

## **Quaranteam: Phil's Tale – Chapter Eight**

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### **Chapter Eight**

About a week later, Phil found himself ready to do the one thing he absolutely hated more than anything else in the entire world.

He needed to ask somebody *else* for help.

Phil had lived much of his life like he was a mob boss – he didn't take favors, he gave them out, and he did his absolute damnedest never to collect on them unless he didn't have any other option. But this time, this one time, this was too far out of his skillset.

“Linda,” Phil sighed. “I think we need to head off site again today.”

“Jesus, Phil,” Linda grumbled. “Are you sure there isn't anything you can do here onsite?”

“This one's way above my paygrade,” he grumbled. “And I'm a bio-engineer, not a goddamn code monkey. I need someone to help me understand what I'm looking at.”

“You've got someone in mind?” she said. “Someone you can trust? Someone discrete?”

“I do,” he said. “And they're local. Within the walls of New Eden. We aren't even going to leave the town.”

Linda stood up, nodding. “That's something anyway. It okay if we do a bit of scouting and recon first, or does it need to happen *now* now?”

“It needs to happen today,” Phil said, “but it doesn't need to happen right now. I know you don't like surprises, so I'm going to do whatever I can to make it easier on you. Any time today.”

“Where are we headed?”

He handed her a slip of paper with an address on it. She took the paper from him, opened it, smiled and then tossed it into the shredder. “You could've just said. I've got someone on the inside over there, so that place is five by five at all times. You want to go now?”

Phil nodded. “I want to go now.” He picked up his laptop, slid it into his bag and they headed for the elevator. Operational security should've gotten tighter in the wake of all the chaos, but instead, it'd gotten a great deal more lax, at least in terms to the base itself. The reason, or so Phil had heard, was that because New Eden was functioning as an extension of the base, so the border security in and out of New Eden had gotten strict while the base itself had relaxed. That wasn't how Phil would've managed things, but it also wasn't his concern. Just six months ago, carrying a laptop out of the base would've gotten him shot on sight. Now, nobody even blinked an eye.

On their way through the security checkpoint (if you could even really call it that anymore), Phil saw Linda sending a text message, presumably to her woman on the inside at their destination, letting her know they were coming.

Phil did wish he knew a bit more about the size and reach of Linda's spy ring, but any time he broached the subject with her, she just sort laughed it off and politely told him it was better that he didn't know, just in case he was captured and tortured. He liked to think she was joking about *that* but she might *not* have been, and Phil wouldn't have put it past her either way.

They got into the Tesla and headed off the actual base and into New Eden, Linda driving which gave Phil the chance to sort of look over the suburb that hadn't existed just a year ago. There had been some of the preliminary mansions, and some of the places like Andy's even predated that, but the nucleus of the town had sprung up and been built as fast as possible by whoever they could get, in exchange for getting them higher up on the pairing priority. Once they had a team of skilled construction workers (which often included their partners), they were willing to do as much work as possible to keep people safe.

If they needed to, there was still plenty of room to expand within the walls of New Eden. Most of the mansions had sizable plots of land covered in trees and lawn right now that could easily give room to second buildings. Some people, like Covington, were already getting second homes built on

their plots of land, just places where they could keep all the people in the new weird extended families were expected to have moving forward. Linda was already pushing him to do it at their place, and so he was suspecting Niko was probably beginning to lean on Andy as well.

It was the first time Phil had been over here, but he suspected Linda had been by this way at least once or twice, especially if she had someone from her team placed here. The mansion was around the same size as his own place, one of the mid sized mansions in the area, an automated gate without a guard at it. Most of the places had cameras as their front line of security. Even Andy's place, which was one of the bigger ones, didn't have security staff at the gate.

They brought the Tesla up to the front of the house and hopped out, a woman Phil had seen a couple of times around the base. She was a very fit Latina woman who was still in her fatigues from the base. She'd been assigned here a week ago, but now that she'd been imprinted and familiarized with her partner, she'd started going back to work again. "How's it going, Arroyo?" Linda said to her.

"He's a good dude," the woman replied, reaching out to shake Phil's hand. "Heya Dr. Marcos, how's it going? 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Rita Arroyo. Don't think we've been formally introduced before now."

"Nice to meet you, Rita," Phil said. "And please god, any time we aren't on the based, call me Phil, okay? The last thing I want is everyone thinking I'm getting a big head or something."

Rita grinned, shaking her head with a laugh. "Not at all, Phil. Not at all. Anyway, I told him you were coming, so c'mon in. Let's get to it."

