

The Sapaat Swarm

by Shawn J. Higgins

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*excerpted from "UNDER THE PALE MOON GLOW and other tales"
on Amazon Kindle Store*

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THE SAPAAT SWARM

As I sit at my word processor trying to craft the words of a romance novel my wife convinces me that I can write, I am so deeply disturbed I find it difficult to concentrate on the blank screen before me. Our friend Carlos came over last night after having spent the last year in the deepest rain forest of India, where, he informed us, he had been on a combination evangelism/missionary journey and vacation spot. Although his intention was to "spread the gospel," he also confided to us that he really just wanted to visit some place exotic, and his choice was India. He described a geographical region very few had tread, to which no westerners had ever been, and was indistinguishable as anything other than a gray area on a map of the region. Three distinct villages were once located there, he told us, and now only two remained.

The area Carlos described to us is called "Kamar" in the Hindu tongue, but the native inhabitants—who possess a dialect of their own—have divided the region into three different areas with three different names. The general region itself they call "Bheega" which means "wet," an area with an extremely high annual rainfall. The largest of the three communities there is little more than a small town, known locally as "Ooncha," which means "high." It sits near the pinnacle of the highest mountain in the region, but it is not difficult to travel to this location. A caravan route extends up there,

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/shawn-j-higgins/the-sapaat-swarm>»

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and villagers purchase goods from the travelers on the route, which are then distributed to the other areas. "Kam Hona" ("lower") is a few miles downhill from Ooncha, and at one time there was another, now deserted area, called "Sapaat," which means "flat." This area sits at the bottom of the mountains in a flat area that is also the wettest.

The villagers in the Kamar region no longer speak of Sapaat. As recently as two years ago, several families inhabited the area; no one lives there now. Carlos told us he happened across the area while traveling alone. There, he encountered abandoned wooden structures that looked to him like the same kind of dwellings in which the other villagers of the region lived; however, these were desolate. Nothing seemed to live there any longer except insects and a few small animals that scurried about in the shadows and dove back into the forest as Carlos approached. He told us he found himself consumed by a disconcerting feeling while there, as though something very bad occurred in the village, but could not get any answers to his inquiries from the nearby residents, none of whom spoke English, and all of whom seemed overcome by a kind of crippling superstitious fear when he mentioned its name.

The most direct answer he received, Carlos said, was from the local Brahmin priest, who spoke only fragmentary English and informed him that the residents of Sapaat were "all dead." That was the only explanation he received. The priest shook his head, muttered a few words in the native tongue, and then walked away from him. Carlos left with the impression that perhaps a virus of some sort wiped out the population. With that thought in mind, he paid visit to a local doctor he knew who frequently toured the region to check on people, the ghostly image of the abandoned village having refused to leave his thoughts. The doctor was not inclined toward superstitious beliefs as his neighbors were, and Carlos felt he could receive an honest answer from him.

About three dozen people, the doctor told him, dwelt in the small village until there had been a dry spell—a drought the likes of which

no one in the region had ever seen before. Theories abounded as to the cause of the drought as theories do: a curse by the gods who were displeased, a bizarre climactic change, a volcano in another part of the area that had some kind of effect. Ultimately no one was certain what caused the drought, only that it produced something which the doctor—and a few others who investigated the phenomenon—said was “the worst thing imaginable, worse than any Hindu curse could invoke.” This sparked Carlos' curiosity, just as it ignited ours as he related it to us.

A couple of years earlier, the doctor told Carlos, he was conducting his semi-annual tour of the area, checking on the locals, accompanied by his young nephew who lived in the region. The boy departed his company briefly to play with a couple of the local kids in the Sapaat area when they saw an insect crawling on a rock in the nearby jungle. On close inspection, they observed that the creature was an abnormally large ant—over an inch in length—with a saddle-shaped thorax and yellow stripes on its jet-black oval abdomen. Each of its six legs was as long as the insect's entire body. As the kids came closer to view it, the boys expected the insect to flee for cover as was the natural tendency of insects when being pestered by children. This ant, on the other hand, reared back and jumped on the boy's knee.

This frightened the child, of course, but the fright could not compare to the intense, searing pain that flared into his leg immediately afterward. The boy screamed aloud, alarming the other children who immediately fled in terror, and the doctor's nephew attempted to flee back with them to Sapaat where his uncle was treating some of the villagers. Before the boy could even make it halfway there, he began to walk awkwardly about, as if drugged or drunk. Within a few minutes, he passed out cold on the ground, his unconscious body slowly curling himself up into a fetal position, a look of wide-eyed horror in his eyes that frightened the other children.

