

THE DEFENDERS

*No weapon has ever been frightful
enough to put a stop to war—
perhaps because we never before
had any that thought for
themselves!*

Taylor sat back in his chair reading the morning newspaper. The warm kitchen and the smell of coffee blended with the comfort of not having to go to work. This was his Rest Period, the first for a long time, and he was glad of it. He folded the second section back, sighing with contentment.

“What is it?” Mary said, from the stove.

“They pasted Moscow again last night.” Taylor nodded his head in approval. “Gave it a real pounding. One of those R-H bombs. It’s about time.”

He nodded again, feeling the full comfort of the kitchen, the presence of his plump, attractive wife, the breakfast dishes and coffee. This was relaxation. And the war news was good, good and satisfying. He could feel a justifiable glow at the news, a sense of pride and personal accomplishment. After all, he was an integral part of the war program, not just another factory worker lugging a cart of scrap, but a technician, one of those who designed and planned the nerve-trunk of the war.

“It says they have the new subs almost perfected. Wait until they get those going.” He smacked his lips with anticipation. “When they start shelling from underwater, the Soviets are sure going to be surprised.”

“They’re doing a wonderful job,” Mary agreed vaguely. “Do you know what we saw today? Our team is getting a leady to show to the school children. I saw the leady, but only for a moment. It’s good for the children to see what their contributions are going for, don’t you think?”

She looked around at him.

“A leady,” Taylor murmured. He put the newspaper slowly down. “Well, make sure it's decontaminated properly. We don't want to take any chances.”

“Oh, they always bathe them when they're brought down from the surface,” Mary said. “They wouldn't think of letting them down without the bath. Would they?” She hesitated, thinking back. “Don, you know, it makes me remember—”

He nodded. “I know.”

He knew what she was thinking. Once in the very first weeks of the war, before everyone had been evacuated from the surface, they had seen a hospital train discharging the wounded, people who had been showered with sleet. He remembered the way they had looked, the expression on their faces, or as much of their faces as was left. It had not been a pleasant sight.

There had been a lot of that at first, in the early days before the transfer to undersurface was complete. There had been a lot, and it hadn't been very difficult to come across it.

Taylor looked up at his wife. She was thinking too much about it, the last few months. They all were.

“Forget it,” he said. “It's all in the past. There isn't anybody up there now but the leadys, and they don't mind.”

“But just the same, I hope they're careful when they let one of them down here. If one were still hot—”

He laughed, pushing himself away from the table. “Forget it. This is a wonderful moment; I'll be home for the next two shifts. Nothing to do but sit around and take things easy. Maybe we can take in a show. Okay?”

“A show? Do we have to? I don't like to look at all the destruction, the ruins. Sometimes I see some place I remember, like San Francisco. They showed a shot of San Francisco, the bridge broken and fallen in the water, and I got upset. I don't like to watch.”

“But don't you want to know what's going on? No human beings are getting hurt, you know.”

“But it's so awful!” Her face was set and strained. “Please, no, Don.”

Don Taylor picked up his newspaper sullenly. “All right, but there isn't a hell of a lot else to do. And don't forget, their cities are getting it even worse.”

She nodded. Taylor turned the rough, thin sheets of newspaper. His good mood had soured on him. Why did she have to fret all the time? They were pretty well off, as things went. You couldn't expect to have everything perfect, living undersurface, with an artificial sun and artificial food. Naturally it was a strain, not seeing the sky or being able to go any place or see anything other than metal walls, great roaring factories, the plant-yards, barracks. But it was better than being on surface. And some day it would end and they could return. Nobody wanted to live this way, but it was necessary.

He turned the page angrily and the poor paper ripped. Damn it, the paper was getting worse quality all the time, bad print, yellow tint

Well, they needed everything for the war program. He ought to know that. Wasn't he one of the planners?

He excused himself and went into the other room. The bed was still unmade. They had better get it in shape before the seventh hour inspection. There was a one unit fine—

The vidphone rang. He halted. Who would it be? He went over and clicked it on.

“Taylor?” the face said, forming into place. It was an old face, gray and grim. “This is Moss. I'm sorry to bother you during Rest Period, but this thing has come up.” He rattled papers. “I want you to hurry over here.”

Taylor stiffened. “What is it? There's no chance it could wait?” The calm gray eyes were studying him, expressionless, unjudging. “If you want me to come down to the lab,” Taylor grumbled, “I suppose I can. I'll get my uniform —”

“No. Come as you are. And not to the lab. Meet me at second stage as soon as possible. It'll take you about a half hour, using the fast car up. I'll see you there.”

The picture broke and Moss disappeared.

“What was it?” Mary said, at the door.

“Moss. He wants me for something.”

“I knew this would happen.”

“Well, you didn't want to do anything, anyhow. What does it matter?” His voice was bitter. “It's all the same, every day. I'll bring you back something. I'm going up to second stage. Maybe I'll be close enough to the surface to—”

“Don't! Don't bring me anything! Not from the surface!”

“All right, I won't. But of all the irrational nonsense—”

She watched him put on his boots without answering.

Moss nodded and Taylor fell in step with him, as the older man strode along. A series of

loads were going up to the surface, blind cars clanking like ore-trucks up the ramp, disappearing through the stage trap above them. Taylor watched the cars, heavy with tubular machinery of some sort, weapons new to him. Workers were everywhere, in the dark gray uniforms of the labor corps, loading, lifting, shouting back and forth. The stage was deafening with noise.

“We’ll go up a way,” Moss said, “where we can talk. This is no place to give you details.”

They took an escalator up. The commercial lift fell behind them, and with it most of the crashing and booming. Soon they emerged on an observation platform, suspended on the side of the Tube, the vast tunnel leading to the surface, not more than half a mile above them now.

“My God!” Taylor said, looking down the Tube involuntarily. “It’s a long way down.”

Moss laughed. “Don’t look.”

They opened a door and entered an office. Behind the desk, an officer was sitting, an officer of Internal Security. He looked up.