

PROCESS

Major Francis William Henlotter was a sadist, but he kept it hidden, the way a functioning alcoholic will keep the bottle always close, in case a sip need to be taken. His upbringing was the usual trope that led to his character. The military father, abusive. The mother addicted to numbing her head and turning a blind eye to the abuses. The constant moving from base to base as his father climbed that ladder. There was never an opportunity to make long term friendships, have a long term home, not once did he belong. Henlotter never spoke of his upbringing, it was what it was. To use his mother's favorite expression "it's neither here nor there." Perhaps those formative years were the chisel that scraped away anything soft from the granite of the man that remained. Henlotter had power, held the proper ears. Henlotter could fast track you or be the pebble in your shoe. When things needed to be done quietly and correctly, they came to him. Discretion, without question of morality in delicate situations, they came to Henlotter.



And
for
that
very

reason Henlotter found himself standing in a dimly lit room of a prefab building that did not exist one month before at the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station. Sitting on an Antarctic plateau almost twenty-nine hundred meters above sea level, the spring air outside was so cold and thin that you could hear a gull squawk from a distance that binoculars could not reach.

“How’s our guests?” Henlotter’s voice had lost the twang of its Texan roots. It came up occasionally when he raised his voice. His grey eyes seemed to have no gleam or humor in them.

The second man in the room was short, with a fury of curls springing out from the sides of his head. He wore the same outfit as Henlotter; drab olive parka, overalls, toque. Despite the heating units in the building, the cold always crept in. Any uniforms indicative of rank or profile were not peacocked here. This operation was secretive, their work done only to the knowledge of a few in the Pentagon and Congress, and Dr. Heinrich von Flue was one of Henlotter’s “Inner Circle of Trust.” One of the few that he felt confident enough he could bring in on the most delicate need-to-know situations. And this situation was the most delicate, and possibly world-changing, that Henlotter had been a part of.

“They are good. One still stays quiet, and this one still, still he won’t shut up,” von Flue replied.

The two men viewed a third through a two-inch thick plexiglass window. The third man sat in a locked room, sitting on a steel chair with his arms strapped. His face was a mishmash of all the wrong features; eyes too close together, nose crooked, teeth missing, or what ones remained brown and dead. His name was unimportant. For their needs they simply called him The Subject. For what they had planned, this was better. Best not to get too personal with their experiments.

“Hey now, let me out of this chair. Get me out of this fucking chair. Please. At least, at least let me out so I can piss,” the Subject went on. “Let me out so I can piss and maybe give me some fucking water? Can you at least do that, goddammit!”

There was only one entry point into the room in which the Subject sat. The entry door was so flush and perfectly sealed into the wall that one had to squint to see the lines of it. A good seal was important. It was built to specs by von Flue. In each corner of the room was a camera keeping record in another media room. Also along each wall were two spouts that had igniters below the tips. At the flick of a switch the room could be engulfed in flames, turning the room into a crematorium, if need be. A wide outflow vent with a thin-slat one-way grate was the only other feature besides the viewing glass.

Who the Subject was did not matter. He was no one. Less than no one; picked up from the streets of Washington not more than five blocks away from where Hinckley had gunned down Reagan the year before. He was just meat on Henlotter's plate for his purposes here in this Middle Of Nowhere shithole part of the world. Sometimes the Major pined for his activities to be called for in a more tropical location, though his dealings in '81 in Nicaragua showed him shitholes are shitholes, no matter the latitude.

"C'mon, hey, I have to piss. Hello?"

"Nothing else from our other guest?" Henlotter posed to the doctor. He was not speaking of the cajoling man in the chair.

"No, no transformations. All has been normal scenario, human form. Eating, sleeping. We have studied the waste, and there is no cellular activity to give us warning that the, uh, our guest, as you say, has tried to hide itself in this way. Just broken down parts of what it has ingested. The normal bacteria that should be there are not. Dr. Cohen is continuing his research to understand the metabolic processes, it really is quite fascinating, you see—"

"Tell Alvarez to send in our guest," Henlotter interrupted. He was not one to listen to the prattle of the scientists. He preferred to go over their reports rather than to listen to their endless postulates. Bullet-point facts were all Henlotter wanted from the bunsen burner and beaker crew he kept close.

