



Chapter Three

The flies were incessant. When breathing they were inhaled. When eating they were consumed. When trying to walk from one end of the dead city to the other, the flies bit and swarmed on any piece of exposed flesh.

There were still plenty of corpses lying along the streets and alleyways for the flies to eat and lay eggs on, but the freshest meat was more than a month old. Most of the dead creatures scattered throughout the city were swarmed with maggots or had been in the heat so long that the flesh was desiccated and the body looked like a fibrous white cocoon.

Small things that crawled or slithered across the cracked pavement dominated the once-thriving city of Rio De Janeiro. The hillside *favelas* were in the worst shape; never having had a good supply of running water or functional sewers in the first place. The tin and plywood shacks of the *favelas* were flimsy and jerry-rigged in the best of times, and now without the constant struggle of maintenance and upkeep by the poor who had lived there, they were the first buildings to fall.

The survivors from the great die-off were all native-born. Only those who had undergone the elaborate Amazon puberty ritual as their rite of passage were immune to the deadly *cordcyps* fungus. They watched as their city-born spouses, roommates, and friends, those who had not spent three days in an isolation hut breathing tukano wood smoke and drinking herbal tea, succumbed to the wasting disease.

At first, they tried to help those who were afflicted, bringing them water and nursing them along. But then they realized that once infected the host was hopeless. Their patient would end up shaking and grasping at the end, before the mushrooms would sprout out from their orifices and claim the diseased body.

The corpses were everywhere. Those native-born who had been working as prostitutes, laborers, and thieves abandoned their *favelas* and formed small groups. They tried to avoid areas of the city with a heavy concentration of bodies, like hospitals or city halls. These groups of transplanted Indians banded together for protection from the wild animals roaming the streets and the other groups of survivors who were just as wild as anything roaming the blasted landscape.

At first there were some fights and shootings as one group would face off against another over a claim to an area of the town and its stores and liquor shops. Eventually they learned that there was plenty of canned food and water for the few survivors left in the city, but that the cities were a putrid and dangerous place to remain.

Bianca was a prostitute. She was tough, a native-born girl who had been kidnapped from the Awa when she was fourteen years old. She was short, like all the Awa, just under five foot tall, but she looked much taller in her seven inch spiked heels and pink hot pants. Bianca was pretty, even with the tribal markings she'd been tattooed with at puberty. She was popular with the locals, but they all knew not to push her too hard; perhaps they'd seen the razor sharp flat blade she hid in her boots.

Bianca lived in one of the poorest *favelas* on the hillside outside of Rio, the one known as the Gaza Strip, a notorious drug and prostitution area. Her hillside shack was in one of the cheaper areas of the *favela*.

She wasn't a first class call girl, merely an average girl struggling with three or four tricks a day just to pay the bills and keep herself in a daily supply of booze and weed. Prostitution was legal in Brazil as long as you didn't operate out of a permanent establishment. Bianca was a low-priced whore, popular with budget tourists such as the English or her fellow, native-born, city dwellers.

When the great die-off began and the bodies began to pile up, Bianca was scared and had started hoarding goods. She began with food, water, and liquor; afraid that so many would die that there would be no stores. But eventually she realized there was profit to be made if she switched her attention to both medical and recreational drugs, air and water filters, and weapons.

Her hillside shack in the Gaza Strip was a three room affair, with a small kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom. The bathroom was a pit toilet behind the house, and any water they used had to be carried up from the road a few hundred yards away down a steep sloped trail.

Though the house wasn't easy to get to, Bianca didn't take chances. She fortified the bedroom and installed interior dead bolts on thick oaken doors and strong metal shutters to keep thieves from her hoard. She began trading items and thrived on dealing guns and drugs.

Bianca only trusted women. Her self-built empire of the *favela* grew quickly. She bartered to hire other working girls and armed them to work as guards or delivery personnel.

They became known as *Las Gatas de Gaza* and soon Bianca was running the largest female gang left in Rio. The girls kept a few cars and buses at the base of the hill and carried out regular raids on all the medical facilities and sporting goods stores within a ten mile radius.

Bianca's Gatas grew to two dozen brave and desperate women. They were heavily armed in public and had earned a reputation of shooting first and asking questions later. Some were ex-prostitutes, some were ex-drug mules, but they were all tough and dedicated to Bianca for providing some semblance of security after the great die-off.

Her chief lieutenant, Ramona, was another native-born girl who'd spent the majority of her life in the Gaza Strip. She was tall for an Amazon, nearly five foot three, but she wore the ubiquitous Kuripako tattoos from the area along the Isana River.

She had grown up spearfishing and gathering jungle herbs until shortly after her tribal initiation when she'd been kidnapped by miners. They'd used her and then sold her off to a pimp in Rio where she'd lived ever since.

