

The Toymaker and the General

by Mike Resnick

The door burst open, and six armed soldiers entered the small house. Two of them trained their weapons upon the woman who remained seated placidly before her tapestry frame; the other four, each positioning himself at a window or a door, held their guns at the ready.

"Where is he?" demanded the leader.

"I don't know," replied the woman.

"You are his wife."

"Nevertheless."

"The harder we search, the harder it will go on him when we finally find him," promised the leader.

"You will not harm a hair of his head," she answered serenely, returning her attention to the tapestry. "We both know that, so why do you make meaningless threats?"

"Then let me make a meaningful threat," said the leader. "If you do not tell me where the Toymaker is in the next ten seconds, I will order my men to kill you."

He nodded his head, and five safety mechanisms were disengaged as five weapons were aimed at her.

She waited seven seconds, then sighed and nodded.

"Where?" demanded the leader.

"Hell's-A-Comin'," she answered.

The leader ordered his men from the house, reported what he had learned, and returned to base.

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The bartender at the Devil's Lair looked up, and found himself confronting three tall, lean men with cold eyes and hard mouths.

"Where is the Toymaker?" demanded the closest of them.

The bartender shrugged. "Beats me. I haven't seen him for almost two weeks."

"Where was he going?"

"I believe he said Castell City."

The three men exchanged glances. Then the tallest leaned forward across the bar.

"If you're lying," he said, "we'll come back and kill you."

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"Toymaker!" said the young lieutenant into the speaker system. "Come out! We've got you surrounded!"

The fifty marines waited for a response.

"All right, men," shouted the lieutenant after sixty seconds. "Storm the building!"

Silent as wraiths, they broke down the doors, fanned out through the building, burst into a dozen apartments, rummaged through the basement, ransacked the closets, even clambered into the hot, cramped attic.

The Toymaker was gone.

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They found him, finally, hiding in the storage rooms beneath a church in Shangri-La, and they dragged him before the General.

"Very innovative," said the General pleasantly. "The atheist hiding out in a church." He chuckled appreciatively. "Not unlike the deserter hiding out in the middle of a battlefield."

The Toymaker stared at him and made no reply.

"Come, come," said the General. "There is no need to be sullen. I am not your enemy. May I offer you a drink?"

"No," said the Toymaker.

"Ah, that's right," said the General with a smile. "I forgot. And of course you don't smoke, either. What _do_ you do for amusement these days?"

"I hide from you," said the Toymaker.

"So you do," admitted the General. "But, of course, I always find you in the end."

"Next time you won't," promised the Toymaker.

"Of course I will."

"We'll see."

"Maybe you won't escape again," suggested the General.

"Maybe I won't fix your broken machines again," responded the Toymaker.

"Then perhaps I shall break some of _your_ machines," said the General, unperturbed. "You have two grown sons."

"They aren't on Haven," said the Toymaker.

"That merely makes them more difficult to find," replied the General. "Not impossible." He paused thoughtfully. "I think I would find the challenge stimulating."

The Toymaker remained silent and impassive.

Suddenly the General smiled again. "But why talk of such unpleasant things? We are two old friends. Let us enjoy each other's company for a few moments before you go off to your work."

"I have no work here."

"Of course you do," said the General smoothly. "You are the Toymaker."

"I resigned."

"Your resignation was not accepted."

"That's your problem," said the Toymaker.

"You are my problem," the General corrected him. "It seems that I must continually remind you of your oath."

"I swore no allegiance to the CoDominium."

"I refer to the oath you swore in the name of Hippocrates," said the General.

"I swore to heal the sick," said the Toymaker. "I have never broken that oath."

"You break it every time you hide from us, my old friend."

"No!" said the Toymaker furiously. "There is a difference between healing the sick and repairing your machines!"

"They are both living things," said the General. "Living, suffering things," he added.

"When you heal a sick man, he becomes well and goes on with his life," replied the Toymaker. "When I mend one of your broken machines, you simply send it out to break again."

"They are not my machines," the General pointed out calmly. "They are your cyborgs."

"No longer," said the Toymaker. "Now they're your machines, and I won't keep them running so that they can continue pillaging and ransacking."

"They are human beings, and they are in agony," responded the General.

"If they were human beings, they would be dead. They are toy soldiers, nothing more, and I hope someday I can make amends for helping to create them."

