A Vital Secret

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Summary

Newkirk learns more about Carter than he had expected to.

The benefits to being Luftwaffe prisoners were multiple. The most obvious, of course, was the relative lack of trained and sadistic questioners to torture information out of them. The organization in general, in fact, was not set up for the interrogation of prisoners and it was clear that they were in a sense flying under the radar. There were questions, but two men caught in uniform could rely on at least some protection from Geneva, especially when questioned by an organization which still believed in its own gentlemanly nature. The questioning wasn’t severe, and the conditions were liveable.

He and Carter shared a small cell, two bunks set against opposite walls with a yard between them. The only other feature apart from the iron door was a small barred window set in the middle of the wall between the bunks which looked out over a barren field. The twice-daily walk to the karsey and back was the only opportunity they had to stretch their legs. Newkirk was nevertheless aware that it could have been worse, much worse.

There was, however, one clear benefit to being captured by the SS, or even the Gestapo. The colonel would know where they were. Procedures in such captures were clearly outlined and their network had long ago discovered the locations of the cells where unlucky prisoners of those groups would be held, had even made contacts who flagged captured POWs to the local Underground. The Luftwaffe rarely made arrests, and rarely bothered to keep those who were taken in, and as such neither Stalag 13 nor the Underground had any knowledge of their procedures or eyes on their activities. Quite possibly, Hogan and the others didn’t even know who had captured them, didn’t even know they had been captured. And, with all the iron and salt in this place, there would be no scrying their location.
Carter could hardly be aware of that last fact, but he was clearly aware of the others. The man had been drooping since they were captured. Erratic at the best of times, he was pale and glum now and spent most of his time lying on his bunk. He was liable to cheer up if Newkirk exerted himself in that direction, but if he didn’t keep his interest up after the first push Newkirk quickly lost the ability to drag him along into a more active mood. Even despair would have provided a stronger catch than whatever dull monotony Carter had fallen into, and Newkirk was finding it increasingly difficult to keep his own energy up in the face of it.

The days passed by at the sluggish pace Newkirk had grown used to in the cooler before Hogan came, uneventful and mostly quiet until he forced Carter into conversation to drive back his own excruciating boredom and the slow-closing panic of emotional starvation.

His watch gone, the days were measurably only by the two toilet breaks and meals. One slice of bread and a bowl of mushy potato and cabbage slop, one glass of water. No meat, nothing hearty, nothing filling. Newkirk could be glad at least that he and Carter had been assigned the mission; Hogan or Kinch would surely have been dead by now between the lack of blood and the sheer suffocating pressure of being trapped in a solid-iron box.

Not that Carter was looking very well. Although he didn’t cough or show any signs of fever, Newkirk was starting to genuinely worry he had caught some kind of wasting disease, had walked straight through an old curse left behind from the last war, maybe, or through a diseased hollow without noticing. He was eating well, and sure enough the food wasn’t filling even for a regular human civilian which even Carter wasn’t, but Newkirk himself with a higher drain on his energy was getting by alright. Possibly it really was depression, but Carter had never dropped into so deep a funk before. 10 minutes was his usual length, and it had been 3 days.

“They’ll find us,” said Newkirk out of the blue in the afternoon of the third day. They hadn’t been talking about it, himself choosing conversations which had nothing to do with their situation and Carter following along with worrying passivity. But he was really beginning to feel himself being drawn down, weakening in the face of sheer lack of emotion from Carter. Hope, even short-lived, would be a bright and filling morsel at this point.

“Sure,” agreed Carter dully.

“They must be close by now, you know the colonel. ‘E’ll worry away at this ‘til ‘e finds us, sure enough.”

“LeBeau must be going nuts,” said the sergeant after a minute, apparently trying to keep the ball rolling. He wasn’t invested in it, though, was just spilling empty words. Newkirk trudged on, feeling as though he were forcing his way through freezing mud.

“Wonder ‘ow much ‘e’s made for Schultzie. Probably run right out of apples. ‘Ope we don’t get stuck with KP when we get back.”

“Yeah. The colonel probably wouldn’t do that.”

Newkirk gritted his teeth at the mundanity of the conversation. Carter was making some sort of an effort, but only to talk. He was hardly putting any sort of feeling at all into the conversation, just enough of a nebulous hint at amusement for Newkirk to catch on and continue. “I dunno, mate, ‘e puts LeBeau on cooking and cleaning. And ‘e made me do all the sweepin’ in the rec ‘all and the mess and the officer’s club.”

