

A Stalker's Mercy

Anthony Gonzalez

Louisiana, 1895. The small fishing village of Longue Rivière was in shambles. Located just south of Breaux Bridge, the once peaceful and quiet village was disheveled and bloodied. Bodies littered the muddied ground, some with tools and makeshift weapons in their hands, most face down in a failed attempt to flee. A carriage, with its shredded cover listing lazily in the breeze, sat crushed on the side of the single road through the town. The small rows of raised houses that lined the road stood hollowed and gaping, looking almost as bloodied and broken as their former tenants. Shutters were hanging skewed, doors were torn free of their hinges, and there was nothing but a mournful wind carrying the stench of death through them. Only two other things moved through the remains of this broken community, eyes scanning the death and destruction around them.

Kalista slowly made her way down the narrow road, rifle at the low ready, watching for any sign of life. Her hard leather boots sunk slightly into the soft earth soundlessly. She didn't want to alert anyone to her presence. The long duster she wore looked out of place this time of year with how hot and humid it had been. However, if what she had suspected happened to this village turned out to be true, she wouldn't dare take it off. She moved around the broken bodies, being careful not to get too close to any of them. They were scattered haphazardly, so it was slow going.

Walking closely in front of her, eyes and ears constantly alert for any signs of danger, was her faithful hound, Remy. The Dogo Argentino was 120 pounds of pure muscle and power. His white fur stood in stark contrast to the muck and mire around them, a sign of purity in this god forsaken place. He would occasionally put his nose to the ground, searching for any scent that might offer any clues as to what had happened here.

Suddenly, he stopped and turned his head to one of the houses closer to the river that ran parallel to the road. Kalista stopped and raised her rifle towards the door. She listened intently to try and pick up what he may have heard, but all she could hear was the gentle lapping of the river against the bank. The door was open, and the steps leading up to it were spattered with blood. Cautiously, she began to make her way up the steps, eyes and rifle barrel never leaving the entryway.

The inside of the small house was divided into 3 rooms, with the dining room/common room being the largest. There was a small wood stove in the corner, which provided heat and a place to cook meals, along with a dining table that was covered in the half-eaten remains of what Kalista assumed was the former tenants' breakfast. Various types of wooden furniture lay splintered and smashed around the room, and an oil lantern hung broken next to the back window. The first room had its door open and led into a small bedroom. A quick scan of the room revealed nothing other than an unmade bed and dresser. The last room had

its door shut, and Kalista approached it with slow wary steps. She could just make out the muffled rapid breathing on the other side. Since the door opened out, she positioned herself on the latch side of the door and placed her hand on the handle. After making sure Remy was on the opposite side, she wordlessly counted to three and threw open the door.

The room was a pantry, and huddled in the corner covered in blood was a boy barely old enough to be called a man. He was as pale as a ghost and covered in sweat with eyes so wide they looked like they would pop right out of his head. He was shaking uncontrollably as his hands clutched the wound on the side of his stomach.

“Please...” the boy gasped, staring at the rifle barrel pointed at him. “Please don’t hurt me!”

After a brief pause, Kalista lowered her rifle and looked at Remy.

“Remy, post,” She ordered. Remy padded over to the front door and assumed sentry duty while Kalista entered the pantry. “It’s OK. I’m here to help. Let’s get you out of there, so I can look at your wound.”

The boy looked as if his heart was about to leap out of his chest when she spoke, but he allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. She walked him out to the main room and had him lay down on the table. His shirt was torn, soaked with blood, and a long gash had been made across his abdomen.

“What happened here?” she asked, setting her rifle against the table so she could help ease the boy onto the table.

“The monsters... they came out of nowhere,” he said, still shaking. “It was horrible. They... they just... attacked everyone. I had to hide. God, the screams.”

“How many were there? What did they look like?” she asked, lifting the boy’s tattered shirt to inspect the wound. Black veins were surrounding the wound, and small sores had already begun to appear on his chest. *‘Damn...’*

“I don’t know,” he replied, sweat pouring from his clammy skin. “Three, I think. Two of them looked like regular people but with gray skin and these boils around their face and arms. One of them looked like something out of a nightmare. It stood taller than any man, and its arms were long and twisted. Its head looked like a giant hairless rat with a big gaping mouth that could swallow a child whole.”

The boy looked up at Kalista as she continued to inspect him. She was being careful to keep her face neutral. He stared at the three long scars that ran down the right side of her face.

“Hey, you’re one of them, aren’t you?” he asked. “You’re a Stalker.” She nodded.

The boy suddenly reached up and grabbed her arm. “Please! Please, you have to help her!” he pleaded. “That thing, the big one, it had her necklace caught on one of its claws! Please, you have to find her!”

“Slow down. Who are you talking about?”

“Lucie! She’s been home sick ever since she got bit by a possum a few nights ago.”

Kalista raised an eyebrow. “A possum? Are you sure?”

“Well, she thought it was. It happened at night. What does it matter?!” he asked in frustration. “She lives with her folks a little way outside the village. Please, you have to get to her!”

Kalista nodded. “Don’t worry. I’ll find her.” She gently removed the boy’s hand and eased him back on the table. “Now, close your eyes. This is going to hurt a little bit.”

The boy looked up at her emotionless face as she reached behind herself.

“You promise you’ll find her, right?” he asked, eyes pleading.

