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little chews

“Maximus Unbound” by Matias Travieso-Diaz

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*Life may change, but it may fly not; Hope may vanish, but can die not;
Truth be veiled, but still it burneth; Love repulsed -but it returneth.*
– Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*

Maximus was a prime specimen of the male blue *morpho menelaus* butterfly. He was among the largest butterflies in the world, with a wing span of over six inches, and displayed the coloring typical of his species: the dorsal side of his wings was iridescent, and metallic blue edged with black, whereas the wings' undersides were brown and eyespot-covered, allowing him to blend with rotting leaves and bark in the Amazonian rainforest he inhabited.

Maximus spent most of his waking hours flying amidst the riverbank canopy, where he was safe from ground predators. He would only descend to the riverbed floor to mate and feed; unlike other butterflies, Maximus did not feed on flower nectar but instead sipped tree sap and juices from decaying organic matter, like rotting fruit.

Because of their striking appearance, Maximus and his brothers were sought after by humans who endeavored to capture and resell them, either alive or as dead specimens to be framed and sold to collectors. The main trapping scheme for capturing a morphos butterfly consisted of hanging a cylindrical trap made of wire mesh or cloth and provided with entry slits that allowed a butterfly to fly in easily but made exiting difficult. The traps, baited with overripe plantain covered with molasses, and other rotting fruit, would be set during the butterflies' most active mid-morning period and would be hung several feet above ground along forest edges or river corridors. The combined odors were perceived by the highly sensitive olfactory sensory organs on the butterflies' antennae.

It was one of those traps that Maximus encountered as he flew, one humid late spring morning, over the canopy in the Purús Communal Reserve in the Amazonian jungle of eastern Peru. The humans that set up the trap that attracted Maximus were Mastonahuas, indigenous people that inhabited the Amazon rainforest and made a meager living by capturing butterflies and selling them at the markets of Pucallpa and other Peruvian towns.

On that occasion, Maximus was irresistibly drawn by the smell of food and shifted from his erratic cruising flight to purposefully zig-zagging upwind to track the source of the bounty. He soon descended from canopy height, slowed his flight speed to increase maneuverability, and darted into the trap. The bait was at the bottom, so he had to travel some distance within the trap to reach the bait. Upon making contact with his dinner, Maximus confirmed by touch that it had suitable sugar and alcohol content,

uncoiled his proboscis, placed it directly onto the wet fruit pulp, and sucked it in, slowly but with deliberation, taking in as much of the liquid as was available to be drawn.

After feeding long and deep, Maximus felt satisfied. With a contented shiver, he prepared to exit his feeding station and attempted to fly away. However, he was unaccustomed to flying in a confined space and it was dark at the bottom of the trap, so he could not orient himself towards an exit. As a result, he kept colliding sharply with the meshed walls of his trap and making no progress towards freedom.

Maximus was young and resolute, so he was not discouraged by his initial failures. He began to fly slowly to minimize the pain from collisions. And collisions there were, like before, but he was able to recoil, for the most part unharmed. After ten tries, Maximus concluded that the trap went up a good distance, so he switched tactics: instead of trying to find an opening in the barrier by trial and error, why not land on it and follow it as far as it went? So, with new resolve, he slowly approached the last point of no progress, placed his hairy forelegs on the wire mesh, and sought to continue sliding along it until it ended. Progress was painful, and the fine mesh of the trap was slippery and cutting, inhibiting progress. However, Maximus persevered and made methodic progress down the sides of the trap until, sometime later, he reached the opening to the outside and flew away towards freedom, seeking the top of the canopy. He was bruised, and the wire had inflicted damage on his wings, but he was young and would eventually recover.

Maximus' story provides useful analogies to other situations in which people sometimes find themselves. One can be fooled by false promises of rewards which devolve into compromising situations, but if one is persistent, thoughtful, and does not get discouraged by obstacles to progress, success in delivering oneself from an onerous or risky situation is assured, even if one is left with bruises to show as the price of the learning experience.

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