

00:04:23 by Colin Blackwood

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**An Entry in the 2011 Windhammer Prize for Short Gamebook Fiction
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Introduction

This gamebook is an exercise in solving a puzzle, one where the cost of failure is your life, and the prize for success the saving of many others. If you choose to attempt this exercise you must accept that you will not be successful at the first try. Your adversary cannot allow you to succeed and to this end he has devised the puzzle that will soon confront you. Write down everything you do, keep a record of how many times you attempt this challenge and record each failure, for only by doing this will you find your way through. If you are ready turn to section 1.

1

The knock clawed through the quiet of the early morning as an urgent and staccato rap upon your apartment's front door. On the first salvo you stir, unsure as to what might be waking you so early in the morning, but as you lay in your bed there comes another. Louder and more insistent in the embracing dark you sit up, swing your legs out of your sheets and stand carefully on the cold wooden floor.

"This better not be the office." you think as you pull on a pair of sweats and move for the door.

For three weeks you have been seconded to a Federal Taskforce sifting through intelligence regarding a domestic terrorist group simply known as the Red Militia. As far as you have been able to ascertain there is little to show that the group even exists, but these days everything is taken seriously and for the past weeks you have been committed to the hunt. Long hours and little sleep have left you edgy and in no mood for an early morning wake up call.

At the door you listen for a moment, the silence of the morning now returned, no noise to show that anyone remains in the hallway beyond. Peering through the door's peephole you can see nothing, although the hall is lighted and there is a shadow of something leaning against the base of your door. It wouldn't be the first time files or other papers had been delivered to your door, but there has always been an Agent attached to them and not generally so early in the morning. You know however, that whatever ever it might be it cannot remain out in the hallway.

Carefully you open your door and find a large parcel standing at your threshold. Wrapped tightly in brown paper and without stamp or address it reaches to your knee in height and is about two-thirds as wide as the door itself. Curiously there is an envelope sitting loose upon its upper surface and resting on top of the envelope is a pair of wire cutters and a box-knife. Lifting the tools from the envelope you pick up the paper and take a neatly hand-written letter from within its folds.

Turn to section 17.

2

Although it is tempting to try one of the switches you know enough to leave them alone and look for a better appreciation of the total bomb mechanism. Carefully but quickly you peel back the foil and uncover the true nature of the monster at your door. Beneath the foil you see immediately a large slab of home-made explosive that covers the base of the cardboard box and resting on top of the grey, clay-like material there are three distinct components. At the left side of the box is a standard-looking 12 volt battery, housed within a clear plastic container from which a series of wires leads to every other component within the device. At the centre of the box is a micro-chipped control board. Blinking LEDs and a thick twisting cable of coloured wires tells you that this is the nerve centre of the device. Intricate and professionally made it is a complex device of which you have no idea as to how it works. To the

right of the box is a radio transmitter and a compact loop aerial, also connected to both the battery pack and the control board. At first glance you can see only one detonator thrust into the explosive.

What you notice also as you look over the bomb's workings are three sets of two coloured wires that lead from the control board up to the underside of the timer. It is these wires that must send commands from the timer switches to the control board itself.

Confronted by the complexity of the bomb mechanism you sit back and consider what you should do. You now have three minutes and one second until the device detonates.

Will you attempt to cut the wires leading from the timer switches to the control board. If you think this will work turn to section 21. If you see an opportunity in smashing the control board turn to section 14. If you think it would be prudent to look more closely at the battery pack turn to section 8. If you would rather disregard the letter and have a closer look at the transmitter turn to section 28. If however you feel a better idea is to carry the box out of the building and let it detonate elsewhere turn to section 10.

3

As far as you are aware all the residents of the apartments have evacuated and you have only the bomb-maker's word that there are more devices primed to explode. You decide that you have done all you can do and there is no point in staying. Standing you call up and down the hall but get no response. At least on this floor you can be sure there is no-one still resident. Turning for the stairwell you begin to run.

