

Heart of Darkness

Inside the dangerous race to liberate tens of thousands of slaves in Brazil

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On the day of the raid, Guilherme Moreira awakens before dawn in a seedy motel room in the Brazilian town of Palmas and tries not to think about all the people who want him dead. It's nothing personal -- none of the rich landowners, crooked politicians, dirty cops and hired gunmen who have it in for him have even met him. But that fact provides little comfort. They've killed his kind before, and if they get a chance, they'll do it again.

Moreira gets out of bed and pulls on a gray T-shirt and stonewashed jeans, the same thing he wears on weekends back home in Rio, 1,500 miles away. A small silver hoop glints from his left ear. No uniforms on a day like this. Uniforms only make you a target. Then he goes outside to check on the weapons.

In the predawn darkness, Moreira can make out the outline of two duffel bags in back of the Ford F-150. The 4x4 is as ordinary-looking as they come: white, unmarked, fitted with local plates for an extra measure of anonymity. The bags are stuffed with 9mm semiautomatics and .38-caliber revolvers and a stack of bulletproof vests. For insurance, there is a pair of Heckler and Koch MP5K submachine guns, along with enough hollow-point ammo to hold off an entire platoon.

The weapons have been standard issue for Moreira's *grupo movel* -- a federal "mobile squad" -- ever since four of his colleagues were gunned down on a dirt road in a brutal ambush. The men had stopped to help a motorist who appeared to be having engine trouble; a group of armed thugs suddenly appeared from hiding and opened fire on them, executing the squad leader with two shots to the head. When the gunmen were later captured, they confessed that the "King of Beans" -- Norberto Manica, Brazil's largest bean grower -- had paid them \$17,000 to kill the federal squad. The agents, it turned out, had raided one of Manica's farms. They weren't looking for drugs, or guns, or laundered money. They were looking for evidence that Manica was using forced labor -- the official government term for slaves.

Although Brazil outlawed slavery in 1888, landowners like Manica continue to hold thousands of men captive in the vast scrublands of Brasil Profundo -- Deep

Brazil -- a desolate, sun-scorched region that sprawls across a million square miles in the country's vast interior. It's a brutal, lawless land, where drugs and small arms flow north through the "cocaine corridor" and mahogany and other rare woods stripped from the rain forest make their way to American furniture showrooms. Here, on huge cattle ranches and farms known as fazendas, enslaved men are forced to work without pay from sunrise to sunset under inhumane conditions. Those who refuse to follow orders are beaten and tortured; those who demand payment or attempt to flee are killed, their bodies mutilated and dumped in unmarked graves. Human-rights advocates in Brazil have documented the murders of more than 1,200 forced laborers, and many more killings are passed off as farming mishaps. One recent "accident" victim, a twenty-year-old named Carlos Dias, was killed by a bullet fired into his eye. "It's like your Wild West," Moreira says. "In the hinterland, the landowner is king."

At first light, Moreira's squad of five inspectors and five federal police officers slips out of town, kicking up a cloud of red dust as we head deep into the Brazilian outback. Moreira wipes the sweat from his eyes and scowls. He knows that the dust is visible for miles across the barren cerrado -- and that means the slaveholders will know we are coming. With less than an hour's warning, landowners can hide slaves on their giant ranches and still have plenty of time left to prepare an ambush. "If you listen carefully," Moreira says, surveying the dust cloud, "you can hear the phones ringing at the fazendas."

As we careen through a small town, people pause and stare. Faces appear at windows and withdraw just as quickly. Conversations stop. Even a donkey pulling a cart clops to a halt and watches as the trucks roar by. Moreira turns around again. "That burro made it official," he says with a wry smile. "Now *everyone* in the entire state knows we're here."

Twenty minutes later, we pass a truck tire hanging from a fence post. On the side, painted in crude white letters, are the words "Fazenda Santa Tereza." Cattle graze in the fields. They are beautiful animals, with lustrous coats and gleaming eyes that are testimony to scientific breeding, special diets and excellent veterinary care. They look like oversize show dogs. The land rolls unobstructed to the horizon in every direction. Moreira looks grim. "This is it," he says. Then he lapses into a tense silence, waiting for the raid to begin in earnest.

