

Excerpt From

“HOME DE-OFFENSE”

By Terofil Alexander Gizelbach

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CYRUS Wilbarger, a pale, thinly blond man of thirty-five with a thin, palely blond face, stared at the daily holo-news slate with sudden interest. Below the stock market reports; below the price indices of wheat-germ, and orange juice, and asparagus, and hog jowls; below the recurring clip of a demented hockey-masked thug pounding at the door of what was evidently the flowered plasti-cottage of a slight ashen-faced man, the tri-dimensional holo-advertisement read:

“Do you worry late at night? Are your dreams filled with restless nightmares of hoodlums thirsting for your valuables or your blood? Does the thought of leaving your loved ones home alone fill you with an agonizing dread? Do you require medication to face simple problems compounded by an ongoing fear of assault within the sanctity of your domicile?”

WE CAN HELP!

Home Defense Systems, Inc., is proud to present its latest line of consumer security products specially designed to protect YOU, the home and/or business owner, from the predations of the unscrupulous! No longer are you at the mercy of those who seek to deprive you of life, limb, and your hard earned possessions...

NOW YOU CAN STRIKE BACK!

Let Home Defense System’s revolutionary new “COBRA” (Coordinated Obstruction, Resistance, and Attack) software and hardware free you from anxiety and restore your peace of mind!

CALL NOW...

...for a free, ten day, no-risk introductory trial!

CALL TODAY...FOR A SAFER YOU!

Home Defense Systems, Inc., Kilcoggin, Ms., Holo-Ph: R697-83142”

Shaken by the ad, Cyrus powered down the holo-news slate, and peering thoughtfully through the kitchen window, mentally compared the flowers pictured in the recurring clip to the mums in his garden. Why, the blooms featured in the holo-clip were of practically the same variety! And the ad's gated Tudor-style plastic cottage...granted, his house was smaller, but there was, well, a definite similarity—and popping a pill for stress, Wilbarger wondered if indeed the rumors were true, and that—despite assurances and a law to the contrary—advertisers were profiling individual consumers based upon their buying habits, cultural background, ethnicity, age group, etc...but no, that was impossible. Profiling was against the law—and the corporate government was clearly above such tom-foolery.

Still...the mental image of the hockey-masked, machete-waving, holo-madman persisted—and not for the first time Cyrus considered the adequacy (or lack thereof) of his own aging home security system. Five months old, the system crashed with regular abandon, and twice had been the victim of viruses, which Wilbarger—at great expense—had been able to defeat only with the aid of Cyberdyne's emergency cyber scours. If an assailant managed to penetrate the core of Wilbarger's alarm defenses during yet another of the system's periodic virus outages, his antique stamp collection, the spoons from each of the fifty-three states, the antique vases from Florida, his Boy Scout memorabilia—why, perhaps even his own person—might even be placed in desperate jeopardy...

...And that would never do.

Perhaps, Cyrus contemplated--finishing his coffee and casting an anxious glance towards the front door's security holo-monitor (half expecting to see a burly burglar snarling back at him)—perhaps, it was time for an upgrade. Yes, yes—perhaps it was time for a change....

A bare two days after Cyrus had submitted his request for the “Free Trial!”, a large crate arrived, neatly labeled “Fragile”, and “In care of Cyrus Wilbarger,” and “Property of Home Defense Systems, Inc., Kilcoggin, Ms., HPh: R697-83142,” and “Some Assembly Required.” Cyrus ran his fingers over the resin container, feeling security wrinkling up through its lid like a warm flannel blanket. He popped the lid, brought forth oddly shaped machinery, packing peanuts, and reams of schematics—

“Well!” he said, placing his hands on his hips as he surveyed the snowy mounds of packing material and the shiny aluminum power posts and the bulky specialized installation tool packet and the self contained solar generators and the large oblong titanium box labeled “Unit A, 3rd-line.” “Well!” he said, adjusting his glasses fussily.

There was, Cyrus decided, eyeing a nuero-wrench dubiously and rubbing his chin, so much to do—

Reluctantly, Cyrus removed the nuero-wrench from the tool packet. As he did so, a holograph (a smarmy black-haired spokesperson projected from the master power pole) appeared and began barking setup instructions—and Cyrus, taken aback, dropped the neuro-wrench and rushed to comply as the voice chanted: “Task A: position pole A at the helix of point B, exactly 3 meters from the easternmost corner of...”

Meanwhile, a second holograph—projected from the main, self contained solar generator—also began chirping setup instructions, and Cyrus, still scrabbling to complete “Task A,” redoubled his efforts as the second spokesperson—a perky, vapid-eyed blonde

spokesmodel—began reciting: “Task XB: feed power source Z to female receptor AA exactly fifteen seconds after installing solar battery AB into the approved remote entry device...”

By the time the third holograph appeared (a precocious ten year old)—projected from the large titanium box labeled “Unit A, 3rd-line—Cyrus was hopelessly confused. Still, late for work, he muddled on—and in an hour, or perhaps two, had assembled what he hoped was the proper configuration...as a holo-ad (touting Magcar security add-ons per Home Defense System’s “revolutionary upgrades” to a man who bore a suspicious resemblance to Cyrus, and, who drove a similar make and model) droned incessant accompaniment. The ad, Cyrus noted with displeasure, was recycled repeatedly; he was, however, unable to replay the instructional holographs. Apparently, setup was expected to progress on cue...with all breakage or misuse due to improper installation solely, Cyrus recalled, the responsibility of the consumer...

Holding his breath, Cyrus flipped the master power switch—

A smell of ozone permeated the air; the self-contained solar generator whined, whirred and shuddered; the power poles glowed, hummed and vibrated—and an eerie shield of shimmering light surrounded the exterior of the house to a distance of 2 meters. The large oblong titanium box labeled “Unit A, 3rd-line” lay dead as a stone...perhaps, Cyrus considered, due to installation error. The instructions had certainly been...well, vigorous; beyond Task A, he had been functioning solely on memory—and his memory was known to be somewhat spotty. But, everything else seemed to be in order—and he was now definitely late for work. Well, well, there would be plenty of time to iron out the kinks later—and Cyrus, rushing about, gathered his things and flung himself through the door...remembering only after he had passed beyond the confines of the security field that he had forgotten to pack his sack lunch.

Reciting the names of the 2034 Texas Rangers (fourth Ranger Team to make it to—and lose—the World Series), Cyrus adjusted his glasses fussily, turned to go back into the house—and bumped into the security system’s force field.

“Fuss and bother,” he grumbled as he fumbled the system’s remote from his pocket protector and pressed the deactivation button—

And was again blocked by the shimmering wall of light.

Taking careful aim at the shield, Cyrus jabbed the button once, twice, three times, four—

Nothing. The force field glimmered and twinkled and held; winking like a thousand sardonic eyes.

It was then Cyrus remembered that he had botched Task XB; in his rush to keep up with the instructions, he had forgotten to install the power source for the remote.

“Fuss and bother, bother and fuss!” He fumed, whipping off his glasses and glaring, hands on thin hips, at the diaphanous wall of light. Well, well, nothing to do for it now. He was late. It would have to wait until after work. Yes, he would holo-phone the company for a replacement solar battery at lunch. And ruefully Cyrus pictured his delicious, carefully prepared sardine sandwich (on rye), which would now almost certainly be spoiled upon his return...