this. It wasn't for them. Something happened when he played that he wouldn't have been able to explain. The recordings themselves were superfluous (though they did comprise a record of the experience).

In his bumbling way he was transported.

On the other side, the man he had come to know as the Chief presently resolved into view.

"Report," said the Chief, swiveling in his chair to face Stan and his guitar.

"Slow week," Stan said. "Three tracks, none of them mixed. I'm... not sure where to go from here."

"Don't worry about it," said the Chief, and broke the connection. Stan set down his guitar. What was that supposed to mean? He stopped the tape recorder and opened another bag of Doritos.

Thirteen years into his career as a mail carrier, Stan still didn't know what he wanted to be when he grew up. Spying with his guitar was okay, but he had always assumed he'd get famous for something... else. He still had no idea what that might be. His current pay was sufficient, so he was free to follow his conscience during his free time. He wasn't even sure that his career needed to encompass his interests.

Whatever, it was time for work.

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The team was coming together. A delicate job in Japan. The Chief had hand-picked them all:

Stan, communications. Mild and reserved, Stan was a newcomer to the field. With his guitar always in hand, he hoped he could live up to his billing as the team's messenger and oracle. If not, well, how would anyone know?

Alix Graves, recon scout. Point man, so far out in front of everyone else that he was pulling up the rear. Private investigator and New San Francisco native. Weird sports glasses. His imaginary friend was along for the ride at no extra cost. This netted him all the capabilities of a

two-man team at a fifty percent savings.

Raven, hitter. Not really a bird, which led to some awkwardness with Stan. (Stan mostly deferred to the younger man's superior costuming). Raven's contempt for his teammates was evident. He didn't say much, but when he did speak it tended to make people uncomfortable. The target of his professional attentions would surely be made to feel worse. Raven's training mirrored the Chief's, but he was definitely (maybe?) human.

Dimension Man, transportation. An early skateboarding accident had triggered the onset of latent superhuman powers, namely the ability to transport people (including himself) and objects over great distances using only the power of his mind. The implications were obvious. Nearing forty, he still skated whenever he got the chance.

John Ratcliff, enforcer. Sometimes known as Super-Sonic, though the name had little to do with his skills: class 100 superhuman strength, physical invulnerability, prolific anti-establishment mythopoeitics. Another refugee from the vintage New York team.

Finally, the Chief himself. Still wearing his favorite brown jacket. Still carrying his ancient, somewhat controversial weapon. Sporting that same wooden expression, only seen to crack a grin by those taking their final bows as they prepared to exit the stage. Something was up with him, but you couldn't tell what it was. That was the Chief, for you.

The mission would kick off in three days time. The men would fly to Japan aboard the Chief's peculiar pink aircraft (the Chief having thought it would be wise to reserve Dimension Man's equally peculiar talents for the main event). Once in-country the Chief would run the show from the big board in front of his captain's chair.

All that remained for Stan was to find out the spec for the job.

He figured he was ready.

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The job did not go as planned. Discipline had broken down almost immediately. Or at least it had seemed that way; it was never really clear what anyone was doing at any given time.

First, they had materialized in the wrong place. The initial disorientation led to several unauthorized weapons discharges, each of which would need to be accounted for in the paperwork. Civilian bystanders were caught in the crossfire. Members of the team had mistaken the misfire as an incoming attack and responded in kind. This expanded the mishap's reach exponentially. When the smoke cleared the streets had turned red.

Ignoring the signals to turn back, Raven advanced to the objective, with John Ratcliff laying down suppressing fire. Stan was impressed, he'd never seen anything like it. Well, in real life. He aimed his guitar at the action, ensuring that the Chief would enjoy a clear view. He guessed that this was what they wanted him to do. Nobody had told him anything.

The general disorganization was exacerbated by the team's failure to locate the target. This had hardly slowed Raven down. He proceeded to carve a path through the civilian-clogged street. At least now the rest of the team could follow. Stan tracked his progress with the guitar. When Raven rounded a corner, Stan realized that he'd have to move forward as well. The crowd closed up behind them like a self-healing wound. Everyone just stepped over the bodies.

