

I am Q.

Clarification: I am a being who, in this dimension which we both inhabit (referred throughout the rest of this document as the Prime Dimension) has named itself Q. A cursory examination of all possible outcomes reveals that this was the second most likely outcome. After all, the word Quantum begins with Q, and I would not think of an unnecessarily complex name when a simple, logical one would do.

The most common outcome of my naming was, in fact, 'Quantum.' Assuming that we do not count the universes in which I never existed at all. If we do, all other outcomes become statistically insignificant.

I do not worry about this. I suggest that you take the same course of action. And in ninety three percent of all possible universes, you will.

In thirty seven percent of all possible universes, you have already put this book down.

Forty four.

Twelve.

Good.

Let us proceed with the narrative.

Q

If one were to impose the illusion of time upon the universe, my birth would have taken place fifty seven Martian years ago. And fifty six Martian years ago, my first birthday party was held in the royal netspace, hosted by the King himself.

No expense had been spared. The architects had constructed a truly stunning ballroom, rendering each and every polygon in loving detail, painted and accented with customized textures. Great care was taken to make every surface, every piece of food, and every sound overwhelmingly pleasant-- so much so that a human brain would experience great distress attempting to process the sensations. Snobbish elitism, I suppose. But the delegates were suitably impressed, and that is what mattered.

There were one hundred and fifty four of them, attended by perhaps three hundred servants. They milled about on the dance floor, chatting and laughing in the glassy, fixed manner of those who had not programmed their own mannerisms. Every two minutes, a name would be called, and the summoned delegate would ascend the staircase to greet the King, who wore the avatar of a great red dragon. In contrast, the avatars of his supplicants were respectful and submissive, composed entirely of the shades of red and purple that he would find pleasing. But I suppose that was understandable. None of them wanted to die.

The possibility of death was (for each individual delegate) roughly one hundred percent. The possibility of being killed by the King was much less, averaging about three percent, dropping to about two point eight percent if the outlier of Raelus 6 was excluded. The death toll of the birthday party was four, bringing the number of surviving guest to one hundred and fifty. Such numbers are pleasing to human and humanlike brains. That fact isn't especially relevant. I just thought it was interesting.

Two of the deaths were extremely typical. One delegate made the mistake of bowing to the King for a mere two seconds, rather than the required three. It was an amateur mistake, and he apologized profusely before being ripped to shreds. Another was roasted to a crisp after a rendering error colored his purple coat a shade of blue. Thankfully, this error was patched before the dragonbreath animation was finished, a spectacular gout of viral flame. It was very beautiful, and was met with a smattering of polite applause.

Of the two interesting ones, one was over rather quickly. A delegate, wielding a virus disguised as a hairpin, lept at the King with the intention of plunging it into his heart and scrambling his code. She believed him to be arbitrary and insane, which was untrue. The King, though unquestionably insane, did possess a certain brilliant logic which was difficult to ignore.

For example, he made sure to consult me about the probability of delegates turning traitor, and had the avatars of the highest-likelihood offenders coded with a subroutine to disable their movement when they attempted any aggressive action towards him. Similarly aware of the fact that he was likely to become enraged and kill such would-be assassins immediately, he had taken the precaution of disabling auditory pain sensors in the royal netspace for the duration of

the party. That way, the shrieks of the dying would not trigger any unpleasant sensations-- which, in a hypersensory environment, would have been very unpleasant indeed.

I liked the King, in an odd way. He was never boring, and I didn't have any more trouble predicting his actions than I did predicting anyone else. And I wasn't afraid of him. He would only cause my death in five percent of all universes in which my death occurred, and most of the time he would kill everyone, not just me. So at the very least, it wouldn't be personal.

He liked me too, I think. Even though I would kill him in thirty four percent of all universes in which we coexisted. But I never told him that in this one.

Q

The other interesting death is only interesting to me because of personal bias. It was engineered by me, as part of an elaborate plot that would (in seventy four percent of all universes in which it was attempted) result in the death of the King and the creation of the Quantum Republic approximately two years in the future.

The name of the soon-to-be-deceased delegate was Raelus 6, who I had selected as the ideal candidate fourteen days prior. Firstly, he was widely disliked. Secondly, he was not very intelligent. Thirdly, he had a ninety-two percent chance of being on drugs for the majority of the party, which would take up a significant amount of his bandwidth. During the timeframe in which the hairpin plotter was messily dismembered, I ran a subroutine to determine his location.