Ramona was only a whore for a little over a year before she slit the throat of her gaudy pimp, Sebastian, in an argument over percentages. She was the perfect backup for Bianca.

Ramona had lived by her wits in the *favelas*, dealing drugs and pimping herself when necessary. She was ruthless. There were plenty of stories of Johns who disappeared that were last seen with Ramona.

She had met Bianca at a broken down liquor store a few miles from the Gaza Strip *favela*. Both girls had backup with them, Bianca had a half dozen of her *gatas*, while Ramona had come with four girls from her neighborhood.

The liquor store had already been robbed and the front windows were blown out. Electricity had been off for months so

anything left in the cooler cases was bottled soda, booze, or rotten. Both groups had come for the last of the hard alcohol. Most of it had been taken, but there was a sizable amount of cheap vodka, off brand whisky, and flavored liquors to be carted off.

Ramona and Bianca told their friends to back off as they approached each other in the middle of the littered aisles. Ramona smiled at Bianca and fingered a hunting knife on her belt.

“So bitch. You think you and your skanky *gatas* can just take whatever they want?”

“No, you slut...” said Bianca, the shorter of the two, as she stepped back and put her hand on the Beretta in her waistband, “...we just take what we want because nobody has the balls to stop us.”

“Then just take a look at these, you whore...”

Ramona reached into the pocket of her parachute pants and pulled out a felt pouch. She gave Bianca a sinister sneer as she dumped four sets of dried testicles out on the ground.

“Damn, bitch!” screamed Bianca as she fell to the ground laughing. Her fellow raiders looked at her quizzically as she slapped her hand on the ground in glee.

“Bitch has balls...” Bianca sputtered.

She sat down on the floor with her legs spread apart and leaned back with a smile. Bianca nodded at Ramona and gave her a wink.

“Look slut, that’s the best laugh I’ve had in months. You and your bitches take what you need and go in peace.”

Bianca smiled and reached out her hand to Ramona, who looked quizzically at the hand, then quickly knelt down and scooped up a pair of testicles to put in Bianca’s palm. Bianca’s eyes widened and she reached for her Beretta again.

“No. We’re going with you,” said Ramona as she wrapped Bianca’s hand around the testicles and squeezed it warmly. “We know about *Las Gatas de Gaza* and we want to join. We’ll all have a much better chance of surviving together.”

Bianca eased her free hand from her pistol and reached over to grab Ramona by the shoulder. She looked her in the eye.

“Then you shall be one of us, slut. Now tell us your names or we’ll make some up for you that you won’t like.”

Bianca slipped the pair of dried testicles into her jeans pocket and motioned for her *gatas* to come forward. The six girls put down the cases of booze they were loading and walked confidently forward. Nobody had to say where they were from, each of the girls knew what tribe the other was from just from body build and facial tattoos.

“This is Ilena,” Bianca said as she motioned toward a shapely blond in camouflage pants and a white tank tee. Ilena stepped forward and dropped her hand with the 45 caliber to her side. She hugged Ramona uncomfortably with one arm and nodded to Ramona’s girls. Each of Bianca’s girls performed the same ritual hug as they were introduced.

“..., Rosa, Sophie, Gloria, Esther, and Joy. Who do we have the pleasure of?” asked Bianca, nodding toward the rival group of girls.

Ramona bowed low, exposing her breasts through her loose tank top as she ushered her girls forward. Each of the girls performed the same ritual in reverse with Bianca.

“Joker, Fast Girl, Sneaky, and Loser. None of them wanted anything to do with real names.”

Ramona’s girls were knockouts. All of them had worked as escorts at one time or another and they were each fiercely protective of their leader. Ramona had killed their sadistic pimps for them. Most of her girls wore camouflage of one type or another, while Bianca’s *gatas* all dressed in heels and tight pants.

The girls loaded all the cases of cheap booze they could fit into their two Volkswagen Transporters and then took off for the Gaza Strip with the newcomers split between the two buses.

They cruised down streets littered with corpses and trashed cars, past overflowing sewage, and wild dogs. The girls had remarkably similar stories and they bonded quickly. It was only

about fifteen minutes into the drive when the grenade blew apart the front axle of the lead bus.

Rosa, who had been driving the cream-colored lead bus, was pitched through the flat front window and ended up a mangled pile of red flesh on the asphalt. Gloria, who had been riding shotgun, was wearing her seatbelt and was merely tossed up in the air with the front of the bus and then coated with broken glass.

The new girls in the lead bus, Loser and Fast Girl, were out the side doors of the bus before it hit the ground. Each took cover on one side of the bus and scanned the side streets for action.