As soon as he walked into the place, Phil noticed how little they'd gotten settled in. There wasn't any sense of personality on any of the walls, and while the place was huge, Linda had made sure that as soon as they'd settled into their home that his personality was writ large on all the walls. Maybe he wouldn't have done it quite as quickly without her there, but he felt like there still should've been something on some of the walls somewhere.

"It still hasn't settled with me that this place is mine," Eric said to him as he met him at the door to the living room. In terms of coders, Andy's former roommate Eric was one of the sharpest people Phil knew. "You were thinking I hadn't decorated yet."

"I might've been."

Eric smirked. "You were, and it was obvious, Phil. I don't mind, because you're right, I haven't decorated yet. Andy and Ash said the same thing when they were here yesterday, so I'm not letting anyone else over here until we spice the place up some."

They moved into the living room, one of the living rooms anyway, and the inside actually had some personality to it, a few large pictures hung on the wall, landscape photos that Eric had taken on vacation of the years. They'd been in his bedroom in the old place, but here they seemed much more fitting.

"See?" Phil said, gesturing to the walls. "You've gotten a start in here."

"Yeah, well, I... *we* spend a lot of time in here, whether it's watching tv or while a handful of us are working. You know us, code from just about anywhere," he said, sitting down next to Lily on the couch. She looked pleased to see Phil, but hadn't gotten up from her seat, her laptop in front of her clearly vexing her in multiple ways. "Lil, say hi to Phil."

"S'up Phil," Lily said, not looking up. "Kill anybody lately?"

"Nah," Phil said with a laugh. "Linda does all my killing for me. How about you? Stepped on the necks of any of your foes the last few weeks?" They'd only met briefly, when Eric, Lily and Jenny had arrived at the mansion a week ago, Phil insisting on giving them the personalize tour, so he could basically prep both Eric *and* Lily for the idea that Eric would be getting more partners over the coming weeks. Rita had shown up literally less than an hour after Phil had left them that day, and Phil was starting to suspect Lily hadn't entirely forgiven him yet.

"Wish I could get close enough for me to do that, but no," she grumbled. "Sorry, not mad at *you*, just dealing with a shitstorm lately. Someone's been fucking with our tracking data, and considering we're doing mad business what with the pandemic going on, the last thing I need is some

fucking blackhat coming in and pissing all over my code.”

“Ah, well then, don't let me stop you from shitting all over their Cheerios,” Phil chuckled.

“So what brings you by, Phil? Judging by the unexpected arrival, I'm guessing it isn't just a social call to see how we're adapting.”

“It isn't, but it doesn't hurt that I can do that while I'm here,” Phil said to him. “How *are* you adapting? Getting settled in to the place, used to having staff?”

“Thank fuck you only gave us the one housekeeper slash cook, Phil,” Lily grumbled. “I think if you'd have given us a full time gardener and a full time maid like Casa De Rook, we wouldn't have had enough for them to do on a daily basis.”

“It's entirely possible it's coming, Lily,” Phil told her. “Sorry about that. As it stands, though, the minimum number of female partners a male partner needs to have to get good-to-great immunity is more than you're pulling down over here.”

“I let you add a bodyguard for him, Phil,” Lily sighed. “What more do you want from me?”

“I want you to let more women into the *house*, Lily,” Phil chuckled. “You can still be Queen Bee but the hive needs more people taking care of the honeymaker.”

Eric laughed, pointing at Phil in a 'I see what you did there' gesture, while Lily just rolled her eyes. “Fine. Just make sure they understand who fucking runs this house and that they shouldn't get in my way when I'm in a bad mood.”

“Absolutely Lil,” Phil chuckled. “It's your house; Eric just provides for it.”

“Too fucking right,” she said, stabbing a finger in the air, not even looking up from her computer. “As long as they all remember that, you can send a dozen fucking dancing girls in here for all I care.”

“I see she's lightening up,” Phil said to Eric with a smile.

Eric smiled and nodded back, even as Lily pointed a finger at him, still not looking up. “Don't you encourage him. He's a bad influence.”

“So why are you *really* here, Phil?”

“You've still got all your clearances, right, Eric?”

“From one spook to another, Phil, I haven't the foggiest what you're talking about,” Eric said with a devilish grin. “Course I do. Why?”

“I want you to look at something for me,” he said, reaching into his laptop, pulling it out and turning it on. “Take your time, don't rush it. I want you to read through the entirety of the code and see what you think of it.”

Phil and Linda talked a little while Eric was reading through the code on Phil's laptop. About four minutes into reading into it, Eric looked up at Phil, a frown on his face. “Is this what I think it is?”

He nodded. “This is the Oracle code. One of the most recent drafts of it, anyway. I know the guy who wrote and maintains it is constantly tweaking it. Keep going. See what you can see in all of it and tell me what you're looking at.”