At some point Raven returned with the target in tow. John Ratcliff again encouraged the crowd to disperse. Dimension Man was ready with his portal, and Stan nearly missed the doorway as it closed up behind the team.

The first thing Raven did when they reached the ship was to stomp onto the bridge and pin Alix to a bulkhead, his hand stapling the taller man's frame to the wall like a thick sheet of tan, muscular paper.

"You. Said. No. Mission. Log." he rasped through clenched teeth.

"W-what?" Alix managed to get out, totally confused.

Nobody had paid any attention to Stan, standing by and strumming his guitar. Suddenly they all realized he was there, what he was doing.

"Turn that thing off," John Ratcliff said quietly, laying a hand on his shoulder. Stan immediately complied.

"Turn it back on," the Chief said, rising to his feet and raising voice. "I love this song."

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None of it was real. Stan imagined himself participating in... whatever this was supposed to be. But that was as far as it went. The other players may or may not have existed, and he may or may not have really known they existed. Certainly, none of these characters lived on his mail route. And who could he tell? He'd take long breaks from playing his guitar.

Stan didn't know it was all being recorded.

The team relied on him more than he knew. There had to be a conduit between the Chief and the men in the field. Experiments with Dimension Man's portals had

failed; information must be transmitted by an alert, engaged consciousness (Dimension Man, distracted as he was by his other duties, could not fulfill the requirement). Stan might be inexperienced, but he was there, and he could just about do the job. Anyway, the Chief believed in him.

This all left Stan in an uncomfortable position. On the one hand he was happy to help, but on the other hand he had been telling himself that none of this was real. Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe the unreality of the situation need not impede his performance. Stan tried to keep a positive attitude. He decided to keep his head down and forge ahead.

When the Chief called him into his office he was relieved. Now he'd find out what this was all about. Maybe he'd even get a new assignment.

"Have a seat," the Chief said.

Stan performed a quick survey of the objects displayed in the Chief's office. Not much there. He wondered how long the Chief had been operating out of this location. "Nice chairs, boss," he said.

The Chief paused long enough for Stan to become worried he'd said something irretrievably stupid. Then the Chief began to speak, which was worse than the wondering.

"A periodic review of your performance records has revealed that your presence on away missions is literally more trouble than it is worth. Effective immediately you will remain aboard ship and relay mission data to me that has been transmitted to you via telepathic means by the newest member of our team..."



The Chief depressed a small switch on the side of his desk and the narrow door in the wall behind him slid open. Foley: [SCHLICK]

"...Cy-bra."

The Chief leaned back in his swivel chair and made a tent with his hands. He saw that Stan had noticed the affectation and doubled down on the (he imagined) oblique gesture. In this way the master/servant relationship was firmly substantiated.

Cy-bra emerged from the Chief's small closet and nodded to Stan. Unsure what to do, Stan nodded in return.

"Since you'll be working together closely, I imagine the two of you would welcome an opportunity to get acquainted."

The Chief stood up and exited, leaving them to settle the question between themselves.

Stan was more confused than ever.

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Muted colors shifted slowly, or maybe it was just the light. Red and silver tones on nothing. Stan wondered if storks (or ibises) could even see color. Somehow, *he* did. Cy-bra lay next to him, still asleep. How had it come to this?

The Chief had put them together, working side by side on various jobs, and one thing had led, improbably as it might seem, to another. He liked to wake up this way, with no need to dwell on the things he wanted to avoid. Instead of himself he could talk to her.

But she was still asleep. He had to work out the reasons why she could be there, why he wasn't just crazy. He couldn't come up with anything convincing. She hadn't

just walked out of his guitar... but how *bad* she arrived in his bed? He scratched himself, wishing he hadn't finished off that last bag of Doritos. Presently, Cy-bra awoke.

"We shouldn't have done this."