You now have less than a minute to get out of the building. There is only a fifty-fifty chance that you will be able to get to safety before the bomb detonates. To get to this point in the story how many times have you had to restart? If it is less than four times turn to section 18. If it is four times or more turn to section 23.

4

Carefully you press the sharp edge of the blade against the thick paper that wraps the box. Cutting through you find the box itself is made of a standard corrugated cardboard, and with no resistance you slice a line through the side about ten centimetres long. It is the last thing you ever do.

In a devastating concatenation of high explosive the box detonates, its power generating an expanding sphere of incandescent gases that rip through the building, tearing away at its supporting structures and bringing the thirty year old block down in a cloud of collapsing walls and pulverising brickwork. If you are to successfully disarm this bomb you will need to start again.

Turn to section 1 and try again.

5

The direct approach seems the most viable so with sweat smeared hands you place the blades of the wire cutter around the detonator leads and cut them. It is the last thing you ever do. In a blast that rocks the apartment building to its foundations the bomb explodes, your apartment collapsing in on itself as the structure fractures and ultimately falls. You have successfully disabled the primary detonator but were unaware of a secondary detonator hidden in the explosives beneath the control board. If you are to disarm this device you are going to have to try something else.

Return to section 1 and try again.

6

It seems too easy but with few options available you press the switch. It is the last thing you ever do. In a last fragmentary moment of conscious thought you are aware of a screaming expulsion of expanding vapours and then all is oblivion. Thrown back into your apartment by the detonating bomb you are a rag doll unaware of the vicious forces that rips apart your apartment as the entire building collapses in upon itself. If you are to successfully disarm this device you will need to try something else.

Return to section 1 and try again.

7

Carefully you place the short scissor-like blades of the wire cutters around the wires you have chosen and snip the leads through. It is the last thing you ever do. In a devastating blast the bomb detonates, fracturing the apartment block and reducing its structure to a tumbling collapse of steel and concrete. Within this turmoil of destruction you disappear, your body vaporised in the ferocity of the blast. If you are to disarm this device you will have to try something else.

Return to section 1 and try again.

8

Before trying anything to disable the bomb you look more closely at the battery pack. Encased within its plastic housing it will take too long to pull apart. There seems little point anyway, the mass of twisted wires far too complex to unravel quickly. What you are able to see clearly however, is a further set of wires leading to a detonator firmly pressed into the explosive and another set that leads to the radio transmitter. It seems logical that the device relies on this power supply and if you can cut the power the bomb will be disarmed. Not everything is necessarily that simple and you take a moment to think on what you should do. As you decide your eyes flick to the timer and you see you have 2 minutes and fourteen seconds until detonation.

There are too many wires to cut simultaneously but there is a chance that you can grab the bundle of twisted wires that lead from the battery pack and tear them from the housing. It is not neat but it may do the trick. If this is what you would do turn to section 13. If you would instead cut the separate wires that lead from the battery pack to the detonator turn to section 5. If you would rather cut the wires to the transmitter turn to section 24. If you would rather leave these wires alone and instead have a closer look at the transmitter first turn to section 16.

9

In a blind rush you negotiate the stairs, a series of landings and stairways all that stand between life and a certain death. Without pause you hit the ground floor landing and find the fire door into the foyer open. Without a misstep you run out of the foyer and into the open air. Beyond the entrance you find the building's residents standing in the street, a number of police vehicles already on scene. At the end of the block there is also the first of a number of fire engines rounding the corner.

"There is a bomb on the fourth floor." you shout as you make the open air. "Everybody run!"

In the dark of the early morning panic sets in as the crowd moves in a frantic rush towards the end of the street and the fire engines that have now come to a halt. The police abandon their vehicles and run as well, and it is not a moment too soon.

From inside the building comes a muffled crumping sound, one that finds its full voice as a deafening explosion that blows the windows out of the fourth floor and sends showers of glass and pulverised brick into the streets below. Darkness turns to daylight as a series of further explosions rock the building and quickly it disappears in a roiling cloud of dust, the structure failing in a succession of tortured collapses that leave behind only rubble and smoking ruin.