Eventually the children managed to calm down enough to explain to the doctor what had happened while they were at play, and the

doctor hurriedly ran with one of the boys to the location, where he found his nephew curled up on a pathway running through the forest. The boy's uncle lifted him up in his arms and carried him back to camp. Valiant attempts by the doctor and a few of the elders in the village to revive the boy were futile, and by nightfall the doctor reluctantly had to tell his sister—the boy's mother—that her son was dead.

As was the custom, they placed the boy's body in a room of the house exposed to the outside, to allow the boy's soul to find its natural resting place in the jungle. The doctor revealed to Carlos that this would later prove to be the best possible course of action, superstition aside, for reasons he said would become clear. The rest of the family gathered themselves into the largest room of the house where they lit candles, burned incense, and played lugubrious music in mourning for the lost child.

As dusk began to settle over the despondent village, the doctor related, certain domestic animals in the region were beginning to stir. The doctor had noticed earlier that the nightly chorus of insects and frogs in the jungle surrounding them had not erupted as per its usual twilight schedule, yet paid it little heed in light of his family's tragedy. All was silent about them, as if even nature itself was also mourning the passing of the boy. Shortly, however, the doctor reckoned the peculiarity of the silence, and made rounds all about the village to see what could possibly be causing such an abnormality. All appeared normal aside from the strangely silent woods.

Suddenly, the doctor said, the cats jumped to attention in unison, their ears perked to catch a sound somewhere off in the jungle, sounds the villagers were unable to detect with their limited human hearing. Shortly the rest of the animals were also looking in the same direction as the cats. Despite their careful, vigilant attention, the villagers—including the doctor—could see or hear nothing unusual. Shortly thereafter, the doctor related to Carlos, the domestic animals penned up in their cages suddenly began to stir.

At the farthest edge of the clearing bordering the jungle's edge was a chicken coop kept by the village's eldest resident. The penned chickens were suddenly very frantic, pecking away at the ground as if the old man was feeding them. The old man traditionally retired at sunset, however, and no one else was around. The chickens shortly began clucking furiously, flying about the coop and into each other. The doctor and other members of the village went over to the chicken coop to investigate. By the time they arrived at the location of the chicken coops, however, they observed that the birds were all motionless, lying dead on the bottom of their penned-up enclosure. Only upon close inspection of the coop did the men see what had earlier caused the stir: the coop—and the street nearby—began rapidly filling up with inch-long ants. Never before had the doctor seen such a swarm—apparently the villagers hadn't either. The doctor was quick to notify the entire village that a swarm of ants was descending upon them, and that everyone would have to evacuate immediately.

Until the swarm forced its way into their domiciles, the villagers were reluctant to leave home. Evidently these people did not habitually endure this kind of insect swarm so common to residents of Africa and South America. The doctor was unable to determine what kind of ant was swarming into the village, but he was quite certain it must be the same aggressive species of creature that earlier had stung and killed his nephew. The other boys described the insect as “huge” and another illustrated to the doctor that it was the size of his thumb, slightly over an inch in length.

As he helped the other men drive the villagers out of the insects' path, he could hear the awful, agonized cries of the penned-up animals left behind as the ants stung them. While the villagers were heading frantically for the road that would lead them to Kam Hona a few miles up the road—where they could warn the residents about the oncoming swarm—the doctor remembered that the body of his young nephew was still lying inside his sister's bungalow. He reasoned that if the insects had not yet attacked the body, it would be worth his time to quickly gather up his nephew and carry him out

to the nearby village and give the boy a decent funeral. He was pleased to see that the ants had not attacked the corpse, but he did observe a few “scout” ants advancing toward the open room. He quickly gathered the boy in his arms and followed the rest of the villagers to safety.

It turned out to be more than just a decent and considerate act on the part of the doctor.

The following morning, as the villagers from both areas were planning an early return back down the dirt street to see how far the insects had advanced, the boy gave a stir and came to; thrashing about inside the blankets in which his grieving relatives had enshrouded him. The boy was hysterical and incoherent, yet alive and gradually coming back to full health. At this point, the doctor found himself forced to conclude that the insect's venom must contain some mysterious form of amazingly powerful paralytic. All outward symptoms indicated that the boy had died; the doctor himself pronounced him dead. There was not even a feather of a breath, no discernible pulse or heartbeat, and his temperature had dropped to what the doctor believed to be a lethal level. Yet the boy was now clearly alive, if indeed a little frenzied. No medicine or toxin the doctor was aware of was capable of producing an effect akin to that which so closely feigned death. The doctor, at this point, became determined to capture a live specimen of the insect for future study, and some of the men accompanied him back to the village of Sapaat.