Eric continued, skimming through it piece by piece, tracking his way through it. Phil could see he was heavily concentrating and didn't want to interrupt, but the wait was driving him crazy. It was maybe fifteen minutes later before Eric spoke again.

“Okay, so I think I've got a grip on the broad strokes,” Eric said. “Why am I looking at it?”

“Tell me how it works,” Phil replied.

“Broadly or specifically?”

“Start broad and narrow your way down.”

“Alright, so if you get right down to it, it's not all that complicated of an algorithm. It's pretty similar to what sites like OK Cupid and Match use for their back end matching,” Eric said. “That's just the first pass, though.”

“First pass?”

“Right. So what this Oracle program does is to set a man's sexual preferences down to a single

profile, and then runs all the women in the database against it. Whenever a new woman is entered, she's pushed through the system and it grades her viability with all the available men in the system. Then it considers things like distance between the two, and number of partners that particular man already has. It's extremely more heavily weighted in the man's favor, however.”

“How do you mean?” Phil asked.

“Okay, so imagine you have 100 points worth of weight to assign this, and on your typical dating site, you assign them as a 50/50 split.”

“Sure.”

“Here, it's more like a 80/20 split in the man's favor,” Eric said, waving a finger in the air while he talked. “To some extent, sure, I get that. Men are currently more rare than women, so the goal is to make sure that the men are satisfied and not rebelling against the system. But this is pretty heavily biased towards men, even taking that into consideration.”

“Anything else?”

Eric nodded. “It's this portion of the code that I'm a little surprised by, simply because whoever was building this spent a *lot* of time getting it right and smooth,” he said, tapping the screen. “Once the system is in the process of considering assigning a woman to a man, it *then* goes and runs a compatibility screening against all the other women assigned to that man already. Sexual if they're bisexual (and maybe even if they *aren't*, I'm not entirely sure about this bit here) but just straight up personality-wise, assessing what a house dynamic would be like should the additional person be added to it. I mean, I'm talking the kind of socio-political algorithm the likes of which I've never even *dreamed* about. *This*, this is the reason why the women's questionnaires are so much fucking longer than the men's. It's not just evaluating women against men; it's evaluating women against each other, making sure that when they're added together, the system isn't building some kind of ticking time bomb just waiting to go off.”

Phil's face scrunched up uncomfortably. “Can you give me an example?”

“Sure,” Eric said. “So one of the things this code does is flag levels of assertiveness and immediately after that, it flags levels of competitiveness. Essentially, the software is building a template of 'is this woman going to be the alpha of the house,' and 'if not, is she going to conflict with the existing alpha?' It *internalizes* a whole ton of 'roles' around the house, ranging from 'alpha,' 'counselor,' 'protector,' 'builder,' 'homemaker,' 'muse,' I mean the list goes on and on. There's like hundreds of various personality archetypes in here, and everybody gets flagged with at least one, but usually some combination of them. I don't have access to the database this is all connected to, but I would guess that a standard output probably gives each profile between five to ten ranked archetypes, and then cross-references that against *everyone else* in a particular home someone's being considered for. Is it going to make some mistakes? Sure, definitely.” The man sounded almost like he admired the code. “But this is pretty comprehensive, and if the evaluating questionnaires are doing their job right, there's going to be generalized house harmony in, oh, like 80-90% of the households, and that's without people having to work too much at it. I'd argue that catastrophic failures would be rare, and they're likely to happen in the lower ranks of men, simply because the system has a threshold it needs to hit in terms of assigning each man a number of partners. Is this number right?”

He nodded back at Eric. “Yeah, they keep turning the number of women that should be assigned to any man up, because of the casualties rate on the constant climb.” He leaned back on the couch as Linda squeezed his hand. “But you know all about that. It's nice being able to talk to another guy who's at least a little in the know.”

“The CIA's got us doing analysis of other countries and their response to DuoHalo, and I gotta tell you, Phil, as much as we sort of suck at this, we don't suck at this as badly as everybody else sucks at this,” Eric said with a soft sigh. “Some of the countries are very much up shit creek without any paddles. Like, we're not number one at this response, but we're definitely top ten. Some of these countries, though, they're going to be trying to import men, to up their respawning numbers.”

“What do you mean 'import men?' What does that even mean?”

“I mean that one of the theories the logistics and modeling team has put together is that men are going to be the new currency, at least for the next several years. Countries need to keep their population from dying off, so they're going to start trading men around like breeding stock at some point. That's assuming you guys figure out the deimprinting problem,” Eric told him. “How's that coming along, by the way?”

