

COLONY

Phil Lewis

Science Fiction, suspense, thriller

Due to underground nuclear experiments the ants have mutated. Bigger, smarter and stronger they begin to out muscle the human race. The discovery is at first slow, but Darren Wright is the first to discover the bigger picture. Will the ants win the war, or will the humans be a little smarter, using their technical knowledge to great effect.

Told in two parts: The Queen Ant's Story and The Human's Story.

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COLONY

The Brood

It was dark and musty. Only sounds and smells were needed. Movement in the darkness, restless, constant. Noise from many sources. As she moved forward, a slow quietness descended in the cavern. Her arrival was communicated back down the passageways. Deep into the ground. To the far reaches of the Brood. She rose on her hind legs and felt her feelers touch the rough ceiling. She bent forward and began the ritual.

One Nest. The message rippled outwards.

One Nest. Rippled back the reply.

Leave. New Nest. Still One Nest.

One Nest. Came the reply.

They understood. They knew how to communicate, but few knew the real reason WHY it was so important to the Brood. Cheetch waved her mandibles gently in front of her, her scent glands working overtime to add impetus to what she was saying. The front line of listeners felt the full impact. Their immediate response was to produce a similar combination of odours and gently pass it on with a few beats of their delicate wings. The sound of wings fluttering filled the chamber. The echoes rolled throughout the Nest. No one was left in doubt as to the importance of this moment.

Cheetch waited until the noise rippled back through the tunnels and she began her final communication. With surprising eloquence she retold the story of the Colony. She paused at times to acknowledge the responses. The fear, the understanding, the excitement. All rippled backwards and forwards through the canyons of the Nest. They all heard. They all listened. And finally, they all understood what was being asked of them.

Part 1: THE QUEEN ANTS' STORY

In one single moment everything changed. In the future, we would call it The Gift. For now, it was time for controlled panic.”

The temperature rose suddenly. Alarmingly. Too quickly to respond. The Babes were already lost. Writhing in the heat. Soldiers ran to help, finding corpses blocking every corridor. Every access filling with more and more bodies, some already burning. There was a desperate scramble to open the access vents and reach the surface. To see bright light and freedom. Few survived. Those that made it to the surface first were washed away by fierce winds. Their hardened shells disintegrating instantly. Those at the lower levels had no warning of the end. In a wing beat it all had gone.

The earth shook, collapsing walls and caverns. Whole sections of the Nest were reduced to powder. The Army unable to immediately sift their way through. The Babes were lost. First order though, the Queen! There was a concerted scramble to reach her sacred chamber. The first workers eventually breaking through, to find her remains still smouldering.

At first, confusion, then our organisational disciplines settled in and the Nest was cleared of all debris and the few surviving Babes relocated to safer, deeper chambers. The Brood had been drastically reduced. As the

lead Worker tried to assess their position, further shocks rippled through the Nest, collapsing more chambers and tunnels. The work began again. The quakes lasted for a long time. Each shock brought a fresh wave of activity from the Workers. Slowly their strength ebbed. Food was not available, apart from their dead family. Time to eat was restricted. There was work to be done. Then redone. And started again. As the shocks subsided, the Nest was slowly restored. Passages opened to the surface, the Babes settled into a safe habitat. Ventilated and warm.

For the next few days, the Army was further depleted due to a strange weakening illness. Soldiers slowed to a crawl before collapsing in death throes. Passing traffic sliced them into moveable pieces and took them into the Nest. Food distribution carried on. For the first time, food was available on the doorstep. The Brood still continued to decline.

After several bright lights the Brood was all but gone. The few survivors prepared to Swarm. The few remaining Queens were feeding, building up fat and reserves. They had a long journey and needed massive support. Under instructions from the new Queen, who had taken the responsibility for the Nest, they assembled for the Departure.

The new Brood waited for the bright light to rise. They felt the warmth creep through the earth. At just the right time, the Workers widened the surface tunnels and the Swarmers moved on to the surface of their world. One by one they took to the air, heading in all directions, slowly climbing higher and higher, their tiny wings silent in the landscape. The wingless young Queens began their earth bound journey, protected by the winged males.