Moreira knows it is unlikely he will find any slaves today: There are only seven mobile squads to patrol all of Brazil, a country the size of Australia. "*Como enxugando gelo*," he calls it -- like drying ice with a towel. And even if Moreira does find slaves, it's even unlikelier that anyone will pay for the crime. Slaveholders aren't merely immune from the law, some are the law: In recent years, mobile squads have found slaves on fazendas owned by a federal senator, a secretary of agriculture and the speaker of the Brazilian house. With the exception of a few courageous prosecutors, the judicial system is more sympathetic to wealthy landowners than to the enslaved poor. Despite a Brazilian

law allowing for prison sentences of up to eight years for convicted slaveholders, not a single person has yet served a day in jail for the crime.

The government puts the number of slaves at 25,000, but others say there are as many as 100,000. "No one really knows how many slaves there are in Brazil," says Patricia Audi, head of the anti-slavery program for the International Labor Organization in Brasilia. Around the world, an estimated 27 million people are held in bondage -- more slaves than at any other time in human history. In Pakistan, hundreds of thousands of slaves toil in brickmaking kilns. In India, desperate parents sell their children to weave carpets. The Burmese government forces villagers to build roads and bridges, and the "Lord's Resistance Army" in Uganda kidnaps children to serve as soldiers and sex slaves. Gangs in Eastern Europe enslave women into prostitution, and more than 10,000 people in the United States are forced to work in brothels, farms and sweatshops.

Compared to some countries, Brazil has relatively few slaves -- but its effort to end forced labor is widely regarded as a model. Since 2003, the government's antislavery squads have freed nearly 7,000 workers. "They're among the leaders of the world," says Kevin Bales, president of Free the Slaves and author of *Disposable People*, the most comprehensive book on modern slavery. "While other countries pretend slavery doesn't exist, Brazil uses mobile squads with just one purpose: to find and eliminate slavery. That's what other countries should be doing."

If Brazil is the front line in the global war on slavery, the general is President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva -- known throughout the country by his nickname, Lula. A month after his inauguration in 2003, da Silva unveiled the seventy-five-point "National Plan for the Eradication of Slavery," which increased funding for the mobile squads and stiffened penalties for slaveholders. Critics said the plan was too ambitious, but the issue is clearly a personal one for Lula: He is the first chief executive in his nation's 500-year history to rise from the *favelas*, the slums that fester on the outskirts of major cities. When Lula waved to the crowds of working-class supporters who jammed the streets of Sao Paulo the day after his election, they saw the evidence that he was one of them: a gap on his left hand where the little finger should have been, amputated by a machine press when he was a young factory worker.

The process from freedom to bondage begins when a contractor known as the *gato* -- the cat -- enters the slums flashing a big smile and a wad of bills. Hired by the landowners to shield themselves from legal responsibility, the *gato* promises wealth to any man who'll climb onto his truck -- and even a few *reais* to tide their families over until they return, pockets stuffed with cash. In minutes the flatbed is full and headed out of town. The men travel for hundreds or even thousands of miles. Days pass. Along the way, the *gato* gives them food and hands out bottles of cheap *cachaca*, a 140-proof liquor nicknamed *mijo de cao* -- "dog piss." The men think he's being a good guy, but the *gato's* plan is to keep them so drunk that

they won't remember how they got to their destination, whether it's an isolated fazenda on the cerrado or a labor camp in the rain forest.

By the time the hungover men climb off the truck, the gato is shouting at them, telling them that they each owe him a lot of money -- for the advances he gave their families, for the ride to the work site, for the sandwiches on the trip, for the "dog piss" they drank. No one can leave, he declares, without paying off their debts -- and the debts will continue to grow with every day the men work. If anyone tries to protest, guards with huge revolvers stuck into their belts are present to discourage complaints. The men are now slaves.

"Modern slavery is different from classic slavery and, in some aspects, it is even worse," President da Silva told *Rolling Stone*. "In the past, a slave was a piece of property that had to be preserved in order to maintain its price in the market. Today, slaves are a disposable workforce -- they pay a high price for wretched food, they are not assisted if they get sick or in case of an accident, they have to purchase their own work tools and build their own lodges over bare soil, subjected to all weather conditions and bites from poisonous animals. On these horrific farms, cattle, which are property, are treated and fed better than the workers."