Esther and Bianca pulled their sidearms and stuck their heads cautiously out the side door. A few shots rang out and rounds bounced off the door frame as Esther pulled Bianca back into the burning bus.

There was a commotion in front of the VW as a dozen men ran down the middle of the street toward them, firing as they ran. Loser had seen the flashes from the first shots that hit the bus. She poured three rounds into the sniper who was standing in a second floor window over the street. Fast Girl heard one of the first shots buzz by from behind her. She swung around and peppered the guy that was leaning out the door of a pizza parlor with his rifle.

Bianca and Esther jumped out the side door of the bus with their guns blazing and poured a withering fire into the group of men charging toward them. Eight fell in quick succession and lay on the streets screaming in Portuguese. The four that weren't hit dove behind trash piles and tried to slip away down a side street.

When the grenade blew apart the front axle on the lead bus, the following bus, driven by one of Bianca's girls, Joy, skidded to a stop. As one, the girls jumped out the front and back doors of the bus and sprinted for cover.

Ramona, Gloria, and Sophie had been riding in back of the second bus with Joker and Sneaky while Ilena rode shotgun. Gloria had been lying on the cases of alcohol with a rifle by the knocked out rear window to act as tail gunner. When the grenade hit the

first bus, the seven girls piled out of the rear bus and raced up the street.

They caught the four men left crawling away in the gutters and stood them up. Gloria and Sophie had cornered one of the men, a desperate and unkempt Arawak. He was middle-aged and looked like he was down on his luck.

Ramona and her girls, Joker and Sneaky, caught the next three crawling away from the scene. They weren't even looking over their shoulders until the girls were right on top of them with guns to their temples.

They marched the men back to the first bus, now crippled and smoking. Bianca and Gloria, dripping with blood, were bent low over Rosa's body and saying something under their breaths. Ramona had her girls kneel the men down in front of them.

"These are the ones. Shall we kill them now or later?" asked an enraged Ramona as she waved her hunting knife around.

"Bianca? Do you want one, for revenge?"

Bianca looked up from her prayers and stepped across Rosa's body toward the men. She knew from their tattoos that they were all Arawak, men that had left their tribes long ago.

"Who is the leader?" asked Bianca innocently. "We have a message we'd like to send."

Three of the captives turned to the middle-aged Arawak that Gloria and Sophie had captured. He was taller than his companions and his neck was covered with sacred symbols.

"Would you like this one?" asked Ramona as she drew her knife across the tall Arawak's neck.

"No," Bianca smiled, "I'd like to keep him alive to send a message to his leader."

Ramona nodded and kicked the kneeling Arawak down onto the ground. She looked up at Bianca and waited for her new leader to give the nod. When she did Ramona slit the man's pants open and emasculated him while he screamed and squirmed across the ground.

That was the message they wanted to send. Joker, Sneaky, and Fast Girl each put their guns to their captive's heads and blew their brains out. The tall Arawak screamed and grabbed his crotch as he got up and tried to hobble away. A few of the girls bound his wrists, stuffed some rags in his mouth, and kicked him off down the road.

"Send that message...and you're lucky we didn't cut your tongue out as well!" yelled Ramona. She turned toward Bianca and held out something bloody in her hand. "You want these?" she smiled slyly. "Maybe you can start your own collection." girls stuffed some rags in his mouth and then kicked him off down the road. He

Bianca grinned and shook her head.

"No, thank you. Feel free. But good job, sister," Bianca winked. "I think this relationship just might work out."

The girls began loading everything they could from the disabled bus into the rear bus. All ten girls would have to crowd into the one bus. Ramona and her girls refused to ride along.

"If you think we're cramming ourselves in there like a clown car you're out of your mind," snorted Ramona. "If you'd like, I'm sure one of us could find you another vehicle."

Just then Loser came sliding up in a bright green Volkswagen bug. Ramona and her four girls piled into the bug and waved toward the bus to get moving. Joy was already behind the wheel of the overloaded VW bus and gunning it towards the Gaza. Bianca rode shotgun while the rest of her girls crowded in among the cases of booze in the back of the bus.

It was a quick trip. There was nobody left in the neighborhood to set an ambush. The girls pulled the bus and the bug into a makeshift garage at the bottom of the hill below the *gatas'* ramshackle fortress.

Ramona and her girls grabbed cases of cheap whisky from the bus and hiked them up the muddy trail to the house. Bianca's place was heavily guarded, but the *gatas* had already seen Bianca

and Ramona talking like friends so they backed down from the new girls.

Loser, Sneaky, Fast Girl, and Joker tossed their burdens down at the front door of the small house Bianca used. Her guards stood by the door eyeing the new girls until Bianca broke the tension with a scream.

“Welcome your new sisters, bitches! Tonight we party!”