Coming to a halt you listen as sirens begin to wail, emergency services quickly awakening to a blast that has sent shuddering echoes across the whole city. And that is all you here. From beyond the noise of the last crashing falls of stone and brickwork you hear nothing else. No ominous tremors or flashes of light against the horizon. The other bombs have not detonated. You have survived.

THE END

10

You know little enough about bomb disposal and in the absence of that knowledge it seems your best option is to carry the bomb out. Where, however, is the question. The device is large enough to demolish this building and cause considerable damage to all the structures that surround it, but you have an idea. The area surrounding your apartment block is mostly medium-density housing though you are lucky enough to have a small public park directly across the street. At its far end is a city recycling depository with some large, heavy duty dumpsters used for glass and cardboard removal. If you can throw the device into one of those metal bins the blast should be focused upwards rather than outwards, limiting the damage and masking to some degree any transmission the device might generate. As it seems the only viable plan in a desperate situation you look carefully over the interior of the box for any sign of a trembler switch, and finding none lift the bomb off the floor...

Turn to section 27.

11

If this is a reset switch you may be able to restart the timer and give yourself a better chance at disarming the entire device. Without hesitation you press the switch and it is the last thing you ever do. Engulfed within a deafening blast that vaporises your body and collapses the entire apartment block in a blossoming flower of destruction the bomb detonates and your attempt is over. If you are to successfully disarm this device you will need to try something else.

Return to section 1 and try again.

12

The bomb is a complex device and you know you have no expertise in disarming it. You have only survived as long as you have because you have not touched any of its components, but as you look at the tuner you wonder if it is the one thing the bomber may have neglected to consider. With only fifty-five seconds remaining on the timer you make your decision. If you can change the frequency of the device's transmission then the other bombs will not trigger. With the building evacuated the only loss should be the building itself and you have no intention of dying here if you can help it. Your decision made you carefully turn the tuning wheel away from its setting...

Turn to section 20.

13

The minutes are counting down and you have no time for an elegant solution. With your right hand you grab the bundle of wires and take a firm grip around the twisted leads. When you are sure you can apply all your strength to the attempt you pull sharply and tear the wires out of the battery housing. For just an instant you relax as you see the timer dim and go out but it is the last thing you ever see. Unknown to yourself the device holds a small secondary battery and detonator hidden within the putty-like material and in a concatenation of detonating explosive the entire floor of your apartment block erupts in a devastating blast. Consumed by destructively expanding gases the building shudders then falls in upon itself, its remains left as a smoking ruin twisted metal and pulverised concrete. Similar detonations send shockwaves around the city as the other devices complete their lethal mission. If you are to successfully disarm this device you will have to try something else.

Return to section 1 and try again.

14

It seems logical that if you can smash the control board that the device will be too badly damaged to detonate. Only as you are bringing the closed wire cutters down upon the fragile electronics do you see the bare edge of a small secondary battery and detonator hidden within the grey mass of explosives. It is the last thing you ever see. In a devastating blast the box explodes, a wall of fire and destructive gases blossoming out in a detonation that blows the walls out of the apartment block and into the streets below. If you are to successfully disarm this device you will need to try something else other than breaking the control board.

Return to section 1 and try again.

15

Carefully you place the short scissor-like blades of the wire cutters around the wires you have chosen and snip the leads through. It is the last thing you ever do. In a devastating blast the bomb detonates, fracturing the apartment block and reducing its structure to a tumbling collapse of steel and brickwork. Within this turmoil of destruction you disappear, your body vaporised in the ferocity of the blast. If you are to disarm this device you will have to try something else.

Return to section 1 and try again.

16

There is two minutes still remaining until the bomb detonates and with a need to ensure that the other devices will not explode you turn your focus first to the transmitter. It is a small device not unlike a walkie-talkie whose casing has been opened and from which a number of wires run to the main control board. A careful survey of the radio shows it is connected to a loop antenna that has been fixed to the right wall of the box. You note also that the transmitter has a small tuning dial at its left side. There is a chance that the transmitter can be disabled either by cutting its connection to the antenna or by changing the frequency using the tuning dial at its side. Either option should stop any chance that the other bombs will be triggered. There is the chance however, that any attempt to do so will detonate all the devices, including this one. Whatever you do it must be done quickly. There is less than 1 minute and eight seconds left on the timer display.