“I give you my word that I’ll find her,” she said as she reached up with her other hand to place it on the boy’s head. “Now, close your eyes and try to relax.”

The boy did as he was told, and before he could utter another word, Kalista retrieved the bowie knife from behind her and plunged it into the boy’s heart. He let out a surprised gasp and then went limp. She looked down at the poor boy who had died by her hand. The blessed forged blade would ensure that the corruption that was growing within him wouldn’t spread. It was the only thing she could do for him, a hollow mercy that tasted like ash in her mouth. If her uncle were here, he would have said a prayer for him, asking God to welcome him into His kingdom. But he wasn’t here, and she would never waste her breath on a God she felt either didn’t care or wanted His creations to suffer. Her thoughts turned back to her own past, and she began to feel a sense of something approaching envy for the boy. She didn’t know if he’d had any family that died in the attack, but she knew he wouldn’t have to know what life was like without them if he had.

Remy let out a low growl, breaking her from a train of thought that she could ill afford to follow. She still had more to do, more monsters to banish from a world they wished to devour. She removed the knife from the boy’s chest and put it back in its sheath. She picked up her rifle and moved towards the doorway. Raspy voices were growing louder with every step. The once deathly silent village was now about to become unnaturally busy. She had a job to do and a promise to keep.

Outside, the broken and battered remains of the villagers were lifting themselves out of the mud and blood. Their skin had turned a sickening shade of gray with black veins spidering around boils and sores. Blackened eyes searched their surroundings, looking for prey, and darkened teeth bit the air in anticipation. After spotting the pair at the top of the stairs, the walking corpses shambled towards them with arms outstretched. Kalista raised her rifle, took aim at the closest one as it began to ascend the steps towards her, and fired a round through its head. It dropped like a marionette that had just had its strings cut as she chambered another round and fired at the next walker that was trying to climb over its fallen neighbor. More and more plague-walkers began to shamble towards the

noise, and Kalista knew she had to hurry and get rid of them before the big one showed up.

After she fired her last rifle round, Kalista moved down the narrow porch and jumped over the railing. Remy followed close behind, jumping through the posts on the railing. Kalista slung her rifle over her shoulder and drew her revolvers. Even though it was a small village, there were a lot of walkers with a newfound hunger that would never be sated. She fired round after round with quick precision, dropping them one after another.

“Remy, roundup!” she ordered once she had fired her last round. Remy began barking and darting around the horde trying to get their attention. The walkers began to give chase to the loud and nimble creature that they were far too slow to catch. They began to bunch together as Remy quickly circled them, their focus completely on him. Kalista used this time to reload, as well as check her surroundings. It looked like almost all the reanimated villagers were now together in one group, being herded by her dog. She began to fire into the crowd, which caused some of the plague walkers to break away from the main group and advance towards her. However, they were slow, and Kalista was able to finish off most of the horde before a loud, guttural roar pierced the sound of raspy moans and snarls from the few stragglers that remained.

From the far end of the road, a towering abomination was charging towards her with frightening speed. It stood over nine feet tall and waved its long misshapen claws as if it couldn't wait to tear her limb from limb. Its mouth was stretched impossibly wide, and its large black eyes were filled with hate and hunger. Tattered rags and dried blood covered the thing's gray, stretched flesh, and its limbs were far too long and had far too many joints to be considered human anymore.

“Shit!” Kalista swore as she holstered her revolvers and began to reload her rifle. She'd hoped she would have had a little more time before the plague-morph showed up. As it was, there were still two or three walkers around. Once she put the last round into her rifle and chambered it, Kalista had just enough time to fire off a few quick shots before she had to roll out of the way of the thing charging at her. It dug its claws into the soft earth, trying to stop its momentum, and charged at her again. Kalista fired another series of rounds into the thing, with one hitting it in the hip, causing it to stumble. Unfortunately, the massive monster was able to reach her with a swipe of its elongated arms. Despite how lithe and sickly it looked, the creature was powerful enough to send Kalista flying across the road. She landed on her back with her rifle tumbling from her grasp.

Before she could even get to her feet, the creature was on top of her. It opened its maw wide, and Kalista had to block its bite with her forearm. It was like her arm was in a vice, and she howled out in pain as its teeth tried to puncture the hard leather of her duster. With her free hand, she tried to reach her knife, but it was difficult with her pinned on her back. Her hands kept slipping on the muddied handle, and the creature's thrashing was causing her to shift around

too much.

Finally, she managed to get it free and plunged the blade deep into the abomination's side. It let out a demonic howl of pain and fury as the blessed forged steel burned its corrupted flesh. Kalista pulled the knife out and plunged it upwards into the creature's heart. It rolled off of her and started to claw at its chest as faint wisps of smoke rose from its wound. Kalista pressed the advantage and continued to stab the creature repeatedly until, with one last gurgle, the thing lay still on the ground.

Kalista sat on the ground panting from the struggle, watching the corpse to make sure it was dead. The last two plague-walkers began to shamble closer to her, no longer interested in the prey that was too quick for them to catch. With barely a glance, Kalista drew one of her revolvers and shot both in the head. Getting to her feet, she picked up her hat and rifle before moving to stand over the body of the plague-morph. She noticed the shine of a small, silver necklace caught in one of the thing's claws.

"Rest in peace, Lucie," she said, once again saddened that this was the only mercy that she could offer.