It's 1:30, more than an hour behind schedule, when Moreira and his men finally jolt to a stop in front of a large ranch house. Several young cowboys sit on a shaded porch. Moreira and the rest of the squad are out of the trucks in seconds. The cowboys start joking with each other, as if this kind of thing happens all the time, but it's clearly an act. This fazenda has never been raided, and the cops are intimidating as hell in dark sunglasses, ninja-black Kevlar vests with POLICIA FEDERAL in bright yellow on the back, submachine guns slung over their shoulders. Ignoring the cowboys, the squad heads down a path to a smaller house of whitewashed concrete blocks. A man with an enormous gut and the squashed features of a failed boxer is sitting on the porch. He climbs heavily to his feet as the squad surrounds him.

Someone asks his name. "Adail Pereira da Silva," he responds in a gravelly voice.

"The gato," Moreira whispers to me. He asks da Silva, "Where are the workers?"

The gato swears he doesn't know. Maybe out in the fields.

"Where?" Moreira insists. The gato makes a show of scratching his head and looking around, as if it might be possible from the porch to spot the workers on the ranch's twenty-two square miles. The reality is, they could be anywhere. The gato, alerted that the squad was on the way, could have ordered them to leave or had them driven miles from the fazenda.

"Someone tipped him off," Moreira growls under his breath and stalks off.

A high-stakes waiting game begins. Moreira and the gato both know that the clock started ticking the moment the squad arrived. With so much territory to cover, the federal team has only one shot at Santa Tereza. They either find the workers today -- and proof that the men are being held as slaves -- or they will be forced to move on to other ranches, abandoning the workers to their fate. For now, all the squad can do is wait to see if the workers come back, as the sun slowly sinks toward the horizon.

Two hours later, Moreira sees a sight that makes him smile. The men begin returning from the fields in groups of twos and threes. They are dressed in rags, covered with sweat and grime, and carrying scythes. They stumble down a path in a nearby pasture, heading straight for the gato's house. Now it is the overseer's turn to scowl.

The workers drop their tools and collapse on the porch. Twigs and bits of dried grass crown their heads and seem to sprout from their clothes. Their hands are the stuff of nightmares -- palms crisscrossed by cuts, some scarred over, some fresh and raw, others oozing pus. One man is missing a finger. Another man's hands have been recast by work, stiffened like a claw into the shape of the tool handle he clutches all day in the terrific heat.

Moreira identifies himself as a labor inspector and sits down on the porch with a sigh, like a neighbor who has just dropped by to visit. Getting workers to talk is often the hardest part of a raid; the overseer has likely threatened to kill anyone who speaks to the authorities. But Moreira seems genetically engineered for the task. He's average height, with a heavy build and a flicker of sadness in his eyes, his T-shirt untucked and agreeably rumpled -- a disheveled Columbo with a Brazilian accent.

Moreira looks at the men slumped around him on the porch. He knows that one of them probably holds the key to the raid's success or failure. At most ranches, one man has earned the trust and respect of his fellow workers and serves as an unofficial leader for the entire camp. "If that guy starts talking," Moreira likes to say, "so will everyone else."

Moreira scans the group. If there is a leader here, it isn't obvious. He turns to a tall, painfully thin man crouched beside him. "It is," Moreira says, drawing out his words, "so . . . fucking . . . hot!"

The man smiles slightly.

Moreira speaks to another man wearing the tattered jersey of a professional soccer team -- one that's having a very bad season. "Aren't you ashamed to be seen in that shirt?" he teases. A small ripple of laughter spreads through the group.

A few yards away, one man isn't laughing. He's older than the rest and seems oblivious to the banter. Beneath a mud-splattered STP cap, his face is broad, with startling green eyes and a pencil-thin mustache that has gone white. He leans against the house, his muscular arms folded across his chest in a manner that suggests either self-confidence or defensiveness. Moreira knows there could be lots of explanations for the man's detachment. He could be weary. Or a loner. Or sick. Or simply frightened, feigning indifference to mask his terror. Each explanation has its own logic, but none feels right to Moreira.