There are three choices open to you. The first is to leave the bomb and run. With a minute remaining on the clock you have just enough time to get out of the building and to a safe distance. The apartment building should now be deserted and apart from yourself only the building is in danger of this device. If

you believe that you can assume this bomb is the only one and you would rather live to fight another day turn to section 3. If you believe that cutting the antenna connection from the transmitter is the only option turn to section 28. If you see a simpler solution in just changing the radio frequency turn to section 12.

17

The letter is folded crisply in thirds and as you open it you begin to realise the mistake inherent in touching the box. At the centre of the parcel's upper surface you see a small hole, one that had been covered by the envelope. Quickly you read the letter, and in response to the message it delivers your blood runs cold.

"By lifting the envelope from the box you have activated a five minute countdown for a device constituting six kilogrammes of home-made high explosive, enough to demolish the apartment block you are currently standing in, and a good portion of the apartments that surround it. We have provided a pair of wire cutters and a box-knife so that you might, within the time period that is now rapidly diminishing, attempt to disarm the device and render it harmless. It would be unfair not to mention that before detonating this device will also transmit a short radio pulse that will trigger a further five similar devices that have been placed at strategic locations around the city. Do not tamper with the transmitter as this will cause the device to detonate. Your failure to disarm this device will lead to the deaths of thousands of innocents. Enjoy."

For a moment you stand speechless, the paper-wrapped box a lethal message from someone with the need to commit mass murder, and with no compunction in making you a part of his plan. Looking up and down the hall you see no other soul stirring, there is only yourself and the box and less than five minutes to do something about it. In those few seconds of hesitation you consider calling for the bomb squad but there is no time. It will take them at least fifteen minutes to respond and by then it will all be over. Instead you do the only thing you can. You yell "Fire!" and activate the fire alarm that rests on the wall to the right of your doorway.

At the top of your lungs you shout out the warning, the alarm a shrill combination of light and siren that fractures any remaining early morning calm. From the apartments around you your neighbours stir and in nightclothes and wrapped blankets answer hurriedly the alarm's insistent call. As you look at the box you only barely notice people running past your doorway, the building quickly emptying as you consider how to begin to disarm it. You are not a bomb technician but you have an idea where to start.

To begin you must gain access to the interior of the box. Will you use the box-knife to slice open the top and see what is within? If this is your choice turn to section 25. If it seems better to cut a small hole in the side and attempt to see what confronts you turn to section 4. If you think it might be safe to lift the box and move it into your apartment first for a better look turn to section 22.

18

At the run you make the stairs and then begin your descent. Your apartment is on the fourth floor of a six floor building and it takes almost fifty seconds to make the main entranceway and run out into the street. Beyond the entrance you find the building's residents standing in the street, a number of police vehicles already on scene. At the end of the block you also see the first of a number of fire engines rounding the corner.

"There is a bomb on the fourth floor!" you shout as you make the open air. "Everybody run!"

In the dark of the early morning panic sets in as the crowd moves in a frantic rush towards the end of the street and the fire engines that have now come to a halt. The police abandon their vehicles and run as well, and it is not a moment too soon.

From inside the building comes a muffled crumping sound, one that finds its full voice as a deafening explosion that blows all the windows out of the fourth floor and sends showers of glass and pulverised brick into the streets below. Darkness turns to daylight as a series of further explosions rock the building and quickly it falls in upon itself, the structure failing in a succession of tortured collapses that leave behind only rubble and smoking ruin.

Coming to a halt you listen as sirens begin to wail, emergency services quickly awakening to a blast that sends shuddering echoes across the whole city. As you try and catch your breath however, you begin to sense something else and it sends shivers down your spine. To the north and west bright ruddy lights illuminate other parts of the metropolis, conflagrations starting where once buildings had stood and now they themselves exist only as rubble. Against the dark skyline you count five separate sources of smoke and flame. The bomb-maker had not been lying.