“It's not,” Phil replied. “We have an emergency thing that works in case of death, but we can't even really tell you *why* it works. If a dude dies, we've got a twenty-four hour window in which we can harvest sperm from his corpse, and something about the sperm in a decomposing fashion will essentially de-link a partner, but they go into a need frenzy, the kind of thing that happens when a woman goes too long without getting her fix from her partner. And she will reimprint on whatever man she takes on as soon as that happens. We haven't had to test that it works multiple times, but there's nothing in our modeling that says it won't work repeatedly. We'll keep an eye out and see what happens if it comes to that.”

“Speaking of keeping an eye out,” Eric said, tapping the screen, “this software has a couple of back doors in it that I don't like the look of. That's something you should know about.”

“What do the back doors *do*, Eric?”

“Hard to say, but it looks like someone with the right level of admin access could just insert a person and override the Oracle profiling system,” he said, handing the laptop back over to Phil. “The system will use that person's templating in later matches, though, but the system can't guarantee as much harmony if people are just messing around with it willy nilly.”

“There's been talk about putting in a 'request' system into the program, so that people can suggest to the system particular people they'd like to be paired up with. I know some work on that's already started, so maybe that's the back door you're—”

“No no, I saw that script in there, and it's mostly done, and it follows the normal rules with just a few minor tweaks and nudges in that it starts with a specific candidate rather than just anyone,” Eric interrupted. “That's being done by someone who didn't write the main portion of the code. Neither was this back door, either, for what it's worth. The insertion process, the one using the back door and not the script, overrides *everything* and just *tells* the system 'you're pairing this person with that person so get fucking used to it,' and it just *does* it. It also fabricates a false pairing report if anyone looks at it, so it's basically impossible to tell the difference between scripted request and an implanted mandatory matching after it goes through. And the process runs a person through the profiling system so it takes all that into consideration for latter runs. It's not too stable, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“So, assuming you used this backdoor to insert someone *once*, the problems with latter people would be almost entirely minimized and compensated for,” Eric said, leaning back in his seat as Lily finally closed up her own laptop. “But each successive time you used it, it's going to complicate things, not additive but multiplicative. That means your first and second people that skip the process have like a 0.5% of causing things to go haywire. Your *third* person goes to 2%. Your fourth is probably 8-10%. Your fifth would be 20-25% problems. Any time beyond that, well, you're just playing Russian Roulette with your social life at that point, because the system can no longer adequately predict how the social construct model for your home is going to work at that point, so it basically throws its hands up in surrender. At that point, anyone you request, through the script or through the backdoor, is going to be just flat out approved, because the system has marked that person as a corrupted file and says 'Well, there's no hope to this case any more, so don't assign it anyone until it asks, and whenever it asks, fuck it, give'em whatever they ask for, and don't waste your time thinking about it.' The person who wrote the backdoor must've had two mandates in mind – make sure that anyone added this way just happens, and make sure it can't be traced back. Everything else? Fuck it. Not in spec.”

“And there's *no* way you can back track who's come in from where?”

Eric tossed his hands up in defeat. “Like I said. The data's all designed so that the backdoor mimics it perfectly. What with the script you've got here, I don't even know why the backdoor exists other than someone wanted to guarantee, and I do mean *guarantee*, that they could send person A to person B, no questions asked, no chance of rejection.”

“I can think of a handful of people who might have demanded that level of power, although I wonder if they know exactly how dangerous it can be to them.”

“Probably not,” Eric chuckled. “I mean, if *I* was the coder who had to put this in, I'd have told the client, 'don't over use it otherwise it may have problems,' but beyond that? Caveat emptor.”

“Let the buyer beware indeed,” Phil said.

“Hang on, back up,” Linda said. “You're telling me there's a way for a man to just... to just fucking *take* a woman he wants?”

“Well, *yes*,” Eric said, “*but* it could also be just as easily used the other way. Men are given priority when they're put into the system, but the backdoor can also be set up to *anticipate* a person coming in, like a spider laying in wait. Once a man is put into the system, the spiders laying in wait get to see it *before* it goes into the main pool. It looks like they're also starting to forcibly relocate living men, but we all knew that was coming sooner or later.”

“Did we?” Linda asked.

“Well, *I* did,” Eric laughed, “but then again, I'm watching big data boards for this whole mess like my life depends on it, which, y'know, it might.” Lily snuggled up against his side, wrapping her arms around him.

“So, what,” Lily asked. “They're just going to move dudes from one place to the other?”