Soft bodies whirled around, picking off the slow moving Swarmers. The predators swooped in for the kill, the flying insects hastened their wing rate to clear the area, searching for the new Nest.

On the ground the slowest in the Brood struggled to get clear. Small soft bodies and scabies fed eagerly on the sluggish victims. Within an hour, the ground was clear. The sky held the last stragglers of the departing Brood. The Nest was left to the three established Queens. They settled down to produce the next Brood.

The bright light crept across the top world and began to sink towards the pink tinted horizon. A light breeze pushed the hordes in different directions. But the Swarming was over. The next stage had begun. The next generation was in progress.

As dim light glided on to the landscape, the flying Brood settled for a rest. Attached to a tree bough, the first of the Queens settled. Her legs clasped the rough bark. Her mandibles waved, drawing attention to herself, while her scent wafted with the light breeze. Soon others swarmed around her. They settled around her body, forming a living shell. This we've done for generations too numerable to count. By the time the dim light arced its way across the horizon, a ball of black ants hung from the tree. There was much movement and communication within the horde. The Queen was safe for the night. When the sun rose the following day, they would be on their way again, looking for the site. The Queen knew the direction and the distance. All she had to do was get there.

The bright light rose behind thick banks of cloud. It took longer for the heat of the day to establish. At a signal from the Queen, the Swarmers detached and took to the top world. The Queen, last to leave the safety of the tree, struggled to catch up with her guards.

Once settled in the protective cloud, the new Queen, Teeach, pointed her tail towards where she knew a new life waited. She also knew one important fact. Something was different. She was different. Something had changed her. She felt stronger, lighter, and faster than before. More importantly, she knew she was smarter than before. Once shown the direction, the new force started the next stage of their journey.

As she stroked her way across the sand floor, the water began. The drops fell large and heavy. Battering at her guards. Forcing them to drop towards the ground, only to struggle upwards again. The smell of the earth now changed. Strange aromas assaulted her senses. That was another thing that had changed. Her sense of smell was far more potent and far reaching than before. She took the time to stretch her senses. Searching the level. There! It had to be there. Up ahead, a large tree was silhouetted against the skyline. She began to move forward, the depleted guards following. The journey was almost over.

The water became almost a solid entity, as she slowed to a stop at the base of the tree. The dampness of the roots called to her. The small entrance hole, discovered by Workers of the Home Nest some time in the past, beckoned her. She sent in the male Swarmers to clear a passage. She was soon safely deep underground, entrenched in her chamber.

The Queen grasped the nearest male and severed his head from the body. She ate quickly. Her strength was depleted and she had a major task to perform, as soon as possible.

The first of the males announced his approach and was accepted. He mated with her. It was quick and to the point. There followed a succession of suitors and at last, the Queen settled. Discarding her wings, she began the process of growing the new Brood and providing herself with an army of helpers. The mated winged males died quickly and were absorbed into the Nest as food.

The nest developed quickly. All the Soldiers and Workers organised as a team, working without rest. The Workers upper jaw, when closed, served as a scoop to shovel soil away, making a tunnel or chamber. The walls of all the Nest areas were smoothed out with a mixture of earth and ant saliva. This gave the structure a strength and resilience to anything but a major destructive force.

The first area to be fully completed was the Queen's chamber. It was built to allow her some growth, as she ate and began to get fat. Males were brought in for mating and soon the Babes were arriving. A maze of cocoons was constructed to house the new eggs in individual cells. Each was lovingly tended by the Workers as they paid particular attention to temperature and humidity. If the chambers became too warm, they would move the eggs, larvae, or pupae to the lower reaches, where new chambers were constructed. When that became too cold, they were moved up again to warmer chambers. Ventilation shafts were opened, or closed, as the weather dictated.