“Yes, let’s do that,” von Flue said to himself. He often talked to himself, Henlotter noted. He found that the most genius of minds often had some kind of furious war going on for normality, and he put up with these traits, to a point. Sometimes even the best dog needs a firm tug on the leash. “Alvarez, come in,” von Flue spoke into a walkie talkie put to a frequency that would not be picked up from those others stationed at Amundsen-Scott.

There was a brief crackle, followed by a crisp reply. “Alvarez here. Go ahead.”

“We are ready here. Have him enter Room Two. Over.”

“Copy.”

Alvarez was one of Henlotter’s favorite dogs. Loyal, deadly. When Henlotter chose not to pull a trigger he used PFC Alvarez as his finger. He was part of the small contingent brought here for this very secretive mission. The building itself was a contract build, funded off a CIA branch for the purposes of “studying an air-borne virus in test animals.” The contractors, a crew from France, had long-since flown out, and the small group of ice-probing scientists that Amundsen-Scott had no interest in the goings-on of the Major. Military operations often came and went, whether it was radar tracking or attempting to listen in on Soviet chatter on the bleak continent.

The strapped man was continuing his plead for urinary leniency when there was a sharp hiss and the door on the far side of the room began to open. Hard rubber stoppers lined the edges of the door, making it air-tight, and it swung into the room on electric hinges controlled by Alvarez in an adjacent room. Pale light from a room connected to the study room before the Major and the doctor revealed the outline of a figure now approaching.

“Hello?” the Subject called out. There was a scratch to his voice that could only be attributed to years of abuse; drugs, alcohol, whatever had been available. “Hey. HEY! Hey you, hey, can you help me out here? Can you, hey, can you get me out of here? Oh man I gotta piss, can you get me the FUCK outta here?”

The figure in the door took two steps down the haul and paused. He was a tall, thin shadow, back-lit, with a nimbus of light that came from the adjoining room. The Subject could see a steel chair similar to his in that room as well. The figure approached the room, his walk slow, deliberate.

The Subject jerked his arms in the thick leather straps, and he looked up at his visitor. It was a tall, thin, open-faced black man. No, almost a boy, maybe past the teen years, but not far off. He wore an olive jumpsuit with no discernible markings. He walked to the entrance of the room, looked at the Subject strapped to the chair, looked into the one-way mirrored plexi on the wall, and smiled a wide smile of bright teeth.

“Looks like I’ve been missing the party!” said the young man.

A speaker crackled in the corner of the room as von Flue spoke into it. “Hello, Mr. Nauls, we hope your are, uh, we hope that you are feeling well today?”

“Tip top, bwana,” Nauls replied, still looking at his reflection in the plexi. The smile had not left his face. “So what do we have here? What kind of party we got?”

Henlotter leaned across von Flue and hit the com button to the room. “You know what we would like you to do. Same thing we have asked. Same deal. Do this for us, and we bring back the food, the water. You know you need to eat.”

Nauls’ smile seemed to widen. “Ahh. I see, I see. A man’s gotta eat, is that right?”

Looking away from the glass, Nauls walked around the Subject. Looked up at the cameras, the nozzles along the wall, the outflow grate. “I see, I see,” he said to himself, smiling.

Von Flue opened the com. “Yes, uh, Mr. Nauls, same deal as before. We would like to see, I suppose we would like to see your ‘process’.” von Flue looked up at Henlotter who only nodded. *Go on.*

“My *process!*” Nauls repeated, and he let out a chuckle. “Sounds like a deal a boy cannot pass up!”

“Hey, hey man. Nauls? Your name is Nauls? I’m Jerry, my name’s Jerry. Did they lock you up too? What the fuck, man, why are they doing this?” and then mumbled to himself, “Ahh, jeez, I have to piss, they won’t even help me out to piss.”

Henlotter was patient. He was not fooled, he knew exactly what they were dealing with, even though there was no revelatory talk from this Trevon Nauls, or whatever had assumed the young man’s identity over there at that shitshow that happened at Outpost 31. The tape they had to chisel off the frozen body of the helicopter pilot offered little in the way of a true explanation, but when the rescue crew found a survivor, the cook, inconceivably alive in the smoldering waste of the camp, when they saw him transform into a goddamn dog and try to run away, they knew. When they found the ship buried in the ice, they knew. When they found the Norwegian camp, found the recorded material there, they knew. So Henlotter could be patient. He knew what Nauls was, but somewhere in there was still a human body that had to have sustenance to stay alive. Sustenance to fuel the heightened metabolic processes that they had identified in the blood samples taken from the cook. If whatever Nauls was did not eat, whatever Nauls was would die a cellular human death, just like anyone else. Perhaps much faster than at the rate of a “regular” human body.