Upon their arrival there, the men were surprised to find absolutely no insects whatsoever on their journey. The ants had apparently taken what they needed from the village and returned to wherever they had come from, or perhaps advanced into a different direction. Either way, there was no sign of the insect swarm anywhere. The village was littered with animal skeletons, however; not a single chicken, dog, cat, sheep, goat, or pig, had been spared; even the sacred bulls and cows—kept only for religious

purposes—were reduced to bones. Only a few birds, chirping from the nearby woods, survived.

The men counted their blessings that none of the residents had fallen prey to the swarm, and gradually the villagers returned to their homes. It took some time to get the village back to where it had been before the swarm; some of the villagers from nearby Kam Hona sold a few of their cattle and other domestic animals to help the residents of Sapaat rebuild what they lost. By the end of that year they seemed to be coming back to where they had been before the mysterious swarm wiped out the village.

The fierce drought came shortly thereafter, the doctor informed Carlos. The regular monsoon season, for some unknown reason, bypassed the region, and left the area destitute. Most of the animals and all of the people survived the intense heat and lack of rainwater, but the crops had been meager to non-existent, and trouble was brewing once again for the land. The drought had taken away a major source of sustenance for the region, and as it was the smallest area in the region, the doctor knew that Sapaat would be hit the hardest. Concerned, he went into the area near the end of the summer, after the drought laid siege to the entire region. Entering the village, he found it deserted once again—eerily silent, as it had been on the day after the villagers fled in terror. Once again, skeletons lay strewn about the village, inside the pens and about the streets. As he entered his sister's abode, he stared down in horror at what he saw inside. Lying on the cot was a human skeleton with a gold chain around its neck: a gold chain he himself had given to his sister as a present the year before. He backed slowly out of the bungalow, went about the other cottages in the village in a daze. He could not find a living resident anywhere: over two-dozen people—along with all the domesticated animals they had recently regained—were now reduced to cotton-clad bones.

The swarm had returned, the doctor said to himself, and this time they had been unprepared.

How could they not know? he puzzled. *How could they not have heard the animals sound the alarm that something was invading their homestead, as had happened before?*

There was only one answer the doctor could fathom; only one possibility could present itself as probable, and it made the doctor shudder to think it. The doctor wept as he departed the village on his way to Kam Hona, to inquire if they knew their neighbors suffered the same fate once again, only this time the villagers themselves had fallen victim to the swarm.

The villagers of Kam Hona, who knew nothing of the return of the swarm, were as shocked as the doctor himself to learn what he told them. Some of the men accompanied him to Sapaat to investigate, and indeed the doctor apparently guessed correctly. The men counted over 30 human skeletons in the village: men, women, and children; none escaped the swarm of enormous ants that apparently descended upon them in their sleep.

One thing, however, disturbed the doctor the most: not a single skeleton was lying outside, in the open area, or on the roads and paths that led into and out of the village. A search of the nearby jungle revealed nothing other than animal skeletons. The ants indeed attacked during the night when all of the villagers were sound asleep. All the skeletons, like that of the doctor's sister, were lying down in their beds, asleep. *How could they have slept through something as ferocious as an invasion of ravenous, inch-long ants?*

Even as he asked himself the question, the doctor already feared that he knew the answer, and it filled him with a sorrow and loathing so overwhelming that he felt dizzy and nauseous. He went out into the common area where the villagers of nearby Kam Hona who accompanied him met to converse, and fell down onto the hard ground, weeping. The villagers tried to console him to no effect. He could not—and indeed *would* not—be comforted ... not with the horrible truth that only he knew.

After he recovered, the doctor shared with the men who accompanied him the source of his misery. He spoke with his nephew a few days after the boy came out of the coma the insect's

sting had induced. He told his uncle that after the insect stung him, first his leg, and then his whole body, had gone completely numb, incapable of movement. The boy said he had fallen down from the inability to stand up, and his arms and legs curled up into a fetal position naturally—*but he remained conscious the entire time.*

The boy said he remembered hearing his mother grieving over him, wanted to be able to tell her that he was still alive, but that he was unable to do anything other than draw a slow, steady, and barely discernible breath into and out of his lungs. The breathing was so slow and imperceptible that even the doctor had been incapable of discerning it. His heart beat once in a great while, but the only thing that he could feel was the coldness gathering about him and a tingling numbness in his body. A thousand horrified thoughts filled his mind when he realized that everyone, including his uncle the doctor, presumed him dead, and would assuredly burn his body alive the following day! The only thing he could hope for was exactly what happened: that he would somehow come out of the coma before they had the chance.