The Soldiers stood permanent guard at the base of the tree, allowing only the Brood's Workers to pass through the entrances. As soon as the Workers handed over their cargo to the Nest Workers, they were on their way out again. The Workers were in constant search for food and brought back a never-ending supply of energy source for the whole of the Brood. Small drops of sugar were formed on their tails, from which the Queen and the growing pupae sipped greedily. All were growing ever larger.

Workers foraged around a widening area, laying scent trails towards any source of food, or nest material they found. Support Workers were recruited to follow up the finds and help transport them back to the Nest. Here any food was distributed amongst the Brood, the Queen getting first feeding. Small soft bodies, leaves, dead hard bodies were all dissected and dragged through the openings for ingestion.

The Nest created its own residue of dead ants, pupae covers and remains of consumed creatures. The debris was collected in the ant's mouths and carried out into the open, where it was transported and dumped, away from the Nest.

The Soldiers were called on to help with some of the heavy lifting, also to fight battles. Many small creatures found the Nest interesting. The Soldiers bravely forced their way into the path of any marauding advance, attacking with strong, angry pincers and a bite that injected small amounts of poison. They attacked creatures

hundreds of times greater than their own size. They only had one advantage, numbers. When the call went out for help, the Soldiers arrived in force. Supported by Workers, they would swarm the predator, most of the time driving them back and away from the Nest. The most easily dissuaded of all the threatening creatures were the incredibly tall two legs. At the sight of the Soldiers advancing, they would back away, and stay away.

All the Nest's events were organised by Teeach. She sat, almost immobile, at the centre of the Brood. Giving orders, expecting results. Rapidly the Brood grew to planned proportions. Once per bright light session, a few messengers were despatched to the Home Nest. No direct message, just a means of keeping in touch with the Mother Queen.

Teeach left her chamber occasionally to inspect the Nest. She paid particular attention to her Babes. She was there when the first one emerged from the egg. She was proud at the size of it. Twice as large as she remembered her original siblings. She watched them grow, feeding rapidly from the food supplied by the Workers. Occasionally she fed them herself, from salivary secretions.

When the food chain slowed down for any reason, Teeach would sacrifice Workers for the Babe's food. As the Babes grew, they joined the Workers and Soldier armies. The few fortunate enough to be born as reproductive Queens, were secreted in another chamber and pampered. They grew fat, waiting for the single day when they too would Swarm and start other Broods.

The weather changed and began to warm. The ground absorbed the heat and the Nest knew it was nearly time for the mass migration. The search for food intensified as the emergent Queens piled on weight. They waited for the right time, the right conditions. Soon, it was time.

Teeach rested in her chamber, the opening having been previously widened into the connecting corridors. The Nest waited her communication. The new wings fluttered, the old Soldiers fidgeted, at a loss for something to do. Teeach noted the size of her Brood and felt very satisfied. They were twice the size of her now and paler in colour, almost grey. She fluttered for attention.

One Nest. The message ripped outwards.

One Nest. Rippled back the reply.

Leave. New Nest. Still One Nest.

One Nest. Came back the reply.

They knew what was required of them. Once a day a messenger was sent to the Home Brood. Just to keep in touch.

The top world darkened momentarily as the hordes lifted from the ground. Many more than her first migration. Many, many more. She watched them leave and quickly settled down. Once again, she started to get ready to produce another Brood. She hoped they would be as big and strong as the last. They were certainly special. A special gift.

The Brood spread out to a thousand different locations. Each surviving Queen settling into a new Nest, formed around her by the surviving winged males.

So the cycle continued, unabated.

Cheetch finished her story and sensed the response. They loved a good story and appreciated her telling of their history. It was good to remind them. They needed to know why they were there and what they had to do. She waved her mandibles and secreted an even stronger scent. She had more to say.

“In a few bright lights we will be crossing the water. Our first. It is in the way, but it must not stop us. We have existed for countless generations, spreading outwards and growing in strength and numbers. It will not be our biggest challenge, nor our last. We have sent scouts to test the distance, but none have returned. Until last dim light. We now know what the distance is and it is a long way. We must build up reserves and start a water bridge. It will need all of us to complete this task and we must succeed.