“So. You fellas would like to see my *process*. And how long do I need to keep you gentlemen entertained, hm? How long you want to watch me dance?”

Henlotter hit the com, paused, and smiled when his mother’s phrase came to him. “That’s neither here nor there, Mr. Nauls. Right now we are offering you what you need, for simply doing what you do. You can decide however you like.”

He backed away from the com console, smiling. Yes, he could be patient. In the media room four alternate angles were spun onto the winding tapes, winding and winding. At some point there would be a moment on those tapes that Henlotter could take to his higher-ups to get himself a seat at the head of the table. Or perhaps those tapes could auction on the world’s highest markets, bid upon internationally to the point that Henlotter could safely disappear, buy

himself an island, an army, what have you. The idea of it all gave him a tingle in the back of his head.

“Hey Mr. Nauls, help me out, can you get me out, man?” the Subject, Jerry, went on, jerking his arms in the straps. “There ain’t no lock on them, can you just pull that buckle there, man? Mr. Nauls? Shit, I don’t know why they got me in there, that fucking plane ride, I got no idea, but I need help, man!”

The young man standing over him took another look around the room, and finally settled his gaze on the glass. For a beat or two he just smiled, and then he nodded.

“Okay,” Nauls said to himself, nodding.

He turned towards the man strapped to the chair, and put a hand on either of the Subject’s shoulders. “Okay, then.”

“What the—” started the Subject, but his voice trailed off in a hissing gasp as he looked up at the man in front of him.

The grin on Naul’s face was gone. His head suddenly started to shake like there was some kind of inner explosion in the bones. Nauls opened his mouth and his jaw was now crammed with teeth, some human, some almost canine. The jaw itself cracked on its hinges, and began to drop, the flesh stretching downwards with the sound of twisting plastic, the mouth widening, expanding, forming a large, hideous tube in front of the strapped man’s face.

The Subject, Jerry, began to scream. It was remarkably high-pitched.

The doctor breathed a sigh of German. “*Mein gott!*”

Henlotter watched, watched with his gray, cold eyes, and if there was any fascination or hunger in them, it could not be seen.



The Subject's screaming was miraculously long and steady, like he had endless lung. Naul's head had shaped itself into a gaping tube into which the Subject hurled his screams into, and with a sound like a spoon going into a bowl of porridge the tube enveloped over the torso of

the subject. For a brief time the Major could still hear the muffled screams inside the undulating tube.

The cameras watched as impassively as Henlotter. In the other room the tapes whirled, whirled.

The length of grisly tube over the Subject's torso twitched and jerked with peristaltic motion. The screams had stopped, the Subject's hands, still strapped to the arms of the chair, flexed and relaxed, flexed and relaxed. The thing that was Nauls now had the body of a man with that horrible fleshy connection to the man sitting before it.

"It is amazing," von Flue managed. There was deep fascination and repulsion in what he saw. "Almost like, like a bacteriophage," he trailed off, at a loss.

Henlotter saw worlds opening to him. What a prize he had before him. What a weapon, what possibilities this could be for the intelligence world, for subterfuge. However, as he looked away from the terrible assimilation before him, he caught a quick glance of something inside the room that tore every thought out of his head.

"TORCH THE ROOM!!" he screamed, lunging at the console.

Von Flue, fearing the loss of both subjects, jumped in his way, confused. "Stop! Stop, you cannot—"



The Major grabbed von Flue and pointed into the room. “It tricked us, you idiot! The grate! The grate, von Flue, you didn’t seal the grate!!”

In the next matter of seconds von Flue saw two things very clearly. The first was what appeared to be some kind of millipede, not of any he had seen before, scurrying its segmented

body through one of the narrow slits in the outflow grate. The next thing he saw was the room engulfed in flame as the Major punched the EXPUNGE button on the console.