"You are sworn to eradicate human suffering," said the General firmly. "They are human beings, born of human parents, and I can assure you that their suffering is genuine."

"So is the suffering they cause."

"They only carry out my orders."

"I know."

"And I only carry out the orders I am given," continued the General. "I'm a soldier, just like they are."

"Don't insult my intelligence," said the Toymaker. "You train them, you select their targets, you send them out on their missions of destruction."

"Only after the politicians tell me who the enemy is," the General pointed out.

"That must be a great comfort to you," said the Toymaker caustically.

"It is."

"And when the politicians get rich enough to make peace, do all the casualties then rise from the ashes

and go back to the business of living?" demanded the Toymaker.

"Not until the God that you don't believe in deigns to take a hand in the game."

"Wonderful!" smirked the Toymaker. "If you can't blame the politicians, blame God." He stared at the General. "The toy soldiers take their orders from you and you alone."

"I am starting to lose my patience with you," said the General irritably. "Calling them toy soldiers makes it sound as if this is a game. Let me assure you that it is not." He paused. "My cyborgs can stand up to punishment that no normal human could take. Each of them survives what tens, even hundreds, of normal men cannot. That means when you repair one of them, you are not only saving his life, but the lives of fifty or eighty men who would surely be lost if I had to send them on his mission."

"I don't even know who you're sending them off to kill!" snapped the Toymaker. "Sergei Lermontov is the Grand Admiral of the fleet. The CoDominium reigns supreme. We are supposed to be at peace."

"And, for the most part, we are," acknowledged the General.

"Then who is the enemy?"

"It is not necessary for you to know. Your job is healing the sick; mine is making the best possible use of them once they become well."

"Are they fighting men? Aliens? Who?" persisted the Toymaker.

"They are fighting the enemy," replied the General calmly.

"Damn you!" snapped the Toymaker. "You haven't changed one iota in all these years!"

"Nor have you," said the General. "That is why you will heal them."

"I won't."

"They are in agony," continued the General. "They scream for their mothers, they curse their God, they claw weakly at their metal and their plastic and their flesh, they beg for a surcease to their pain. You will protest, but in the end you will heal them."

"So that each of them can cause the same agony to thousands of beings who can't be put back together with transistors and computer chips and artificial skin and bone?" said the Toymaker.

"What they do when they leave here is no concern of yours," replied the General.

"I will be responsible for it."

The General shook his head. "You will be responsible for ending their pain. I will be responsible for what they do next."

"You have much to answer for," said the Toymaker.

"Perhaps," said the General. "But on the other hand, I didn't make them. I merely found the best way to utilize them." He lit a cigar. "And of course, they're only the first step."

"I know," said the Toymaker. "And the steps to come are worse."

"Oh?"

The Toymaker nodded his head. "I know the military. An army of virtually indestructible, superhuman warriors is merely a stepping-stone. The day will come when a handful of truly advanced cyborgs will be tied into computers and direct our fleet in battle."

"What's wrong with that?" asked the General. "The awesome logic of a computer joined in a perfect marriage to the creativity of a human brain, the pair of them housed together in an impenetrable body -- the ultimate cyborg!"

"The ultimate machine of destruction."

"Think of its power!"

"I _have_ thought of it," said the Toymaker. "That is why I ran away."

"It really frightens you?" asked the General, genuinely surprised. "It _excites_ me." He sighed. "I am disappointed in you; you _have_ changed over the years."

"You haven't."

The General glanced at his timepiece. "I would love to continue speaking with you into the small hours of the morning, my old friend, but not fifty yards from here lie three young men who gave more for the CoDominium than we had any right to ask. It would be immoral to let them suffer any longer."

"Fix them yourself," said the Toymaker.

The General sighed. "I had hoped it wouldn't come to this, but I think I must remind you that we have ways of encouraging your cooperation."

"Do your worst," said the Toymaker. He shrugged, as if to display his lack of concern. "I can't repair delicate machines if I'm drugged, and my hand isn't likely to be too steady if you torture me."

"I would never harm you personally," said the General. "After all, you are the Toymaker. We need you." He paused. "But I might consider issuing an order to kill one Castell City citizen every hour until you agree to go to work."

"You'd have an open rebellion on your hands."