Now we rest and grow. Soon we move forward. Across the long water to another earth. It is waiting and we are wanting. Our time is near. Prepare to make history.”

The roar of approval echoed around the caverns.

PART 2: THE HUMAN'S STORY.

Stories had been appearing in the newspapers for nearly two years, but few people bothered to take heed of them. All reports seemed to be isolated instances and no one bothered to connect the incidences with a major problem brewing.

It took the mysterious disappearance of a well known naturalist to start an investigation, which revealed a rapidly developing news story. But still the connections were slow to be made.

Darren Wright was a reporter for the Daily News. Not on the full time staff of the newspaper, he was a freelance journalist who relied on commissions from a series of small magazines and especially The News. For years after the events, he would claim he was the first to spot the connection. Others called him a liar, but he claimed his was the first published truth and that made him the major journalist of the time.

Darren had been working on a story about Chinese immigrants leaving areas where they'd lived all their life and moving to other provinces. This caused problems for the overworked and under supported local Chinese authorities. The immigrants were leaving in such numbers that whole villages were being deserted and new villages being created in different parts of the country. This information was very difficult to source. The Chinese were not renowned for giving information to outside countries, so Darren had to resort to other methods.

The emergence of the Internet had one particular spin-off Darren was grateful for. Several actually, but one in particular. Information was no longer hidden. Somewhere on the Internet it was 'out there'. Even in China, some people had access to the Internet and were sending information to anyone that was interested. After an exhaustive search, Darren eventually had enough information to write his article. But he also had something else. A mystery.

Not published in any Chinese newspaper or government report was the reason why so many villages were being deserted. Interviews with some of the migrants revealed a series of stories that all held the same core reason to move. Insects. Specifically ants.

The more Darren read about this plague, the more he became interested. How could this happen? What was old Mother Nature doing? He had collected all the published material he could find on the Internet and was keen to learn more. So Darren started a series of emails and finally was in contact with someone in China who had actually lived in one of the deserted villages and was now re-housed hundreds of miles away.

Darren felt a familiar tingle of excitement as he was developing his story. He looked at the man's reply and couldn't understand a word of it. But he knew a man who could. It took him several days, but Lei Kwan was willing to help interpret and sat at the computer and began to type.

Darren held his breath as the email was sent and prayed the Chinese contact was online, half way around the world. Lei waited too, more disinterested than anxious, but pleasantly surprised when the message box sprang on the screen and the reply was waiting. There began a flurry of messages back and forward and Lei typed out Darren's questions and translated the answers. Before too long Darren had his story.

Yu Mi Tuo and his family were middle class people living in the Hunan province of China. His family had lived in the same village for years and most of them had worked in the nearby paper mill in the town of Yuanling. A year earlier the whole village had been plagued by insects, mostly ants. Nests seemed to be everywhere and the ants particularly vicious and unusually large. People began to leave their houses and live with relatives, hoping the problem would go away. The local authorities tried to spray the area, but this seemed to have no effect. After several months, the village just became uninhabitable and so the authorities bused the whole village to another area.

Yu Mi Tuo now lived in a nice apartment in a large town and had a stroke of luck getting a very good job with the government. He was surprised to find out that most of his villagers were also employed by the same ministry and it was a slow realisation that their jobs depended on them not telling anyone of the move and the plight of the village. But since being given access to the Internet, Yu Mi had began a friendship circle around the world and was delighted to have a new contact in England.

Whereas Darren was pleased at so much background information, he was anxious to find out what happened in the village. He pressed Lei to ask this important question. They waited. Sometime later a long email popped into the box and Lei began to type out the translation. Darren watched and read and looked puzzled.

"What's a 'Landsuck'?"

Lei shrugged. "I dunno. I'll ask in a minute."

Lei finished his translation and sent off the question. They waited. Yu Mi Tuo never replied.