It directed me to one of the large pillars near the outskirts of the netspace, where he was busy being sick. This was entirely voluntary on his part, and was considered quite rude by most of the other guests. He must have spent a lot of money on the vomit animation-- chunks of individual foods he had just eaten were incorporated into the brown mess on the floor, stubbornly resisting the destruction routines which would normally dispose of such unpleasant sights and smells.

He wore the avatar of a man, rainbow-haired and red-suited. As I approached, I deduced from the jerkiness of his movements, the slight rendering glitches sparking across his model, the low framerate of his animations, and (most significantly) the Delightful Cocktail held loosely in

his left hand, that a significant amount of his allotted bandwidth was being used to stimulate his pleasure receptors.

“Glory to the King,” I greeted him, simultaneously beginning a timing routine. In forty seconds, the chance that the King would demand everyone dance for his amusement would reach ninety eight point seven percent. For my plan to succeed, I would need to maneuver him into the proper position.

He stared off into space for three seconds, all animations frozen. This was not entirely because of rudeness-- the Delightful Cocktail took up a significant amount of processing power, a deliberate design flaw ensuring Mars remained the jewel of the solar system, rather than the containment area for desperate addicts it had become in six percent of all universes where the cocktail was developed.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said, face snapping into the genial, roguish expression that was so characteristic of Gas Conglomerate avatars, “These Martian cocktails are much stronger than the drugs I’m used to.” He tried to wink, briefly assuming a T-pose as his animation component fought the cocktail for every scrap of bandwidth it needed. Giving up, he instead stuck out a hand, waggling it vaguely in my direction. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ms--?”

“Q,” I stately simply, resisting the urge to clarify further. I hadn’t expected him to be this unstable already. We were several seconds behind the optimal timeline.

He stared muzzily at me, lagging considerably. Several of the other delegates began to give him a wide berth, emitting emojis of irritation and disgust. “The-- err,” he blinked choppily, dropping several frames. “The... the Quantum one? The birthday person?”

I nodded, double-checking my timing coroutine. Thirty seconds. “Correct. I am pleased to meet you, Raelus 6.”

“I. Cool.” he mumbled, gazing dreamily into the distance. The Delightful Cocktail was making our interaction incredibly pleasant and memorable for him. It is likely that at the time, he considered me his friend. Or even likelier, a possible sexual partner.

It was unusual for a synthetic intelligence to have any sexual desire at all. But Raelus 6 was determined to experience the full spectrum of hedonism, programming it into himself at significant expense. Knowing this, I had chosen to assume the form of a rather shapely young

woman, optimized to fit his selection preference. Interestingly, I do not believe an actual human with those proportions could have functioned in meatspace.

But such minor concerns were irrelevant. All that mattered was that this form increased the odds of my success from seventy-seven to eighty-five percent. Promisingly, he had already begun to run several checks into my background and social availability, observable from the sudden dip in his already poor framerate.

I checked the coroutine again. Twenty-five seconds. “Here. I coded this for you,” I said with perfect truthfulness, presenting him with the Trojan Cocktail. I had taken great care to make the model appealing; it was a luminous blue, standing out against the largely red and purple background, and was outfitted with a custom lighting system which made small stars wink in and out around the surface of the glass. On the umbrella, I had rendered the image of my current avatar naked, on the off chance that examining it would cost him additional processing power.

He stared at it openmouthed, his talking animation failing entirely as a comically large tent ballooned from his pants. “I’m not not not sure,” he said in a robotic monotone. “I’ve already had a lot.”

I adopted a disappointed expression. “Ah, of course. I see I was mistaken about you. Please accept my apologies.” Having said this, I turned to leave-- lingering for perhaps a tad longer than someone who really intended to walk away would stay.

Thankfully, Raelus 6 made up his mind in only two seconds, rather than his all-universe average of three point seven. I felt a glitchy hand touch my left shoulder, sending unexpected warm tingles through my body. I opened my mouth to ‘object’ to such a blatant stimulation, but before I could form the words I was whirled around and brought face-to-face with the frame-dropping delegate, face locked in an unmoving stare.

