

The ANTicipation for a trip which BLOWed

Location: Masai Mara, Kenya

Date: 28/10/19

Target: *Charaxes candiope* (green-veined charaxes)¹

The targets kept its distance, the others in my team served as decoys, confusing the target and pushing it closer to me. My adrenaline began to spike, my legs trembled in anticipation and I eyed my surroundings with glee. Is this it? Have I accomplished my task...? I gave chase! Joy turned to confusion as my knees went weak, and one sandaled foot slipped over the edge of the nearby chasm, my balance was thrown off by the overstuffed rucksack on my shoulders. The green-veined charaxes butterfly I was chasing mocking floated in front of my face as I plummeted into a trap of my own making. An audible tearing sound could be heard as my mind went blissfully quiet. The world went black.

Waking I felt like a beetle in a pitfall trap², the gash in my leg was open and my head swam with nausea. I screamed for help before succumbing to the quite darkness once more. My mind played the following two days in a montage. People lying me on a stretcher, checking my now smelling wound. My skin felt too tight, the light too bright and angry purple bruises mottled my body.

Something moved under the sheet covering my body. Yelping I twisted, but the roughly woven cloth aggravated every bruise, scrape and cut on my body. Lights danced in front of my eyes and it took several deep breaths before my mind refocused. I slowly removed the sheet and instantly wished I hadn't. Maggots covered my thigh, my stomach convulsed, and a wave of nausea overcame me. Strong hands held me down as my mind raced and memories came flooding back.

'Maggot therapy: the use of sterilised maggots (from the blow fly) which are placed into the soft tissue. Enzyme secretions from the maggots cause the breakdown of necrotic or dead tissue which the maggots feed upon. The healthy tissue is left in tact and it helps to prevent infection'^{3,4}.

I forced myself to relax, briefly wished the wriggling maggots were in a sanitised polyvinyl alcohol bag⁵ and glared at my heroic saviours. Gritting my teeth, I watch as the vermin were flushed from my wound. The camps 'doctor', a Massai moran (an indigenous tribal man)⁶, gave a decidedly manic smile before introducing me to his next torture device, driver ants (*Dorylus helvolus*). Their gaping jaws were unlike anything I'd ever seen before, my heart quickened, and I tried to pull away⁷.

The doctor grasped the first ant in his hand before bringing it towards my wound. It bit me, I screamed and in a seemingly practised movement he ripped the body off leaving the jaws clamped around the wound. A perfect suture holding the wound together. One down, nine to go. To block the pain, I chanted facts in my head like it was my own personal mantra.

'Driver ants live in colonies of around 20 million individuals. There is a single queen laying eggs and many sterile female workers and soldiers...'^{7,8}

I winced again as the fourth ant sank its mandibles into me. I continued my chant.

*'... Male ants leave the colony after hatching. When a colony of driver ants find a sexually mature male, his wings are ripped off and he is taken to a virgin queen to mate. He dies soon after'*⁷⁻⁹.

I suddenly hoped I wasn't the male ant, destined to die after being found by a colony. I cried out as the last ant bit into my flesh and the agony finally, blissfully lessened. I was informed through a man with a car would be passing through in two days. He would take me to the large town. I thanked them and began to wonder if collecting butterflies from the Masai Mara for the Kipepeo butterfly project¹⁰ was worth it. Looking at the row of dead ant heads I thought maybe the Natural History Museum was a better trip for next year.

References

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