“You just put the dust in the corners.”
“I call that a harmful, untrue, slanderous comment; I’m ‘urt. Sometimes I sweep it out the door.”
Newkirk, beginning to feel with a sort of desperate optimism like he might actually draw Carter out into real debate, drew his gaze down when Carter didn’t answer. The American was lying on his bed, but even as Newkirk watched he sat up, staring out the window. Starved as he was, the flicker of surprise and interest was bright and savoury as thick gravy.

“Carter?” Newkirk turned to glance at the window. On the sill, a tiny songbird was sitting preening its wing. Newkirk, a city-boy through and through, only knew corbies from gulls and had no idea of its name. The little bird was plump and brisk in its movements, mostly brown but with a yellow breast and bright black eyes. Carter was watching it with surprise and, Newkirk drank in, real joy. But then the man had always had a fondness for animals, witness Daisy the rabbit, kept at considerably trouble in a mesh run in a corner of Carter’s lab extended to run partially under the tunnel walls to allow the animal some more natural environment. To give the chemist credit, the rabbit seemed happy enough to share his space; Daisy was willing to be petted for a moment by any of the men going by before returning to the darker corners of her pen, but she sat complacently for long stretches on Carter’s lap, half asleep with her long ears laid back and her rotund body relaxed under his hand.

As he watched, the man whistled breathily and held up a hand. Newkirk, expecting the bird to take flight at the sudden movement, gave Carter a weary look. It turned to one of shock as the bird did take flight, not outside but rather into the cell, and alighted on the man’s forefinger. Its tiny tail pointed at Newkirk, it sat staring at Carter, cocking its head back and forth inquisitively. Carter smiled softly.

“It must’ve been a cold winter for you,” he said. The bird tilted its head, shuffling its tail as it shifted balance. “You must be happy spring’s coming; there can’t be to much to eat out here. I don’t have anything for you now, but I’ll save you something if you come back later.” The bird shifted back and forth along his finger, then gave a shake and took flight, flitting out the window.

“What the bloody ‘ell was that?” asked Newkirk. Carter paled with a burst of icy fear, and glanced down.

“Nothing. I just like birds,” he muttered, and lay down with his arms folded over his face.

“That’s not unusual. Birds liking you, that is.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Carter dropped his arms, and sat up again, looking watchful. Uncertainty poured off him like mist from dry ice. “How unusual?”

Newkirk eyed him, uncertain what he was asking.

“Look, if … if there was a way to get a message to the colonel, about where we were…”

“There isn’t.”

“But if there were. Say, if we could get someone to take it there.”

“You think you can bribe the guards with your uniform? Your boots? Your skill with birds?”

“Not a guard. Just…” Carter sighed. Then stood up and walked over to the window, leaning against the sill.
Newkirk sighed and leant back. Maybe the captivity really was getting to Carter. He’d come to Stalag 13 after Hogan, after all, he’d never known true solitary. The boredom of absolutely nothing to do. For days. Maybe he was cracking up a little. He should have expected it sooner, really.

There was a low thrumming noise, and Newkirk straightened to look at the door before he realised it was coming from the window. Carter stepped back to sit on the edge of his bed.

Two crows were sitting on the window sill, looking around with intelligent eyes. Newkirk straightened further, glancing from them to Carter. “‘Ow’d you lure ‘em in?”

“They can get a message to the colonel,” said Carter, ignoring his question. “If we had something to write it on, we could tie it onto one of their legs, I’ve got some loose threads in my ‘suit.”

Definitely cracking. But he felt serious. Serious, and scared stiff.

“Even if we ‘ad paper and a pen,” said Newkirk, kindly, “you’d never tie it onto one of them. And even if you did,” he added, wincing at the mental picture of Carter lunging across the room at the crows, “they’d just fly off to their nests with it. It’d never get to the colonel.”

“It would,” said Carter. “Do you have a pen? I have a scrap of old paper, it got stuck in the corner of my pocket the last time I did ground-clearing.”

“Carter, this isn’t going to –”

Without a word, Carter turned to look at him with hard blue eyes. Held out an arm, hand outraised. The two crows flew over as one, one landing on his hand, the other at his elbow. Newkirk stared. “’Ow…”

“It doesn’t matter. They’ll take a letter to the colonel. Do you have a pen or not?”

Newkirk shook himself, glancing down at the floor to break line of sight with the two birds now staring intensely at him. “Yeah, just so ‘appens…” he lent down, lifting his foot up to rest against the side of the bunk. A twist of his fingers opened a small compartment in the side of the boot, ignored by the searchers who looked only at the bottom of the heel, and pulled out a pencil and a small scrap of magnetized metal which fit onto the end to serve as a compass. The tip of the pencil was good and sharp. “Where’s the paper?” he asked, sitting up with a business-like face.

