

Smaller Cages, Shorter Chains

“An officer will escort him out and he’ll be shackled at the ankles and with a belly-chain”. The prison guard casually said this and my stomach dropped. I instantly got a weird, worried feeling. I was mostly worried that Chewey would get upset for me seeing him like that. When I called the SMU (Segregation) officer to request a visit with Chewey, I knew it would be supervised in some way but I had no idea I’d have to see him in shackles through a glass window. Yes, I visited a friend once in county jail and it was through one of those windows, but not here in prison. We always get to visit Chewey in a bright, almost too blue room with dozens of other inmates and their loved ones. A family-friendly night out visiting loved ones, it really is a good time and visitors and prisoners alike enjoy it for obvious reasons. There are always the undertones of reality seeping through, the grief we all feel having to carry on our relationships in such a regulated and unnatural way. One hug when he’s comes out and one hug when we leave is what I’m used to when we visit Chewey, but now I was being reminded of the situation he is in. I realized what I already know, yet had somehow pushed into the back of my mind, Chewey is a prisoner. I am used to seeing the cozy, visitor friendly side of prison during visitation, but now I was seeing the side Chewey lives by.

After I got signed in to visit as usual, the prison guard walked me through the visiting lounge to a door at the far left corner of the room. We walked around the tables and chairs that other inmates and their families were at, talking, flirting, and munching on snacks from the vending machines. I brought my Zip key like always to get Chewey some fresh juice (a rarity but I noticed the drink machine was stocked with 100% orange juice and apple juice) or a chicken sandwich, but visiting an inmate from Segregation is different. As I was escorted to the visiting area, I realized Chewey was in a different kind of trouble, not just in trouble for wearing his beanie indoors. The prison guard sat me down at a chair at the last of three booths. A phone hung on the side and it felt like I was visiting someone else, not Chewey. I was nervous as I waited, this was my first time visiting without my partner and on top of that I had never visited Chewey as the “trouble-maker” either. Men fight, and men stuck to live in a prison hell will fight too. I actually assumed as I was waiting there for him that he had gotten into a fight, nothing else seemed worth it to Chewey. We were worried about him since we had been rejected from seeing him the night before. Knowing he was in “Segregation”, but not knowing why made it important to find out what was up and check up on him.

And there he was, I could see him through the small rectangular shaped window of the door on the other side of the visiting window. Some skinhead looking cop, who looked like he was straight out of Iraq or Idaho, led him in making eye contact with me and he made no change in his facial expression. The prison guard sat Chewey on a stool. He un-cuffed his wrists from behind his back, but the ankle shackles and belly-chain remained. The next ten or so seconds he spent fumbling around the phone in an attempt to get a grip and put it up to his ear while still having his wrist attached to the belly chain. Yes, it was as awkward as it sounds. With his head kinked to the left and the belly-chain cuffs cutting into his wrist, we were able to talk. We said our usual hellos and Chewey was all smiles. He surprisingly seemed to have quite a bit of good energy compared to the last time we visited. That could have been the fact that our last visit we came at an odd time and woke Chewey up basically in the middle of his night’s sleep (Chewey worked graveyard), but regardless he seemed to have a positive attitude considering. He told me he wasn’t in the hole and that it was different from segregation, but now I’m realizing he was making it sound better than it looked for my sake.

Chewey lost his job and his house because of the fight. Prison beds are minimal and Chewey's bed can't go empty for long, so the prison boxed up all his belongings and when he gets out of Segregation he gets a new home with a new cell. I told Chewey I thought that was a good thing since he didn't care much for his last cell and he said, "A cage is still a cage". He also told me if he's going to get into a fight, he's going to win. It makes sense when you think about it. If you don't win then you easily become a target for all the other creeps in prison. Being a man, living in a house full of angry, psycho, or perverted men has to be pretty torturous for anyone, especially someone wrongfully convicted. Chewey was a name given to him by the youth and stands for "Chewbacca" and the friendly, furry and loyal friend on Star Wars mirrors his personality characteristics and physical appearance. And just as Chewbacca could whoop some butt when needed, so can Chewey.

Within the first 15 minutes or so I asked him if he wanted to go because I could see the welts starting from the cuffs cutting into his wrists. I know that sounds like a silly thing for me to say considering what it took to actually visit and that he had to get shackled-up from the SMU. He said it was ok, so we talked for another 45 minutes or so. Visiting time was shorter than usual, only two hours instead of three. It went by fast and before I knew it the time came to say goodbye. The prison guard came in and told us visiting was over and within a minute she shut the lights off on us, a clear sign that it was time to leave. Then, I walked back by the tables of visiting families to the steel door that locks the outside out and the inside in.

What Chewey said, "A cage is still a cage" reminded me of a 1987 anarchist publication from the UK entitled "*Bigger Cages, Longer Chains*". In society we are constantly being given a little more here and a little more there is taken. The give and take dichotomy defines our lives and we are programmed to accept this as ok. In my mind when Chewey told me he was switching cells, I thought "Yeah, that's good", but really a cell is a cell and a cage is still a cage. From the inside or on the outside, prison walls or none, chains and cages confine us. Accepting just keeps one invested in the spectacle. I tried to point out something positive to Chewey to make it seem better or ok, but the reality of prison isn't unicorns and rainbows so why pretend it is?

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