

The year is 2024. My name is Henry. I'm an engineer for the military. My purpose for the last month has been to discover the secrets of the swarm.

The swarm is a race of giant, bright white insects. I don't mean giant like the hornet you saw on your window the other day, I mean that the fully-grown ones are at least six feet tall. And that's the smallest we've seen.

Anyway, the swarm started their rampage in North America. They travel in swarms of thousands. They can't be kept out of homes, they can't be outrun, and they can't be defended from in any permanent way. They eat through anything keeping them from their prey.

The swarm seems hell-bent on ravaging the planet. They have already destroyed most of Western America, killing everyone in sight. The rest of the world learned of the swarm from one of the many videos taken during the first attacks. They were sent out to every major government in the world, warning them of the impending destruction. The military force I'm on has been sent into the West to try to locate the source of the swarm, as well as answer the many questions the world has. I've seen disastrous carnage left by the swarm, everywhere we've gone. If we don't find out what they are, we have to at least find one weakness that we can use to fight them.

Right now, we're camping out in an old, abandoned tower. It's oddly serene, with ivy growing on one side, and a muffled silence in the air. It isn't very big, but it's perfect for a short rest.

I still can't figure out why we've been sent; if the swarm kills everyone and can chew through metal, how much longer can we survive? Sure, there are pesticides, and there's fire; they can't get through that. The problem is, we can't torch a continent, and there aren't enough pesticides in the world that could get rid of one-hundredth of the swarm. I guess that a blind attempt is the best the world can muster at this point.

The force I'm on is extremely advanced; it's built up of genius strategists and near perfect soldiers. There are about a dozen of us, not including Commander Jones. You would hope that there'd be more help, but I guess that you take what you get for a suicide mission.

I haven't worked with anyone on this mission before this month, but I can tell we are all thinking the same thing: we're running low on pesticides and fuel for fires; we won't last long.

I hear shouting from the top of the tower, "Swarm coming from the North!" Suddenly, everyone's moving. I grab a bottle of fuel and pour it just outside a doorway. I, along with others, circle the building, pouring fuel as we go. I look up for a second, and see the monsters.

It's like a blizzard. Twitching, writhing insects cover the land and riddle the sky, with numbers in the thousands. They're charging forward with obvious intent. It is like nothing I've ever seen before. Strangely, all I can think of is how they've hidden themselves to grow in numbers. I hear shouting, "Hurry up! They're almost here!" I sprint around the wall. When I finish, I run inside as another runs out. I brace myself as a wave of heat washes over me.

The explosion is deafening. I'm thrown to the ground along with the one who lit the fuel. I recognize him, and remember that his name is Brian. I quickly get up, pulling Brian with me, and we quickly back away from the fire. Some burning insects get a few feet inside the doorway, but burn up before long. We can hear some of them scratching against the stones. "Come on, let's go meet with the others, Brian." I say to him. He agrees, and we leave the doorway.

We gather in a large room, all gathered in a circle. "Right. Now that we're all here, we should discuss our next move." Commander Jones says.

"They're going to break in soon, and I'm not going to die without taking a few of them with me," Commander Jones says, "There's a small cellar in one of the rooms. It's not much, but it is easily defensible, and sturdy."

"Is there room for all of us in there?" Brian interjects.

"Probably not with bullets flying," I say. "We would kill one or two of our own before killing one of them."

"The reality of the situation is bleak. We won't be able to defend ourselves if all of us are in there. We need volunteers to stay outside."

The silence that hung in the air was only broken with the faint sounds of the fires

and the insects.

“I’ll stay,” Brian says.

Three others volunteer.

“We’ll give you a third of our ammunition,” Commander Jones says. “Good luck.”

The two groups split up. The volunteers go into a stairwell exiting the room outside of the cellar, aiming to kill some up there before they get down to us. In the cellar, the most armed of our group set up closest to the doorway, while the rest of us prepare the best we can. When looking around the cellar, I notice how empty it is. Everywhere else in this building has evidence of people once being there. Cups, cloths, etc. This room is completely empty, save for a few pieces of cloth hanging on the walls. They seem quite bland. What was this room even used for?

My train of thought is broken when I hear gunshots from the room out there. It seems the fire died down. The swarm got through. A few insects come down here, but it seems that most of their attention is fixed on the volunteers.

Then the gunshots die down. The doorway gets filled with the monsters. Then they fall as they’re filled with bullets. The corpses pile up, and block the doorway. Blood flies as the bugs tear open their kin to get at us. I fire the few shots I can without hitting my allies. A piece of insect flies by my head. I look back and see it hit the cloth behind me... and then go through. A look at the doorway shows me the bugs have started overwhelming my squad. I try to yell over the carnage, “Hey! Over here! There’s a way out!” but no one can hear me. They’re all too preoccupied trying not to be eaten. I tear down the cloth, alternately shooting a few rounds into the swarm.