Stan was taken aback, but of course he'd wait to hear her out.

But, that was it. Cy-bra climbed out of bed and stepped purposefully into her clothes. Without another word she left the apartment. Stan figured he'd see her at work.

Work was less satisfying when he knew what he was missing. All along his mail route he could think only of Cy-bra, and his other job. he probably put some envelopes in the wrong mailboxes. This kind of preoccupation wasn't like him at all. Pretty soon customers would start complaining.

In the evenings he would sit and plink away at his guitar. Frustrated by his inability to resume the Chrysler Building, he would thrash about randomly, not even really trying to play one of his songs. He felt old and ridiculous. Underemployed. Didn't they still need him out in New San Francisco?

The answer was not forthcoming. He hadn't expected much, but this was... nothing. In the weeks that followed Stan went through a lot of Doritos.

"Oh, there you are," the Chief said, late one evening just as Stan was about to give up. "We thought we'd lost you."

Stan didn't know what this meant but he took his guitar out of the trash can and got back to work.

He kept the big box of tapes under his bed. It would not be long until he would need a bigger box. He wondered sometimes if he should digitize the lot. He put it off and put it off. Someday, he thought, it would be difficult to get a hold of a working cassette player.

Stan recorded as the mood struck him. It could, and did, happen at the most inconvenient times. He had to set the ideas down as quickly as possible; once they were gone, they were gone. He operated the little 4-track machine with the unshakable confidence of a self-taught expert. Tape hiss was his enemy. Superior technique was his ally.

At some point he realized that the Chief was probably keeping recordings of his own. He wondered if the Chief's equipment was primarily digital, thus avoiding generation loss and tape hiss. This somewhat lateral insight set him on a cycle of acute obsession, pondering the higher fidelity recordings that must exist in the Chief's vault. Stan was his own biggest fan, so of course he had to get his hands on them.

Cy-bra was not willing to participate in any mission that would violate the Chief's trust. Raven told him to fuck off and hung up the phone. Dimension Man had to pick up his kids. John Ratcliff didn't reply to his e-mail, telephone calls, or forum posts. Stan was on his own. Eventually he decided to just ask the Chief for the tapes. Discs? Whatever.

"It's complicated," the Chief said. "But we could probably get you your songs."

The Chief winked at him, and motioned for Stan to step back behind his desk. He depressed a switch inside one of his drawers and a panel dissolved to reveal the largest collection of bootleg stork/ibis recordings Stan had

ever seen. CD-Rs that Stan assumed must contain at least some of his tracks in perfect digital quality.

"Straight from the soundboard," the Chief confirmed.

Stan had to have them, and the Chief knew that Stan had to have them.

They could do business.

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Part of the deal had been to surrender his position on the team. That was fine with him. The whole thing had been confusing. He never really understood his role in the first place.

After the break he never heard from Cy-bra, Dimension Man, or anyone else on the team. He figured it was just as well. These people were just not like him.

It didn't take long for him to settle back into his old routine. None of the last few years had seemed real. Before long, he convinced himself that they hadn't been. He picked up more or less where he had left off, delivering the mail and not speaking to anyone unless he was spoken to.

All of this was in service of continuing the real work. He couldn't continue paying his material into a system that denied him ownership (and access to clear recordings) of his songs. Whatever success the Chief had helped him attain, the spoils could never be equal to simply doing the right thing. Each of his songs was an insurance policy against old age, poverty, madness... He couldn't just turn them over to the enemy in exchange for a little temporary comfort. He placed the box of CD-Rs under his bed with the cassettes and affirmed that all of this had been in his

head, anyway.

For some weeks he came up with no new material, just practiced and refined his fingering on the trickier passages of old favorites. He had started to worry something was broken inside of him, but soon enough the familiar flow of bland, underdeveloped melodies once again began to trickle into his consciousness. It felt like taking the boat home. *This* was the work he had dreamed about. This was the work he would do.

A light had flipped off inside of his head. He noticed, but he didn't care.

Thirty years later he died.