THE END

19

Carefully you place the short scissor-like blades of the cutters around the wires you have chosen and attempt to snip the leads through. It is the last thing you ever do. Your cutters shear through the first of the wires but jam against the remaining leads, creating a live circuit and triggering a massive explosion. In a devastating blast the bomb detonates, fracturing the apartment block and reducing its structure to a tumbling collapse of steel and concrete. Within this turmoil of destruction you disappear, your body vaporised in the ferocity of the blast. If you are to disarm this device you will have to try something else.

Turn back to section 1.

20

The tuner turns and the bomb remains quiet. Standing, you call out into the empty hallway and hear no reply. The floor appears deserted and with nothing left to do you run, straight for the fire stairs and a way out of the building. Your apartment stands on the fourth floor of a six floor block and with the bomb counting down at your back you make the fire door and then into the stairwell beyond. You know you have less than twenty five seconds before the bomb will detonate and it is going to be a fifty-fifty chance that you will be able to make it into the street. With hell hard upon your heels you run.

If you have succeeded in changing the frequency used by the transmitter you will have saved hundreds of lives. If you are wrong then you will be lucky to save your own. If you have restarted this adventure less than four times turn to section 9. If it has taken four attempts or more to get to this stage turn to section 26.

21

Quickly you trace the wires leading from the control board back to the timer and decide that by cutting the wires you might cut the signal between the control board and its timing mechanism. First however, you must decide which of the wires you will cut.

Will you cut the wires to the Reset switch? If this is your choice turn to section 7. If you would cut the wires to the On/Off switch turn to section 15. If you would rather try the Disarm wires instead turn to section 29. If you would try and cut all the wires at the same time by drawing them together turn to section 19.

22

The lighting in the hallway is dim at the best of times and you will be able to see better if you move it a few feet further into your apartment. Carefully you take a hold of the box and lift. It is the last thing you ever do. In a devastating blast the bomb detonates, a pressure switch hidden at the base of the device triggering its high explosives, fracturing the apartment block and reducing its structure to a tumbling collapse of steel and pulverised concrete. Within this turmoil of destruction you disappear, your body vaporised in the ferocity of the blast. If you are to disarm this device you will have to try something else.

Return to section 1.

23

At the run you make the stairs and begin a hasty descent to the foyer below. Your apartment is on the fourth floor of a sixth floor apartment building and the fire stairs are a twisting series of landings and stairways that take you quickly to the ground floor and a fire door that should give you access to the foyer, and then the street beyond. Reaching for the door you pull on its long levered handle and find it to be jammed. Pulling at it again the door swings open but it is a delay that you will not survive. Above you there comes a deafening explosion, a detonation that rocks the building to its foundations and even as you make the foyer a blast of flame and pulverised concrete throws you sideways into the wall opposite. Before you can recover your feet the ceiling collapses around you and in that moment you know you cannot save yourself. As the building falls in on itself the only thing you can focus on is whether the other bombs have detonated. It is a question that for you will remain unanswered.

THE END

24

Although the letter has told you not to tamper with the transmitter you decide you must first cut power to that part of the device designed to trigger all the other bombs placed about the city. If you can do this at least the damage can be minimised. Carefully you place the blades of your wire-cutter around the leads and cut them neatly in two. It is the last thing you ever do. Caught within a blast that collapses the entire floor of your apartment block you die, your consciousness snuffed out in an instant as the deadly device completes its mission. Within this turmoil of destruction you disappear, your body vaporised in the ferocity of the detonating explosives. If you are to disarm this device you will have to find another way.

Return to section 1 and try again.