Then it strikes him: This is a guy who doesn't make small talk.

In Moreira's experience, there are two kinds of leaders on fazendas. There are the fiery revolutionaries who talk long and loud about how badly the *gato* treats them but who ultimately prove powerless to do anything about it. Then there are others whose leadership comes from a quiet center. They're good at reading the *gato's* moods and know when to push and when to let things slide. They don't speak much, and others seek them out for their advice.

Moreira immediately stops kidding around. Without a smile or any preamble, he turns to the older man and puts the question to him directly: "What's it like working here?"

The man, whom I'll call Carlos Vilela, glances at Moreira's clipboard and hesitates. On the ranch, everyone in authority works for the landowner. Off the ranch, no one in authority ever exhibited much concern about the fate of enslaved workers. Vilela seems to be weighing the risks. Then, in a voice loud enough for the other men to hear, he says, "It's terrible."

It isn't a complaint. There's no self-pity in his voice or any sign of outrage on his face. He might as easily have said, "The sky is blue." It's a simple statement of fact, and a few of the other men nod in agreement. Moreira asks Vilela if he is willing to give a formal statement about the conditions.

Vilela removes his cap. "Of course," he replies.

The other workers immediately follow Vilela's lead and begin volunteering statements, just as Moreira had hoped.

As the men talk, an ugly picture of life on the fazenda emerges. At sixty-two, Vilela is the most articulate of the thirty-one slaves in the camp. He has been working on ranches since he was ten. Santa Tereza, he says, is the worst he's seen.

"I've never been on a fazenda where the debts are so high," he tells Moreira. Vilela hasn't received a *real* in the five months he's been here. When the workers are paid at all, he says, it's in the form of scrip -- handwritten IOUs redeemable for goods only at a single store in a distant town. The *gato* periodically takes all the scrip to the store and returns with the items that the workers requested. But

prices have a way of inflating during the drive to the store. The cost of tobacco may double, and then the scrip falls short of the purchase. The difference enters the gato's account book as more debt that the worker must pay off before he's allowed to leave.

The men work the fields at least ten hours a day, six days a week, regardless of the weather. They are fed beans and rice, with a few scraps of meat, which are often spoiled or from diseased animals. Water comes from a well only a few feet from a filthy squat toilet -- a hole in the ground -- and the men carry the water to the fields in plastic jugs with pesticide labels still on them. By law, the ranch owner must provide safety equipment, but there's nothing like that here. Only a lucky few own shoes, let alone boots. Most go to the fields in the kind of cheap plastic flip-flops that Vilela has on -- with predictable results. The second toe on Vilela's right foot curls completely under his other toes. When I ask him about it, he explains that he was cutting down a tall tree during the rainy season, and the ax glanced off the slippery wood, slicing into his foot. The toe was nearly severed, and Vilela wrapped the whole mess in rags. He considers himself lucky because the toe remained attached.

A doctor might have been able to set the toe right, but few of the men here have ever received professional health care of any kind. Forced laborers die from a long list of serious but treatable diseases, including malaria, yellow fever, tuberculosis and dysentery, and all kinds of parasites. Even rest isn't an option for the sick. Vilela recalls the one time he was so ill that he wanted to stay in his hammock. The gato ordered him to the fields. "If you're well enough to eat my food," the gato bellowed at him, "you're well enough to work!" When a slave becomes too sick to work, he's dumped out on the cerrado, where he either gets better or dies.

After taking Vilela's statement, Moreira inspects the unpainted wooden shack where the men sleep. It doesn't look so bad from across the field. Inside, however, the place is an oven. The only windows are holes cut in the wall, and even these are shuttered over. A single bulb dangling from a wire provides just enough light to make out bugs scuttling across the broken concrete floor. There's no furniture, only frayed hammocks, stretched from wall to wall in tiers from the floor to the ceiling. It resembles the hold of a slave ship. I count the hammocks; sixteen men are squeezed into this tiny, airless box.