Whatever the two men, or things, were left in that room gave out an animalistic howl. It sounded part man, part wolf, and perhaps something else that had never been heard by human ear. In any case, the room was engulfed in every available space, broke down and purified and erased by that great flame. A whooping klaxon alarm rose and fell, rose and fell, surely even alerting the unknowing research scientists in the adjacent buildings.

Henlotter grabbed a stunned von Flue by his coveralls, and lifted the smaller man off his feet.

“Goddammit, I told you *air tight*, you incredible idiot!”

He threw von Flue across the room like a rag doll. The doctor slid across the floor and came to a standstill, and he lay there, his mouth working, staring into the flaming room at the conflagration.

There was a roar of wind from the test room as the pumps kicked in to outflow the blasts of heated air from the room. The flames were only set to blast the room for twenty seconds, and now nothing could be seen inside but thick smoke and a vague charred shape that had been the two subjects.

Henlotter took a deep breath. Think, think. Had the outflow air been hot enough to exterminate Nauls’ escape? Could that insect, that form, could it have survived?

Think. Think.

Henlotter picked up the walkie talkie.

“Alvarez. Burman. Get here now, we have a situation.”

Think, think. No reply. He tried again. “Alvarez—”

There was a noise behind him. Henlotter turned around to see Alvarez had entered the room. In one hand was a silver case. In the other was a Beretta M9, and it was pointing at the Major.

Henlotter took a breath. “Alvarez. We have a situation. Where’s Burman? What—”

Alvarez was a large man. He looked around the room, noted the smoke-filled test room, the doctor on the floor. “Burman is no longer in your service, Major. And neither am I.”

Henlotter took another breath. Think, think. “Alvarez. I want you to think very clearly, very fucking clearly, about what you may want to do next. We have an opportunity here—”

Alvarez’s answer came in the form of a headshot. The front of the Major’s head held his stunned expression; the back, a triangle-shaped exit wound. His body fell to the floor like a loose helping of rags, any bold dreams scattered with his brains on the adjacent wall.

Alvarez lowered the Beretta. “No, Major, I have the opportunities now.”

Von Flue slowly rose to his feet, one hand held out in front of him. “Good riddance! Good riddance to that son of a bitch! I was never—”

Alvarez shot him as well.

Too long had he been thrown scraps from the Major’s table. Too long shining his boots. The blood samples in the refrigerated case he held were his ticket to everything he wanted. He had no idea why the Major had incinerated the subject, but it worked out even better in the end; he was planning on burning them anyway. Only his treasure now remained, and its buyer was waiting for him even now on the airstrip.

Alvarez already had his parka on, and he made his way out of the military building. There was no one left in the contingent that the Major had brought; Burman, too, lay in a pool of chilling blood in the media room. The Major’s need for secrecy had kept this little mission small. The only ears that heard the secrets of this operation would hear no more, and the higher-ups back in the States would not find out about his little mutiny until he was safely hidden away, a new face, a new name.

Scientists from the nearby research station were coming out into the cold, investigating both the alarms from the military building as well as the roar that came from the helicopter that

had just made an unscheduled landing on the small airstrip. Alvarez did not acknowledge the calls of the men as he steadily made his way to the chopper.

The wind from the chopper blew the thick hat off Alvarez's head as he reached its door. He pounded on it once, and it slid open, revealing a man with dark goggles and a long black parka within.

"Let's go, let's go! They're dead!" Alvarez yelled over the roar of the blades.

"Is that the sample?" the other man yelled. The accent had a trace of Russian.

"Yah! We need—"

Black parka shot Alvarez in the heart. His mouth made an "O" of surprise, and he pinwheeled his arms, sending the case across the compact snow of the airstrip.

Black parka jumped out of the helicopter and looked towards the huddle of scientists a hundred feet away that had gathered. Showing discretion rather than honor, the scientists had already begun to flee back into their buildings. Black Parka picked up the case, looked at Alvarez, and climbed back into the copter.

As Alvarez lay dying, as his mind exploded in the memories of his youth, his loves, his losses, he thought he saw, or maybe imagined, seeing a strange eel-like insect twisting across the snow not feet from his outstretched arm. As he entered that dark whirlpool, feeling the betrayal burn at his mind, he wondered if he had perhaps doomed the world.

Perhaps. But that is neither here nor there.