There’s a tunnel behind the cloth, about five feet in diameter. It goes on too far to see where it ends. I hear screams behind me. I turn to see the remaining few of my allies become overwhelmed. I leap into the tunnel. I aim my gun at the ceiling near the entrance, and fire off a few rounds. I quickly back away as it caves in.

Now it’s pitch black. I take a moment to catch my breath. What just happened? Did I just abandon my team to save myself? Could I have saved someone if I had tried? I tell myself that they were already gone, but I can’t help but think of what might have happened if I had noticed this tunnel earlier.

Well, what's done is done. I take a small flashlight from my pocket. I turn it on and flash it deeper into the tunnel. I still can't see the end, but at this point, I don't have much of a choice.

Five minutes of crawling in the tunnel later, I start thinking about what I might do if this tunnel doesn't lead anywhere. If maybe the person who made it wasn't able to finish it. I guess I might go back; maybe the insects have gone away.

Fifteen minutes in, I hear buzzing over my head. I start thinking of how many people, if any, are still alive. I think of what might happen if the swarm isn't stopped. I think of what might happen to the Earth. I also think of how the globe will recover from this epidemic. How long it might take for life to return to normal, if it ever will.

Twenty-five minutes in, the tunnel takes a left turn. Around the corner, I see a dim light. I speed up, really wanting to get out of here. As I turn, I see a man standing in a small, lit room, aiming a shotgun at me. He looks tired, if nothing else. I can tell he has been here for a long while.

When he sees me, he lowers the barrel of his gun, but only a little bit. "Who are you and what on Earth are you doing?" He says.

"My name's Henry, and... I'm crawling. Now, if you want to know why I'm here, I'll tell you, sure, but I'm not very partial to guns in my face," I reply. At that, he puts the gun at his side, and sits down in a chair.

"I'm William Harolds. I lived in the tower back there.

"Pleased to meet you, William. Would you mind telling me what exactly I crawled through for the past half-hour?"

"The tunnel? It's my escape route. I made it in case something bad ever happened. A burglar with a gun, a serial killer on the loose, stuff like that. In extreme circumstances, it's my safe room."

"Well, it seems that's paid off. For both of us."

And with that, I tell him how I was investigating the swarm with my team before we got to his building, and what happened from there.

"Now that's quite a story. You sure you're okay after what happened to your team?"

"Right now, I don't really have the luxury of grief. I need to keep going, to

finish my mission. Is there a way out of here?"

"Well, other than the tunnel, there's a hatch over there."

He indicates a ladder behind him.

"But it opens up into an open field. I don't think there are any insects up there, but you'd be very vulnerable, and all you have is a pistol," he says.

"Well, I have to try."

"Need an extra gun arm?"

"You realize that it's more than likely that I won't get one mile, right?"

"I'm not going to last much longer in here. It's a miracle the swarm hasn't found me yet, and my supplies are running low. Now, I could sit here and starve to death, or I could join an adventure," he says.

"...You're right. I could use an extra gun."

"After you."

So I climb up the ladder and open the hatch. I climb out and look around. It's around the middle of the day, one or two in the afternoon. I see open plains for a long distance. There are mountains far in the west, and a road running east to west in the south. I get out of the opening and help William up.

"I think we should head for the road over there, then head on west," I say.

"That's probably the best we can do for now... Hold on, what's that?"

I turn to look, and see he's pointing at a point to the southeast of where we are. I shade my eyes and see the silhouette of a man walking west. I look closer and see what he's wearing... camouflage. He's also got a few guns. Could that be...?

"I think that that's one of my team... he must have been one of the volunteers! Come on!" I say as I start running. As I get closer I recognize him... for the second time that day. "Brian! Brian!" I yell. He looks in my direction, a quizzical look on his face. When I get to him, I slow down. "Brian! It's me, Henry. How... how on Earth did you survive that assault?" I say,

"I could ask you the same thing! The rest were nothing but corpses. What happened?"

"You first."

Then Brian proceeded to tell me what happened during the fight. It seems that the gunfire dying down was actually their group moving up the stairs. They kept going up, keeping the swarm at range. When they were right under the roof, the two other volunteers got killed, and Brian was the only one left. He kept off the swarm, until they forced him onto the roof. Up there, he managed to actually kill them all.

“When they were all gone, I checked the cellar. I covered up the bodies, trying to make them as comfortable as I could. There was little left! What happened to you?”