"I very much doubt it," replied the General confidently. "Public executions cause rebellions. Private executions tend to be overlooked ... and these would be very private indeed, performed to impress an audience of one."

"Then issue your order," said the Toymaker. "At least the blood will be on your hands and not mine."

"It will be on both our hands," said the General. "Mine for issuing the order, yours for forcing me to do so."

"No one is forcing you to do anything."

"I must have my soldiers back. You are forcing me to take steps that I would prefer to avoid."

"You can avoid them," said the Toymaker. "Just let me walk out of here. Surely you have other doctors who can put your toy soldiers back together again."

"But none with such skill as yours," answered the General.

"Then you'll have to teach them better, won't you?" said the Toymaker.

The General stared at him for a long moment. "I have no more time to waste," he said at last.

"Then let me go and stop wasting mine."

"Oh, no, my old friend. You are here and here you will stay." He pressed a button on his desk, and two uniformed men entered the room and saluted smartly. "Take the Toymaker to his quarters," said the General.

"A dank stone cell?" suggested the Toymaker sardonically.

"No," replied the General. "A warm dry room with every amenity, including a very comfortable bed." He paused. "Four beds, in fact."

"Four?" repeated the Toymaker.

The General nodded. "The occupants of the other three beds are in excruciating agony. They cry out for the help that only you can give them." He smiled. "I will make no further demands of you. You can cure them or not, as you choose," -- suddenly the General's face hardened -- "but I will not let you out of that room _until_ they are cured." The smile returned to his face. "All your equipment is there, if you choose to use it."

"This is inhuman!" raged the Toymaker, backing away as the two uniformed men approached him. "I won't be a part of it!"

The men each grabbed one of his arms and began dragging him out of the General's office.

"I'll let them die!" cried the Toymaker. "I swear that I will!"

Then he was gone, and the General leaned back on his chair, enjoying the aroma of his cigar.

"You played your role very well, my old friend," he said at last with a contented smile. "You're getting better at this all the time." He paused thoughtfully. "In fact, we both are."

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A week had passed, and the General was standing outside the infirmary, peering intently through a large glass window as brand-new plastic skin was carefully being peeled back from a titanium arm.

A stocky Major, wearing a security patch on his sleeve, approached him, stood motionless for a moment, then cleared his throat and saluted when the General turned to him.

"Yes?" said the General.

"The Toymaker has escaped, sir," reported the Major.

"It took him longer than usual this time," commented the General.

"Yes, sir. We didn't want to make it too easy for him."

"And you've got a tail on him?"

The Major grinned. "_Three_ tails, sir."

"Wait until he stops running, and then pull two of them back."

"Yes, sir. It looks like he'll be holing up in New Rhineland."

The General nodded thoughtfully. "All right. Once you're sure of that, start the search for him in Shangri-La, and see to it that it takes us at least four months to reach him." He smiled wryly. "One must observe appearances at all costs."

"Yes, sir." The Major shuffled his feet awkwardly. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"I know it's none of my business, sir, but is it really all that important that we keep bringing him back here?"

"It is."

"But we've got other medics who can patch up our cyborgs at least as well as he can."

"Better," agreed the General. "He's been out of touch with the latest research."

"Then what makes him so important?"

"To answer that, you have to understand his history. His specialty was microsurgery. Cyborgs were just a sideline with him, though they were what brought him to our attention." The General paused. "To _my_ attention," he amended.

"I still don't understand, sir," said the Major.

"He has three exceptional virtues," explained the General. "First, he's got an uncanny knack for miniaturization. The smaller the microchip, the tinier the connection, the better he is at handling it." The General paused. "Second, he hates the military and everything we stand for."

"That's a virtue?" asked the Major.

"In this case it is."

"Got it!" cried a triumphant voice over an intercom, and the medic that the General was watching withdrew an incredibly miniaturized device from the titanium framework of the cyborg's elbow. He held it up in a tweezers for the General to see.

The General nodded his approval, then turned back to the Major.

"And third," he concluded with a cynical smile, "he makes the best goddamned bombs you ever saw. This is the fifth time we've brought him back, and the fifth time he's tried to kill me."

They stepped aside as the medic hurried out of the infirmary and carried the device down the hall, where the Dentist was waiting to implant it in the mouth of a prisoner whom the General would be exchanging later that day.

-- -The End -- -