Carter unzipped his jacket with his free arm, reaching down deep into a pocket in his flight suit and pulling out a scrap of paper. He shook his arm slightly and the birds fluttered over to the sill, allowing him to stand and hand the paper over to Newkirk.

“I’m guessing they can’t give directions,” he said, only partially joking.

“No, that’s too long,” answered Carter, unclearly. Newkirk turned to write against the wall and in tiny, cramped letters detailed as much as he could about the location and nature of the Luftwaffe base. Carter meanwhile had taken off his gloves and was picking threads from the hems of his pants. He had finished by the time Newkirk signed the missive N. and rolled it into a thin strip. Handing it back, he watched as without any apparent signal from Carter one of the birds returned to sit on his knee and passively allowed the chemist to wrap the paper around its dark scaly leg and secure it by winding it around with thread. When he was done he prodded at it to see that it wouldn’t come loose, then nodded and pulled his gloves back on.

“Thanks. If we’re still here when you come back, I’ll save something for you.”

“You’ll be feeding a ‘hole bloody menagerie,” muttered Newkirk under his breath. Carter ignored
him. The crow, again with no signal, gave a jerking nod of its beak as if laughing, and then took off, preceded by the one on the window sill. Carter watched them go, then closed his eyes and dropped his head into his hands as if tired or suffering from a headache.

Newkirk watched him for a while, uncertain of how to begin. That Carter was kin was clear, but whatever he was he had lasted this long without revealing it to anyone either in the camp or the German clearing process. He must be either very tricky, or very unusual, or very weak. Really, though, Newkirk wondered why he hadn’t considered it before. Certainly the American hadn’t tipped off any of their wards or even LeBeau’s fine nose – possibly the chemicals he worked with had something to do with that – but his wavering from almost entirely incompetent to quite able to perform difficult tasks unaided should have been a signal. And his blundering off after missions where he performed badly, ostentatiously lost in the woods despite his rural upbringing, only to return contrite but also more alert and focused, pointed to his feeding. And his passivity and laxness here, with such a poor diet and surrounded by iron – although possibly that had no effect for him; he certainly didn’t seem to have trouble touching the walls or even the door on occasion.

He had hidden himself for all these months, doubtless fearing exile or even more likely death at the hands of his own comrades if he made one slip-up, unaware he was living in possibly the only POW barracks in Germany filled with his own kind. Even now, he had lasted three days of imprisonment without even suggesting he might have a way out, afraid one of his best friends would turn him in as a monster.

Newkirk gritted his teeth, and leant forwards. “Carter?”

“Shh,” hissed the man, without looking up.

Newkirk frowned. “Look, about –”

“Later,” snapped Carter, harshly. Newkirk, surprised, drew back. Carter didn’t move, just remained sitting with his back bent, head resting in his gloved hands, face obscured by the dark leather.

Newkirk eventually sighed and sat back, deciding to wait until the man felt like talking. Wondered how to break to him the fact that he was nowhere near as alone as he had thought.

With no watch, Newkirk had no way to judge time precisely, but the shadows in the room had shifted nearly an inch by the time Carter shifted. Newkirk sat up, thoughts jogging back to the conversation Carter had curtailed. Before he had a chance to open his mouth, though, Carter had turned to drop back onto his bunk, arm over his face again. He lay there, unmoving, without saying a word. The room felt suddenly cold and empty, like a pale winter morning.

Newkirk stood. “Carter?”

No answer. He stepped over to the sergeant’s side, looking down at him. “Carter?” he reached out, fingers stretching towards Carter’s elbow. Touched it, to no effect. Startled, Newkirk shook the man’s arm. “Carter?” He pulled his arm away, revealing closed eyes in a grey face. Newkirk hissed a curse and pressed his fingers to the man’s neck to find a slow pulse, steady but weaker than was at all healthy. “You bloody idiot,” he snarled, and spun to kick the leg of his bunk. Then, foot aching, he sat down to wait.

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The sun set and dinner came, two cups, two bowls and two pieces of bread handed in on a plastic tray, before Carter woke. Newkirk had eaten his, leaving half the bread to fulfil Carter’s promises,
uncertain of the nature of his pacts with the birds and the consequences of failing to fulfil them.

