

The Implacable

by Rome Reginelli

The Implacable trudged through the debris knee-high. He would really have liked it if his boots did not get filled up with mud, but even with his coveralls pulled tight over them, the grit kept seeping through. He surveyed the scene. The nearest street sign proclaimed this intersection to be the corner of Hill Drive and 53rd Street, but that sign was lying on its side half submerged in the center of the street. The Implacable judged that it does not likely correspond to this intersection. He checked the GPS on his Communicator, which reported a latitude/longitude pair of 37.0625, -95.677068. That placed him about a quarter mile downhill from the sign's original location.

He kicked his boot against a nearby rock, hoping to dislodge a pebble from under his foot's arch, and oriented himself. If he were to go north, he would tread into another Implacable's assigned territory, so he faced himself away from the mountains and started forcing his way south. The scent of mud overwhelmingly filled his nostrils, and the sensation of sodden polyester-nylon clung to his legs. The Implacable reached into his breast pocket and slowly retrieved a bottle of pills, which he opened with one hand (a trick that would be impossible had not one of his fellows shown how to use a toothpick to break the childproofing). While still holding the Communicator in his other hand, he lifted the bottle up to his mouth and coaxed one pill out, in the hopes that it would quell his raging erection. That was the worst part of being an Implacable, all the doping up. How was he supposed to explain to his rescues about having a hard-on in the midst of a war scene?

The Implacable was a big man, well over six feet and built like an NFL running back, human growth hormone and all. A patchy garden of dark stubble shaded his jawline,

save for a thin line of clotted blood along one side, a souvenir from his last deployment less than a week ago. It should have really been that, his *last* deployment, but the Saboteurs afforded the government little rest and even less mercy. It seemed likely, the Implacable thought as he put away the pills and rubbed his headache, that this would be his last deployment whether or not the Department thought otherwise. He brushed off yet another clump of grime-encrusted hair. It occurred to the Implacable for the first time that he might die bald; hair had always run in his family, but radiation exposure changed all that.

Having finally covered about enough distance, the Implacable checked his Communicator again, this time for incoming cell signals. The towers in this area had long-since stopped functioning, but his government-grade receptor was built to pick up on interference patterns created by cell phones trying to find service, and track areas of high concentration. The indicator remained blank for a few seconds, then lit up with one, two, three signals. This was typical; just like putting a phone next to an unshielded speaker only makes noise every few seconds, his receiver only picked up a pattern when the phones sought a provider - something that happened on timed, regular intervals. The Implacable recognized the signals as coming from somewhere nearby, probably the next sidestreet ahead. He could already see a change in the neighborhood, from houses whose walled gardens now served only as pools of sludge to a run-down series of two-floor apartment complexes the same color as the mud around him. As he got nearer, he could see that the northern wall of the apartments had been devastated by the dam overflow: here a twisted rain gutter had forced its way through a window; there, a tree branch protruding from the muck lay wedged in a walkway. The signal seemed to be coming from the second or third complex, so the Implacable stuffed the communicator away and slogged in that direction.

He called out in a ragged voice, "Is anyone there? Please signal if you require assistance," familiar words that had shaped themselves to his throat and lips by now. Or, rather, his throat and lips had shaped themselves to the words, because he had uttered little else in recent days. There was no response at first, but as he got closer and repeated the mantra, he heard a distinctly human yell and the clank of a hard object hitting a broken window frame. The sound came from the upper floor, and the Implacable quickly recognized why: the debris had washed away the exterior steps, leaving the inhabitants of the second level trapped nine feet above a very uneven ground.

He reached the base of the second landing, where the stairs had been, and looked up. There was no one at the top. "Are you there?" he called out. "I have a rope. I can get you down if you attach it to something solid."

"Go away, soldier!" came an unexpected voice. "These children have already been saved."

"Who are you?" This was not supposed to happen. The Implacable had heard rumors from his comrades about people called Poachers, who "saved" children from disasters and raised them to be ultra-tough agents for who-knows-what, but he had not believed them. Now he began to wonder.

"A concerned citizen."

"How are you going to get them out of here?" the Implacable demanded. "I can summon a rescue helicopter so that they're lifted to the nearest shelter."

"My truck is already here," the Poacher insisted. "I have snow chains. I can get out the way I came."

"Driving through this is reckless!" the Implacable insisted. "Hand over the children and await rescue yourself!"

There was a scuffling from above, and the Implacable heard the sound of someone climbing down a collapsible ladder from around the corner of the building. The Poacher

emerged from around the same corner wielding a survival knife. The Implacable felt his heartbeat double in intensity. He was unarmed – he shouldn't be encountering combat situations in a simple rescue mission like this. He steeled himself, widening his stance and bringing his arms up. "Do not fight me," the Implacable said slowly.

The Poacher shook his head and came at him as quickly as he could manage in the mud and rubble. An untrained forward thrust; just what the Implacable had been expecting. He drew back, hollowing out his stance as best he could, reaching out with one hand to swat the knife-hand down, and then with the other to lock his assailant's wrist. In one smooth movement it was over: using the Poacher's own momentum, he redirected the knife into the Poacher's abdomen and threw him off-balance to the ground.

Pinning the man, the Implacable asked directly. "Are you affiliated with the Saboteurs?"

"Need I be?" the defeated Poacher coughed. "They're just wreckers. Sit safely at a computer in a far-off country, press a few buttons, destroy hundreds of lives..."

"They are horrible terrorists, I agree. But what you are doing is also wrong."

"Wrong? At least I have vision. These children, they're survivors. I can find a home for them, raise 'em tough, so they'll get through anything. What can your government do, but pass the buck to doddering do-gooders?"

The Implacable knew better than to answer. Instead, he carefully withdrew the knife from the Poacher's body. "I can stop the bleeding if you will cooperate. Hold out your hands."

Knowing he couldn't do anything, the Poacher did as he was told, and allowed the Implacable to bind him with a piece of his rescue rope. When that was taken care of, the Implacable used his Communicator to request immediate pickup from the sky team. The children, a boy who looked

to be in his preteens, and a girl a few years younger, descended hesitantly down the Poacher's ladder and eyed the two men. "It's safe," the Implacable told them. "Rescue is on the way."

He set a flare so that they could be spotted easily, and sat down with the children and the Poacher to wait for the helicopter's arrival.

The boy shifted his gaze from the flare smoke to the Implacable, looking up and down, in surprisingly high spirits. Finally he concluded out loud, "You remind me of my dad, but cooler!"

For the first time in a long time, the Implacable felt a smile cross his face. "I'm glad to hear that," he said.