25

Sweating in the cool morning air you cut along the seam between two flaps of paper and find the box beneath made of a standard corrugated cardboard. The box is not taped closed so after prising the top open you find yourself confronted by a blinking display. It is a small LED panel counting down the time the bomb has to detonation. It says you now have 4 minutes and twenty-three seconds. Along the bottom edge of the panel are three switches, each labelled neatly with the words "Reset", "On/Off" and "Disarm". Beneath the timer the remainder of the bomb's mechanism is covered by a layer of silver metal foil. For the moment you can see nothing else of the bomb. You do note however, that the device itself is held within a neatly constructed metal cage that fits snugly into the box's cardboard outer skin.

You have four choices here. You may press the swith labelled "Reset". To do this turn to section 11.

You may press the switch labelled "On/Off" by turning to section 30. To press the switch labelled "Disarm" turn to section 6. If you would rather disregard these switches at this time and instead peel away the foil to get a better look at the rest of the device turn to section 2.

26

Down the stairs you career, the twisting series of landings and stairwells all that separates you from the bomb and certain death. Quickly you reach the ground floor and find the fire door into the foyer open. Without pause you run into the entranceway and then straight for the front doors. In that blind rush you come to a halt, the large glass doors jammed. For a moment you hesitate but you realise what you have done. The doors pull inwards and in your hurry you have pushed against them, and with this realisation you pull them open.

Beyond the entrance you find the building's residents standing in the street, a number of police vehicles already on scene. At the end of the block you also see the first of a number of fire engines rounding the corner.

"There is a bomb on the fourth floor." you shout as you make the open air. "Everybody run!"

In that same instant the bomb detonates, a deafening crash of fracturing glass and pulverised concrete showering down from overhead as the crowd runs for safety. For you however, there is no safe place. Caught by the first blast you are cut down in a spray of torn metal and glass, the collapsing building falling behind you as its debris scatters across the street. Within this turmoil of broken steel and concrete you are lost to the world. It had only been a few seconds but it was not enough to find safety.

If you wish to save yourself, and disarm the bomb you will have to try again. Turn to section 1.

27

It is the last thing you ever do. As the bomb leaves the floor a pressure switch hidden in the base of the box triggers and the device detonates. In a raging storm of destruction the explosion tears apart your apartment and then the entire fourth floor of the building. Fractured and burning the structure collapses in upon itself, the upper floors bearing down on the levels beneath in a cascade of twisting metal and pulverising concrete. If you are to disarm this device you will have to leave it where it is and find another way.

Return to section 1 and start again.

28

Carefully you trace the leads that provide the connection between the loop aerial and the transmitter and with no further hesitation you cut the wires. In the silence of the early morning nothing happens, the bomb quiescent and that is all you need to know. Standing you call into the hall and find no reply. The floor appears deserted and with nothing left to do you run, straight for the fire stairs and for the quickest way out of the building. Your apartment stands on the fourth floor of a six floor block and with the bomb counting down at your back you make the fire door and then into the stairwell beyond. You know you have less than twenty five seconds before the bomb will detonate and it is going to be a fifty-fifty chance that you will be able to make it into the street. With hell hard upon your heels you run.

If you have succeeded in disabling the transmitter's capacity to trigger the other devices you will have saved hundreds of lives. If you are wrong then you will be lucky to save your own. If you have restarted this adventure less than four times turn to section 9. If it has taken four attempts or more to get to this stage turn to section 26.

29

Carefully you place the short scissor-like blades of the cutters around the wires you have chosen and snip the leads through. It is the last thing you ever do. In a devastating blast the bomb detonates, fracturing the apartment block and reducing its structure to a tumbling collapse of steel and brickwork. Within this turmoil of destruction you disappear, your body vaporised in the ferocity of the blast. If you are to disarm this device you will have to try something else.

Turn back to section 1.

30

There is a chance that the bomb-maker never expected you to actually attempt to disable the device and the On/Off switch is the surest way to turn the timer off. Without hesitation you press the switch and it is the last thing you ever do. In a concussion of exploding plastique your world erupts in flames, your body gripped within a shredding shockwave that throws you out of the building even as your apartment block falls away around you. If you are to successfully disarm this device you will definitely need to try something else.

Turn back to section 1 and start again.