A week later Darren was scanning the Internet and looking through the pitifully few English version extracts from the papers and he paused at one article and his body went cold. The article reported a terrible disaster in Yuanling, in the province of Hunan. The whole city was washed away in a land slide. Thousands of people were reported dead and many more missing. The rescue services could not get near the area because of subsidence. The area had been cordoned off and they were awaiting specialist equipment to move in.

Darren called the international news services and tried to get more information. But all of them were waiting on the Chinese to give information. Darren just knew this would not be forthcoming. He tried in vain to contact Yu Mi again, but his message was bounced back every time.

Over the next few days it became increasingly obvious the Chinese were not going to let anyone near their stricken city and were not impressed by people from other countries asking questions. Darren turned to the

Internet and began to search for specific details. It took him several days, but he amassed a dossier on the growing Chinese problem of 'Landsuck'.

With a large map pinned up on his office wall, Darren pushed pins into every area where he had some information that there was a problem, whether with ants, subsidence or the mysterious Landsuck. He was horrified to discover how widespread the problem was. China was a huge country. In land mass, one of the largest on the planet. How could it have so many problems that weren't being sorted out?

On impulse Darren searched for the latest date of Landsuck. It was a small incomprehensible named village in the far west of Yunnan province. Which was the furthest west of China you could get? Darren checked the earliest report of Landsuck. A small village near Jinhua in the province of Zhejiang, in the far east of china.

Darren studied the map. The thing was moving. Whatever 'it' was. It was moving from east to west and moving quickly. It was less than a year between the first outbreak of Landsuck to the last. He guessed at four to five thousand miles in a year! The Chinese government had kept their problem quiet, but if it moved any further.....

Darren returned to the computer and began his search again. This time in neighbouring India. Darren looked at his world map aghast. The problem was well into India and still no one seemed to care. There was a huge problem of nature and yet no one seemed to be worried. Was this going to be a story, or what! He called the Editor of The News.

Hans Argon was concerned. It had started when he found ants in his basement in Northern Germany. What concerned him was the size of the insects. They were at least twice the size of anything he'd seen before. That included his tour of duty in Africa in the forties. He'd called the local council who had said they were a little short staffed. Could he, perhaps, bring a few into the office for their pest controllers to look at, when they had a moment?

Being a true citizen he was not a person to sit on his rear, so he did just that. His first problem was catching the insects. Although big, they were also aggressive and could move remarkably quickly. It seemed that as he trapped one in a jar, several others would appear. He was bitten once and found his hand swelling up so quickly he had to go straight to the hospital. By the time he had returned his jar was still there, but it was on its side and the ant had disappeared.

His next attempt had been more calculating. He'd worn gloves and moved much quicker. He scooped up one of the marching legions and slapped the screw cap on and walked out of the basement. He drove straight to the local council offices and presented his specimen. It was up to them how they handled it from then on in.

He called them a few days later to get the results and they sheepishly admitted that they had mislaid his jar. When pressed they admitted they had found his jar, but it was empty. He would have to start again.

Hans decided to do away with the jar and just spray the bastards. He found their path and bought a large plastic drum of ant powder. He puffed a liberal amount on the trail and waited a few hours. He came back and saw nothing. Good! They would've taken the powder back to the nest and there it would do its work. A few days later he was horrified to see ants back in his basement. The powder hadn't worked, time for something a little more heavy-handed. He found an old plastic fly swat and waited until he saw an ant walk along the old trail. He slammed the swat down and was most surprised to see the ant continue on its route. Again and again he smashed the flimsy wand on the ground and the ants didn't seem to notice. Something heavier was required.

An hour later he was frustrated. These ants were resilient. As he started hammering at them they seemed to change course. They became more hesitant and erratic in their movements. Now using a small hammer, he was having trouble hitting them. He was sure he had hit the target many times, but the ants seemed to keep moving. They couldn't be THAT strong! Any ant that he did manage to strike and kill was so destroyed by the hammer, that it was no use to the pest controller.