The boy had been fortunate enough for that to happen: the swarm diverted attention away from his own apparent demise, and his uncle had come into the room, gathered the boy up in his arms, and carried him out before he had the extreme misfortune to become a casualty of the ravenous swarm of ants.

That time.

What now tortured the soul of the doctor was the fact that the boy had so clearly related to him the events that occurred to them during the time everyone presumed him to be dead: the mourning party in the other room, the music playing, the smell of the incense, the tambourines, the gradual darkening of the room as nightfall approached, the eerie silence as darkness fell and no birds or insects began their traditional nocturnal chorus, the sound of the chickens and some other animals being taken by surprise by the swarm; and finally his uncle coming through the door and carrying him—still wrapped up in the blankets they had earlier shrouded him in—to safety. Not until the next morning did the boy finally feel the

effect of the ant's toxin in his body wear off. He felt the warmth of the sunlight, then gradually his fingers and toes began to warm, and then motion in his arms and legs was possible. Finally the boy was able to draw in a huge breath of air and exhale in a scream so loud and long and anguished that every person in the village could hear him cry out in horror. It would take nearly two days for him to calm down to the point where he could finally tell his uncle what happened.

Now his uncle sat weeping, remembering what the boy told him then, and thinking to himself the unthinkable. The ant's sting rendered the boy immobile: paralyzed, yet still conscious. The swarm had come directly afterward.

Was it possible that the ant somehow communicated danger to the rest of the hive? Was it this that prompted the first swarm? Did the insects feel their safety was threatened and lashed out in defense, or had they simply discovered something they had been unaware of? The doctor and some of the other villagers later combed the forests, jungles, and meadows surrounding them. The closest they came to finding the source of the swarm was what looked like a possible ant's nest surrounding a huge boulder in the jungle. Thousands of tiny dime-sized holes had been dug into the ground, yet there was no sign of insects anywhere nearby. It appeared that the insects indeed started from there, and perhaps went on the swarm when the boys detected them, feeling threatened. The swarm passed through the village of Sapaat, then on to some unknown and undiscovered location, perhaps to lie dormant again, until ...

The doctor described the insect to nearby residents, friends, and colleagues in the medical community, and ultimately to entomologists at three different universities, and no one ever heard of a species of ant that matched the description the doctor gave them. It almost seemed as though the ants materialized out of nowhere and then, following the dual swarms into Sapaat, returned to whatever strange void they had come from.

It was impossible for the doctor to speculate exactly what may have prompted the insects to return to the village, though it was possible that someone had discovered the newly-created nest which the ants must have dug for themselves after feeling threatened by discovery. Another threat of discovery could have likely prompted another swarm, this time with disastrous results. There was no way for anyone to ascertain the answers to so many questions with no one having survived to tell the tale.

Another possibility was that the drought had so devastated the jungle and surrounding environment that the ants were forced to go on the rampage again, this time out of survival, and returned to the scene of the original swarm, back to the village they had devastated earlier.

Now as I sit trying to write this romance novel, Maggie sits in the kitchen with her cup of tea, stirring it slowly, gazing out the window with a melancholy look on her face. Carlos left us with his head drooping and his arms dangling apeline from their shoulders, off to tell his horrible tale to others, to put them into the same taut grip of sickening malaise he left us in. The same feeling the doctor must have had as he pondered the awful truth of what happened in the village of Sapaat on that terrible evening.

Imagine being asleep in the comfort of your home and suddenly feeling a needle-like piercing on some part of your body, to stir to discover the source of the agony, only to find your body slowly numbing, your tongue turning into a useless wet mass of tissue, your body growing cold. Then, from outside, you would hear animals screaming with agony as they, too, were stung by the ants. Then with equal horror, seeing—or feeling—the insects covering your body, and then ...

But enough of that; I have this romance novel to write. I certainly hope I'll be able to do that, to keep my mind on something as warm and embracing as that, and not on the thought of what it must have been like for the residents of the village on that hot summer night during the second wave of the Sapaat swarm.