It was only when he was scraping the bottom of his bowl that Carter shifted, waking slowly like a flickering fire on damp wood. Newkirk finished his mouthful before setting his bowl down slowly. Only after he had swallowed did he step over to sit on the corner of the sergeant’s bed.

“You’re a bloody idiot, you know that?”

Carter opened his eyes, stared up at him in confusion. Newkirk handed him his glass of water, Carter taking it in a shaky grip. “Five months in a camp, living with us, eating with us, working with us, and you still don’t trust us? That, I understand. Everyone like us’s learned some hard lessons about trust and secrets. But waiting ‘til you’re on your last legs to decide to do something, so that you’ll be lucky to be conscious when you’re carried out of here? That’s just plain stupidity. And if that little bugger ‘adn’t shown up, if you’d waited any longer, what then? Were you gonna go for me, or just wait ‘til you starved to death?”

“I d-don’t know what you’re t-talking about,” stuttered Carter, spilling water over his chin.

“Don’t you? Think bloody birds train themselves? Think I can’t spot what’s right in front of me when I see it?” Newkirk paused and then gripping Carter’s shoulder finished in a low, hard whisper, “Think I’d turn my back on a friend because of ‘is nature?”

Carter blinked, and turned to look at him in slow shock. “Especially,” added Newkirk, “as yours ‘appens to be mine? You’re not the only bally kin in this war, Andrew. I may not’ve inherited me mum’s voice, but I’ve got enough skill to distract your eye from me hand ‘owever I choose to do it,” continued Newkirk in a barely audible voice that was nevertheless now filled with lightheartedness. “Or don’t you ‘ave banshees in the colonies?”

“I – you –”

“Yeah, you and me. We’ve got more secrets in common than we thought, seems like.” He sighed; secrets that they shouldn’t have had to keep. Shaking his head, he went on.

“Now the colonel’ll be showing up ‘ere in a few ‘ours, I’ll bet. C’mon, sit up.” He helped Carter rise and turn to sit with his back against the wall, keeping a tight grip on the sergeant’s shoulder when he swayed, and dug tense fingers tight into the skin of his shoulder to keep him alert. “Ah, ah, none of that, now. ‘Ere.” He unbuttoned the cuff of his jacket and rolled it up, pushing the turtleneck sleeve up along below it, and held his wrist out to Carter. Carter, eyes focusing on the arm in front of him, stiffened and turned away. Newkirk, exasperated, was also despite himself impressed. “It’s not going to become a ‘abit,” he hissed, allowing some irritation into his voice. “You need it, and we need you walkin’ to get out of ‘ere. You don’t need to worry, I’ll stop you soon enough.” He grinned, not entirely pleasantly, aware that at this moment Carter needed a strong hand rather than a sympathetic friend.

Carter still hesitated, but when Newkirk pressed the soft underside of his wrist directly to the sergeant’s lips, the man couldn’t hesitate any longer. There was a bright flash of pain as the small, sharp fangs pierced the skin, Carter either too exhausted to worry about niceties or just unused to dealing with humans, and then only Carter pulling with desperate silence at his wrist. Newkirk closed his eyes, focusing on his heartbeat and clear-headedness, and trying to do the math on how long it could have been since the man last had access to straight blood. Possibly weeks. They really needed to start paying closer attention to new arrivals. It was unlikely they had any more like Carter, but even one could spell disaster. And, opening his eyes to glance at the sergeant and see the starved desperation there and then closing them again in pain, the idea of living with any of them forced to survive on such a short leash was simply inhumane.
Poor choice of words.

Newkirk was fully ready to punch Carter in the face to stop him, and from there run him straight into the wall and move up if that didn’t work. When he started to feel like he could do with a good deep drink, he caught the sergeant’s shoulder with his free arm and pulled away, strong but careful. “That’s enough.”

Carter, of course, followed his arm, stopping when he was held back. There was a short, thoughtless struggle, a bright burst of hunger and desperation and need, and then Newkirk broke away, Carter flushing and looking down.

Newkirk glanced at his wrist, finding as expected two small marks and blood hardly flowing at all – neat work, but not too skilled – and then rolled his sleeve back down over it concealing the scent.

Carter looked up, face again full of colour and vitality – not a big drinker, then – and clearly framing an apology. Newkirk just reached down and picked up the tin bowl sitting next to the bunk, offered it over with a small smile “Want some slop?”

Carter took the bowl hesitantly, and nodded. “Thanks.”

“No problem. When we get out of ‘ere, we’re all going to ‘ave to ‘ave a talk.”

Carter nodded again, more fervently. “No kidding.”

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