He gave up. Another jar and another quick capture mission. This time he labelled the jar with his name and address and taped the top shut. He left it in the garage to be taken to the council the following day. In the morning he came down into the basement to collect the jar and looked in puzzlement at the shattered fragments of the jar. The tape had been chewed into fine pieces.

He was angered now and saw the capture of a sample ant a challenge. Hans was not a man to back down from a challenge. He found another jar and slammed it over a marching ant. Quickly lifting it up and screwing the top on he put another label and drove straight to the council. This time he insisted on hand delivering his specimen and explained why. He waited an hour, and a man from the pest control department did come and see him.

The man took one look at the jar and said, "Not another one!"

Darren was disappointed the Editor wasn't interested in his story.

"Okay for the save the world lefties, but not for our readers, boyo."

"But there's a cover up Bryn. That's the essence of the story. International cover-up."

"An international cover up over ANTS! That'll make a front page."

Darren returned home disillusioned. Bryn had softened towards the end and had given Darren a lead for another story that he would like to run within a few days. Darren didn't have the heart for it, but had to earn a living. He pushed the ants to the back-burner and for a while forgot about it.

An email a week later awoke his interest. He read it again and answered immediately. It was a request to meet from a man called Peter Tagheur. Like Darren, Tagheur was concerned about a natural disaster about to strike Europe. To pre-empt a wasted journey, Darren sought out the man's telephone number and gave him a call.

"Mr. Tagheur?"

"Yes. Who is calling?" The voice was cautious and held a slight foreign accent. Darren tried to place it.

"My name's Wright. You emailed me. Something about an ant invasion?"

"Ahh, Mr. Wright. Indeed. You found me. Good."

"Can I ask what you wanted to see me about?"

"I got your name from several people who you've been in contact with. I understand you are investigating this migration of ants moving across Europe. I have some information for you."

“Good. Can you email it to me?”

“I could, but I think you should see for yourself. I’ve something to show you that will sure be of interest.”

“When can we meet then?”

“How about tomorrow. Gatwick airport. I will arrange two tickets. Bring your passport. I will contact you later with a time. Thank you for your interest. We need the public to know what is happening.”

They spoke for a few more moments, Peter not answering any questions over the phone. By the time Darren hung up, he was intrigued. He turned to his computer and searched for Peter Tagheur. It wasn’t long before he had a complete biography on one of Europe’s leading entomologists. And the accent was Austrian.

Hans Argon laid more powder and liquid poison on the ant run and still they seemed to be appearing. He couldn’t find the nest and was getting angry at their domination. One evening he took a large hammer and was determined to try and stop the invasion. His hammering made such a noise, that the line of ants stopped. They were not going near him.

He waited for an hour and they started to return. Once again the sound of hammering rang through his home. He noticed a crack appearing in the concrete floor. He decided to stop before he did any permanent damage. He stood and threw the hammer on a bench in disgust. He stood, hands on hips, wondering what step to take next. He looked up and saw a crack had appeared in his wall. On closer inspection he noticed several more cracks in the ceiling. He peered closer. His eyes opened wide, the cracks were getting larger. He opened the door into the garden and looked at the outside wall. Cracks were slowly appearing and seemed to be spreading. In horror he heard the brickwork cracking. The wall was crumbling before his eyes.

Darren looked along the busy concourse and tried to see if he could see the elusive Mr. Tagheur. He glanced up at a clock and knew they were going to be pushed to catch the flight. A touch on his arm made him jump.

“Mr. Wright?”

“Mr. Tagheur. Please to meet you.”

“I’m sorry we’re running a little late. Perhaps we should go to the gate now, yes?”

Nothing more was said until they were seated on the aircraft. Darren buckled in and smiled at the small man sitting next to him. Tagheur was in his late fifties and looked every inch the absent-minded professor. This didn’t fool Darren. The man had something Darren wanted and he knew it was all going too easily. There had to be a catch. What did Tagheur want?

“What do you know about ants, Mr. Wright?”

The question took him by surprise.

“Ants? Nothing. Small, creepy crawlies, invade the house, eat carrion. Stamp on them.”