Moreira paces the room, taking notes for his report. He gets more agitated with each infraction he sees, shaking his head and muttering under his breath. Finally, he reaches some internal breaking point. "You know what *pisses* me off?" he erupts, his anger landing like a hammer on certain words. "I've been in *barns* on ranches. *They* don't look like *this*. They're *clean*. Modern. What *really* pisses me off is when the owners take better care of their *animals* than their workers." He takes a deep breath, and his sardonic smile quickly returns. "Of course, good cows bring good prices," he says. "Human beings, on the other hand, are very, very cheap."

Ricardo Lemos, a shy and scrawny sixteen-year-old, learned that the hard way. A week before the raid, Lemos injured himself in a fall. He didn't think he was seriously hurt, but he grew alarmed when he kept coughing up blood. Maybe he wasn't thinking clearly, or maybe he just panicked, but he started walking toward the fazenda gate. The gato spotted him and jumped on a motorcycle to cut Lemos off.

"There's only you and me here," he told the frightened boy, pulling out a knife. "We have some problems to solve, and we're going to solve them right now."

Lemos turned and ran down the road, his nose dripping blood down the front of his shirt. The overweight gato must have known he couldn't catch the boy. He took out a .38 revolver and fired twice at Lemos. Both shots missed, and the boy got away. Later, I track Lemos down and ask if he reported the incident to the police. He looks at me as if I were crazy. "They buy the police," he says, referring to the local landowners. "They'd kill me."

That night, Moreira and the rest of the squad decide they have enough evidence to prosecute the owner of Fazenda Santa Tereza on thirty-one counts of forced labor. The next day, the owner is ordered to show up at the civic building at the center of the closest town. Tubal da Silva Neto arrives with his lawyer, clutching a plastic grocery bag stuffed with tens of thousands of reis -- the back pay he owes the workers. He looks like a successful American businessman -- midfifties, tall, expensive haircut, clothes that are casual but tasteful. He refuses to acknowledge that he has held other men in bondage. "I'm good to my workers," he insists. "If there's a problem, it's the gato's fault." But after hours of negotiations with Moreira, he agrees to pay the workers what he owes them.

What unfolds next is a scene that has happened only a few times in a world in which tens of millions of people continue to be held in slavery. One by one, each worker comes forward to sign a form. Most can't read or write and must place a thumbprint on the signature line. When it's Vilela's turn, he declines the ink pad and picks up a pen. It takes him more than a minute to sign his name, but he does it. Once he has signed, Neto, who is seated at a desk, hands him a stack of reis. It's the equivalent of \$1,300 -- a small fortune here. The slave owner is paying the slave. Neto stares intently at a ledger open before him, refusing to look at Vilela. As other workers follow, Neto does the same thing with each of them: Just when it's time to pay up, something in the ledger demands his attention.

Out on the sidewalk, a kind of carnival atmosphere prevails as the workers waiting for their names to be called greet those exiting the building with cheers and thumps on the back. A man in a battered straw hat and no teeth comes out. He's trembling as he shakes hands with every inspector and cop in the mobile squad, thanking them again and again: "*Obrigado, obrigado, obrigado.*"

When Vilela emerges, the workers swarm around him as if he's a member of the squad who freed them. He dutifully shakes hands all around but maintains his

poise. I ask Vilela what he plans on doing with all the money he's been paid. He says he'll buy a small farm where he'll live with his wife and children and raise crops.

Vilela searches out Moreira and thanks him. The two men talk briefly and shake hands before parting. Then the former slave walks off down the sidewalk, softly whistling a tune that rises above the barking of stray dogs and the bad music coming from the cafe down the street.

Moreira watches him go. He knows there are countless men like Vilela still enslaved on ranches across Brazil. But despite all he has seen, Moreira doesn't believe in the devil -- only in humanity. "Whatever is done by man can be changed by man," he says. "So I do what I can and hope for the best."

Moreira blushes and holds up a sheaf of documents to cover his embarrassment. "Paperwork!" he says, screwing up his face in distaste. But he's also smiling: For Vilela and the other men, the paperwork means freedom. As Moreira turns to leave, he too begins to whistle, and the notes rise softly into the night as he disappears inside to continue his work.

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