“Not *all* of them, but a *lot* of them, yeah. The farming communities are getting hit the hardest, so lots of that land is getting redistributed. Tons of that stuff is automated machines these days, but you still need human oversight on it, so some of the denser urban clusters are getting broken up and people are getting scattered around the country a bit more. There's still going to be your major metropolitan areas, but they aren't going to be anywhere near as densely populated as they were.”

Phil nodded. “I saw what they're doing for places like NYC and other big metro areas with large skyscraper apartment buildings or condos. They're giving an entire floor to a household, and telling them to knock down any doors or walls they want within reason. So those forty and fifty story skyscrapers now just have forty or fifty households in them. They're sort of becoming mini-cities, because typically those buildings are also converting one floor into a cafeteria/restaurant, so that they can stay within the protective walls of their building most of the time. Like, a skyscraper becomes like a little mini colony ship.”

“That's fucking crazy,” Lily said. “And people are okay with that?”

Eric leaned down and kissed Lily's forehead. “More than okay, it seems like. Contentment and satisfaction in your typical colony building is higher than almost any other type of settlement.”

“*Almost* any other?”

Phil chuckled, shrugging. “The 'mansion cluster' approach of New Eden still has the highest, but it also cost the most to set up. They're trying small-to-mid contained cities as an approach in a handful of locations – the Pacific northwest, some of the skiing towns up in Colorado, a handful of the mid rural south east towns. We'll see how those turn out.”

“You're *sure* I have to let them send more bitches at my man?” Lily grumbled.

“He's at, like, 40% DuoHalo resistance right now, Lil,” Phil told her. “Believe me, you want that number as high as you can fucking get it.”

“Yeah yeah yeah...” she muttered. “Fine. *Fine*. Open the floodgates. Start sending bitches left and right at him until he's guaranteed to live through this shit, but they'd better understand he's *mine* first and foremost.”

“Trust me, Lil,” Eric said to her. “I'm *positive* the system has you flagged as a *massive* alpha, and they won't send anybody to butt heads with you. That said, if you've got any friends or girlfriends

you want to bring into the house and keep safe...”

“It means sharing them with you, which I'm not happy about,” Lily told him. “But it would be nice to have a couple of my girls around to make sure I'm not going crazy or anything. And you say it'll run them through a compatibility check first, make sure the horse won't upset the apple cart or anything? Since you've got so much faith in this code.”

“You know as well as I do, Lil, that no code is perfect,” Eric replied, “but if you want to bring a couple of your friends in, either the system will reject them upfront or we'll make it work.”

“Thanks for this, Eric,” Phil said, patting the laptop before tucking it under his arm. “You and Lil have a chat, see if there's anyone you want us to run through the script for you, and I'll get your friends moved to the front of the line.”

“Thanks dude,” Eric said, standing up with Lily, as they started to walk him and Linda out.

Linda had been unusually quiet during the whole conversation, and Phil had learned one thing – that meant she was absorbing information and thinking. When they got out to the car, they climbed in and in the privacy of the Tesla, she finally spoke on what she'd been thinking about.

“Who the hell has access to make a backdoor like that?” Linda asked him. “Cunningham clearly didn't do it himself. How big is the Oracle team?”

“I think there's somewhere between eight and twelve people on it, including Cunningham, and it could be any one of them,” Phil said. “I had Eric take a look at it because he's excellent at spotting buried code, things that are tucked in and hidden, meant to look like something else. The rest of the team probably doesn't even know it's in there, and if I called it out to them, they'd probably freak out, and it'd just disappear and reappear later. Better that I know it's there and they don't know I'm onto them.”

“I guess,” she sighed. “I just don't like the idea of any woman being *sent* to a man she'll hate.”

“I don't like it either, Linda, but if they do it too much, it'll blow up on them and then we'll know where they're going.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said. “Let's just get home.”

She drove the car back across New Eden, stopping to grab some BBQ to take home, Phil having texted their cook, Winnie, that they were bringing home carryout tonight. She shot back a message saying that they should not make any other stops on the way home. Phil called to asked if everything was okay, and Valerie, the house manager, answered.

“Look, Phil, I don't want to worry you, but Audrey's acting a little weird, and I'd just feel better if you could get home and check on her,” Valerie told him.

“Weird *how*?” Phil asked.

“Twitchy. Impatient. I know it says here she dosed up from you just a couple of days ago, but it's almost like she's near the nine or ten day mark.”

“Okay, we're almost home, don't worry.”

A few minutes later, they were pulling into the garage at the house, and as soon as the car pulled into the garage, Audrey was rushing into it, pulling the door open, lunging in, shoving her lips against Phil's in a messy kiss.

“Phil. Fuck me. Right fucking now,” Audrey said to him, her eyes a touch reddened.

“*NOW*.”

Shit, Phil thought. Better give her what she wants...