“Well, it’s hardly as astonishing as that. Right as the swarm broke into the cellar, as we were firing, I found a tunnel, made by my friend William here, and managed to get in before they could get to me.”

“Hi. I’m the aforementioned William,” William says

“Nice to meet you.”

“I tried to help the others, but they were already gone. I managed to cause a cave-in so the swarm wouldn’t follow me, and crawled through. At the other end, I met William, and we decided to continue the mission. I guess you had the same idea?” I say.

“Yes I did. I didn’t come all this way to turn back now. I haven’t managed to get far on foot, but I don’t really have another option.”

“Neither do we, unfortunately,” William says.

“But we’re not going anywhere standing here, shall we get going? We might be able to find some transport somewhere on this road.” Brian says, and so our small group starts walking.

We don’t see much as we walk; you couldn’t even tell that there was anything wrong. You might even think it was just a normal day. Eventually we come to a small gas station beside the road. There are three or four empty cars outside.

“Why don’t you guys try to find a suitable car, and I’ll go get some supplies?” I ask.

“Sounds good,” Brian agrees.

The small store doesn’t have anyone working here. Big surprise. I’m about to start gathering some food when I hear a small buzzing noise. It’s coming from a door in the back. I get my gun out and cautiously approach it. I open the door.

The first thing I notice is the enormous hole in one wall. It looks like the swarm came through here. But the hole is bigger on the inside. That would only make sense if the swarm went from inside to outside... how did that happen?

I snap back to my senses when the buzzing gets louder. I look to my right and see a small insect crawling on the ground. I then look at the rest of the room. Half of the room is covered with slime and larvae going from one corner to the opening. My gaze returns to the small insect when it starts flying. I aim my gun when it comes at me. I shoot at it, and the sound echoes around the room and out the hole in the wall.

I look back at the corner of the room where the path starts. I inspect the floor there, as that seems to be the origin of the accumulation. Just as I notice the square fracture on the ground, Brian and William run through the opening. "What was that gunsho- whoa..." William says.

"What... is that?" Brian says, pointing at the wall.

"I think that that's a bit of the swarm's hive," I say.

"A bit? Where's the rest of it?" William asks.

"I think," I open the trapdoor, "It's down here. So who wants to go into the dark, evil insect hive first?"

The eerie silence is only split by the sound of our steps on who-knows-what. I find and flip a light switch, and immediately wish I hadn't. The room is filled with broken and shattered lab equipment, that seems like it all had every sort of organ you would think an insect could have, and then some, inside. There is also a corpse. Among the shattered equipment is a mutilated human body. "I think I can see what happened here," I say.

"The swarm broke in and killed him?" William says.

"You would think so, but I don't think that the swarm would make a hole that big if it was just passing through. I think that this is where the swarm started."

"Underneath a gas station?"

"If nothing else, it's isolated. Now, I don't know quite what this person was trying to do, maybe make a workforce. But that's irrelevant. It went wrong. Maybe he lost

control of the insects, or hadn't even intended them to be awake. Regardless, they killed him. Then they went out into the world and multiplied," I say.

"Well, that's nice to know, but we can't use any of that to help us," Brian says.

"But we can use this laboratory. He can't have accomplished a feat such as this without making some notes... Yep. Here they are."

I hold up papers with writing all over them.

"These have everything we need. Characteristics, chemical makeup, life cycle, everything."

"Hold on, listen," William says,

We all hear a distant buzzing.

"That sounds a little too big for a few larvae," Brian says.

"They must have some sort of long-distance communication, like bees do. I think that each and every one of them is making its way here. They're coming to protect their hive! If I had time, I could make something... a toxin, maybe, but..."

"Bullets still work. If they all go through that hole at once, they'll be fish in a very large barrel. I'll hold them off while you two get to work. The swarm ends here."

"Well, I'd say you have no chance, but you've beaten the odds before. Good luck."

"Work quickly," Brian says as he climbs the stairs.

"Now just let me check... Yes, it's in the notes. William, listen carefully, I've got an idea..."

It's finished. This device I've made will emit a light that will turn off the nervous system of any swarm that looks at it. "We're done. It's time to end this," I say. I go up the stairs to where Brian is firing away at the swarm. I activate my device. A blinding light shines from the lens. The insects in the room all drop to the floor.

We all go to the roof of the gas station. The horizon is covered with writhing insects. Millions of flying monsters are all charging towards us. I think of the empty cars without drivers. I think of the team I left in the cellar. I think of every single person I've seen whose life the swarm has taken away. I lift up the device, and activate it.