

Taking Stock

by Tanaqui

Dale crouched in the ditch, trying to catch his breath. It had been a half-mile jog from where his guys had dropped him off before they circled back to wait for the J&R transport. The last hundred yards he'd done under cover of the ditch, knees bent and head kept low. TV shows made it look a damn sight easier than it turned out to be; the muscles in his legs and back protested the unaccustomed strain.

Fifty yards further up the road, three bored-looking ASA soldiers manned the checkpoint on the road to Cheyenne, though Dale knew from the times he'd driven through that they'd snap to attention soon as anyone approached. Not that there was much traffic: gas still wasn't plentiful and—Dale allowed himself a wry smile—the roads weren't completely free of trouble yet.

A distant rumble drew his attention in the other direction. After a moment, the familiar shape of a none-too-clean white truck resolved itself out of the heat haze shimmering above the blacktop. Beyond it, Dale made out the gleam of low sunlight bouncing off a much cleaner and newer box van that followed a little way to the rear. Though he was hunkered down out of sight, he automatically gave an appreciative nod of the head as the first truck passed: *Good work, guys.*

He crouched down further, making extra sure he was hidden from the second van as it went by. When he lifted his head and looked back toward the checkpoint again, he saw the dirty truck had halted. Both cab doors were wide open and the driver stood in the road as he talked to the soldiers. It all seemed quite natural but, somehow, they'd managed to block the whole road.

The second vehicle—the one belonging to J&R, a Ford E-series—had slewed a little before it halted, angled partway into the other lane. Looked like the driver had been hoping to swing around the stopped truck and be waved through the checkpoint, but had realized at the last minute that there wasn't room to pass.

Dale scuttled along the ditch until the vehicles blocked his view of all three soldiers: the one standing in the middle of the checkpoint, his M16 held across his chest, and the two talking to Dale's men. Which should mean they couldn't see him either when he scrambled out of the ditch and, still bent low, scooted up to the back of the J&R truck. He was trusting the J&R crew were too busy watching the argument going on up ahead to spot him in their side mirrors. As he quietly hauled himself up onto the narrow step at the back, one hand gripping on tight to hold him steady, he could half hear something about the need for permits and manifests, and *Yes, sir; we know you say the truck's empty...* Quietly sliding up the catch and easing up the back door of the Ford, Dale grinned: for once, Goetz's petty power plays were working to Dale's advantage.

A moment later, he'd squeezed himself inside and drawn the roll-up door back down, almost closed but not quite. Steadying himself against the racks of shelves that had been fitted lengthwise along the truck, he pulled a flashlight from his jacket pocket and switched it on. The narrow beam showed the truck was only half full. It didn't take him long to locate the vaccines: they were still in the same crates they'd been in when Goetz confiscated them.

As he lifted the lid on the first one, Dale noted the black rectangle of an RFID tag taped inside the lid. It reminded him of the conversation he'd had with Jake by the chiller cabinets. A surge of warmth and pride welled up in him, though it wasn't so much what Jake had said to him but the way he'd said it that made the memory such a good one. A few months back, Dale knew, it would have been Jake standing here in the dimly lit truck. That it was Dale instead wasn't because Jake was now sheriff and beyond breaking the law. It was more than that.

Dale had been all too aware over the past few months, even when he forced the farmers into honoring their deals, hired the refugees to help defend his farm, or brought his men to join in the fight against New Bern, that people still saw him as a kid. But the way Jake had spoken to him hadn't been like that. They'd talked one man to another: Jake had expected Dale to understand what he hadn't put into words and to handle what needed to be done.

Noises from outside brought Dale out of his thoughts: cab doors were being slammed shut. A moment later, the truck he was in lurched forward. Focusing on the present, he slipped the rucksack he was carrying from his shoulders and, flipping open the lid of the second container, quickly began transferring handfuls of the small bottles, in too much of a hurry to pack them neatly. He knew he didn't have much time.

Even so, it seemed to take an age to empty the containers. There was still most of a layer of vials in each when he heard the note from the van's engine change and the floor slanted beneath his feet as the Ford slowed and began to head downhill in sharp turns. He'd just have to hope he'd gotten enough of the vaccine. Dropping the lids on the containers, he quickly fastened the rucksack closed and swung it back on to his shoulders. The straps pulled heavily, but he ignored the weight as he handed himself along the racking towards the back of the truck.

Sliding his hand under the door, he worked it upwards as quietly as he could. The road behind the truck was empty, which was just as well, since anyone behind might alert the driver—and he wasn't much fancying making the leap from a moving vehicle anyway, let alone into the path of something else.

Holding on tight to a grip bar to one side of the door, he swung himself out, struggling to balance himself against the unaccustomed burden on his back. He reached up and pulled down the door, adjusting the position of his gripping hand and his feet bit by bit as he followed the door down, aware of the hard blacktop moving quickly just inches below him. But he couldn't just let himself fall off the back when the Ford slowed even further as it began the climb up from the river that they were now crossing. Jake had been quite clear in his cryptic way: Dale needed to leave no sign he'd ever been on the truck.

With a satisfied grunt, he managed to get the catch locked back in place, even as the van reached the end of the bridge. The engine note changed again as the driver shifted to an even lower gear. Dale turned and tensed, trying not to think about how hard the road was going to be or how many vials of vaccine he might break as he landed. Then the Ford slowed further as the incline began to bite. Dale jumped.

He managed to stay on his feet for a few steps, before momentum took over and he lurched forward, jarring his hands and scraping his knees as he fell. The rucksack caught him a blow to the back of the head that stunned him for an instant, before he regained enough wits to scramble for the cover of a clump of bushes at the side of the road. He squinted up at the retreating truck, but the engine note remained steady. He let out a breath, confident he hadn't been spotted.

Swinging the rucksack off his shoulders, he ruefully noted the small wet patch spreading at the bottom—but it could have been worse.

Another glance upward showed him the J&R van was out of sight. Climbing out from behind the bushes, he settled himself on the shoulder to wait for his guys, who should now be following behind. He shouldn't have to hang around for long: they were only half an hour or so outside Jericho.

Curving his hand around the rucksack, Dale imagined Jake's quick smile of thanks when he brought the vaccine home. He thought he'd done the job as well as Jake could have—as well as anyone. Likely someone would eventually discover the vaccines were missing, but by then it would be too late to stop the people of Jericho protecting themselves. And that would be Dale's doing.

His lips quirked as he realized that he'd grown up desperately wanting to be liked; to not be seen as trailer trash even by people who were kind about it, like Mayor Green and Mrs Green. For a while, he'd had a chance to be feared, and he'd thought that was better—except it wasn't, really. What mattered was respect and trust. People might buy the goods he smuggled in and be glad of them, but he was still trash to them, a petty criminal, and they were right. Everything he'd done had been selfish at heart.

But this? The vaccines? Jake had given him a chance—no, relied on him—to do something on which the future of the whole town depended, and to do it well. Maybe most people wouldn't remember in a week or two, but the people who mattered would, and Dale would know it too. He was one of them, now.

Disclaimer: These stories are based on the Junction Entertainment/Fixed Mark Productions/CBS Paramount Television series *Jericho*. They were written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from them nor was any infringement of copyright intended.