Bianca grabbed Ramona’s hand and led her into the living room where a dozen of the *gatas* were lounging away the afternoon. The girls stiffened at the newcomer, but when they saw the familiarity with their leader, they cooled. Bianca grabbed the taller Ramona by the shoulders and held her in the center of the small room.

“Tonight I tell you,” bellowed Bianca, “this is my sister. Treat her friends as your friends, and the hell with the men.”

As one, the room erupted in cheers. The *gatas* hugged the newcomers and shared booze and smokes. At nearly thirty members, this was now the largest organized force in Rio. It would stay that way for nearly a year. Through shrewd trades and her control of most of the drugs in Rio, Bianca was now in the driver’s seat. Unfortunately her vehicle, the huge city of Rio de Janeiro, was desperately out of control.

The city was clogged with the dead. The flies had multiplied a thousand fold and choked the Rio air. Other insects, ants, spiders, centipedes, took over the low areas and covered the ground with offspring. There were no longer exterminators, or even people to worry about an infestation. There was only the native-born left to worry about sanitation.

At first most of the infrastructure still functioned. Toilets flushed and even the occasional light would come on, but now there was nothing left to power anything. The power plants had been out for months. There were no solar facilities. The water wasn’t working as the circulating pumps were out, and the sewers were overflowing in the streets; even though most of the people who once used them were now dead.

Bianca watched the slow decay of the city and the rapid rise of her own fortunes. She was too sharp to let circumstances decide their fate. The *gatas* were ordered to get as many as a half dozen buses ready for an extended road trip. Bianca then had her girls commandeer a couple of army transport trucks as well.

When the time came, she ordered the girls to load the transport vehicles with every bit of food, medicine, camping equipment, weapons, and filtration devices that they could get a hold of. She and Ramona, who had become her most trusted lieutenant, split the girls into groups of four and divided them among the vehicles.

Their caravan started early. The dead city was silent before the dawn. The six VW Transporters led off the convoy with the two huge commandeered army transports toward the back. As a backup, Loser drove the bright green VW bug that she had stolen on the first night they met. Sneaky rode with her, with a shotgun on her lap.

The *gatas* had heard rumors of the new city. They knew Sylvio by reputation, and even though he was a thieving poacher and well known archeological looter, Bianca and her *gatas* still wanted to throw in their lot with the ex-GRUMEC officer.

The island paradise Sylvio had beckoned them to, Marajo, was hundreds of miles north over open roads, but the *Gatas* were survivors, and with their load of weapons, medicine, and food, there was no way anyone was going to stop them.

When they reached Belem, the gathering point and launch for the port in Marajo, Bianca appointed each girl in teams to guard their goods and vehicles. Sylvio's men had bawked at the VW buses, and argued there was no use for them on the island, but Bianca wouldn't have any of it. She held a knife to the neck of one of the ferrymen until he waved his men toward the buses and agreed to ferry the lot of them for a case of Jack Daniels.

The staging point in Belem was a mess. There were thousands of native-born outsiders milling about several tents and

mountains of supplies. Sylvio's guards were strolling about with automatic weapons to keep the peace.

Sylvio had watched the *gatas* arrive and begin to work their grift. He decided he wouldn't object as long as they didn't cross him or begin to tear down his new society. His bodyguards and private army of ex-GRUMEC special forces men kept an eye on Bianca and her *gatas*, but granted them peer respect.

Nobody knows a woman like a woman, Sylvio reasoned, so he felt it was a good idea to keep his own private army of women close at hand in the teeming port camp. Bianca had been chosen by Sylvio without her knowing, to be his second.

He needed somebody from the south around Rio, and having a woman as second in command was a definite plus. The only one who objected to the idea was Bianca.

"Go to hell!" she yelled at Sylvio. What makes you think I want to have anything to do with you? Why am I not in command?"

Sylvio shook his long mane of black hair and chuckled. He nodded towards Bianca and the ever present bodyguards she had behind her. They were already calling them the Amazons in the camp and their reputation was growing faster than the booming encampment.

"Hey, we respect you." Sylvio bowed slightly towards the *gatas*. "We're building a new world and we want you on the same side."

Bianca toyed with her dark hair and looked at the leader of the outsiders skeptically. She pursed her lips and looked Sylvio in the eye.

"But what do I get from this new world?"

"Don't worry," laughed Sylvio, "...it'll be as if you rule the world."

He nodded to his GRUMEC men and they pointed the muzzles of their automatic rifles to the ground. The half dozen ex-special forces men backed away from the group of women warily. They kept their hands on their sidearms and their eyes darted from

Bianca to her *gatas*. If anyone moved quickly the result would have been catastrophic.

“Come on boys, let’s go. Let’s give our new commander time to organize her group. Once we hit the trail there will be no turning back.”