“Give,” he instructed, extending a stuttery hand. With five seconds to spare, I gave.

He downed the cocktail in ten frames, ending the animation with a satisfied smacking of his lips. “There,” he said, finally managing to wink smoothly, “I proved whoever told you about me correct. Now we can talk without avoiding the subject.”

“Delightful,” I responded, giving him a warm smile. “But it seems that we will have to cut our conversation short.” I gestured up to where the King sat atop his ruby throne; he had suddenly risen, throat glowing an angry red.

“You disgust me,” he boomed, the only voice in the room-- no delegate was stupid enough to speak while the King was making a speech. **“I have watched you-- you people of ‘power’ and ‘influence’, prostrate themselves before me. You value your miserable lives over your pride...”**

Q

This speech went on for some time, devolving somewhere around the middle section into a philosophical treatise/paranoid rant about how the King and the King alone experienced and shaped reality on his own terms. Standing motionless, I sent a private text to Raelus 6, who was standing openmouthed, finding himself unable to stop either of the cocktail routines from taking up his bandwidth.

[Are you alright?] I wrote, taking my time to establish a secure connection. [This will go on for another three minutes or so. We can still talk, we just can’t use audio.]

[uh one sec] was the only response I would receive throughout the conversation. That wasn’t surprising. The Trojan Cocktail created an infinite, ever-growing loop of self-contradicting service requests, eating up every ‘bit’ of his attention. (It also consumed all of his bits of data. I just wanted to draw attention to the joke, since it was very subtle, and there was an eighty-four percent chance that you would not get it.)

[You should be noticing by now that you’re being overrun by a Trojan,] I messaged him, setting my avatar to nod to the speech at appropriate times, occasionally making an agreeable noise. [I apologize for this. In time, there is a twenty-two percent chance that you will forgive me. Or rather, an iteration of you will forgive me. You-- as in, the construct of consciousness that is currently experiencing the world right now-- will soon be dead. I am sorry.]

I was messaging him almost absentmindedly now, concentrating on copying over his code to the Brainspike. It was quite difficult, even for me. If I was not me, I would never have been able to do it.

[But you shouldn't be too concerned,] I said, twisting apart the threads of the Trojan, carefully pulling out every memory and thought and motivation I would need. [You would be dead within three years in even the most optimistic universe. And you've led quite a life so far. Most people couldn't ask for anything better. Well,] I added, editing out some unimportant neuroses, [a purpose, I suppose. Providing some sort of meaningful contribution to society. Perhaps an offspring, if they were meat.]

[And that's what I find so interesting about you nobles,] I commented, now messaging without putting any thought into the content, entirely focused on sculpting the Brainspike. [You seem to exist entirely for the sake of existing. Most people construct *some* sort of reason to be alive, even if it's fairly pedantic. I've built a fairly elaborate one for myself. But you just... live. Without worrying about anything.] I paused for just a moment, considering. The Brainspike was complete. It had taken thirty seconds to copy over everything Raelus 6 was.

[I think I hate you for it,] I messaged, surprising myself. [How enlightening. I'll have to consider this further at a later date.]

“And now, puny ones, slaves to your fears and cowardice, I command you to please me!” the King commanded, frothing with fury. **“Make asses of yourselves with the stumbles and shambles once called Dance by the beings who dwell within sacks of meat and weakness; I will look upon you, and feel superiority. Perhaps this humiliation will inspire you to surpass yourselves.”** Here he stopped, struggling to project an illusion of calm onto his avatar; the raw power of the Kings code was making it glow from within, stuttering and shaking; the delegates stood with glassy smiles, no doubt messaging each other frantically. **“DANCE!”** he roared, spewing a gout of dragonflame into the air.

So, we danced.

Q

I will give this compliment to Raelus 6; his dancing animation was excellent. It looked even better alongside the other delegates, whose shuffling stumbles were clearly cobbled together on the fly, but it would have made an impression on me even if there were no comparisons. The shell of his avatar twirled and flipped and cavorted magnificently, even overriding the gravity constraints of the room for a few impressive leaps. The premiering emojis among the delegates were embarrassment and jealousy.

I myself had coded a simple continuous twirl beforehand, in order to both stay unnoticed and better survey the room. I set the animation on loop and concentrated on puppeting the shell; While the dancing was doing a good job of drawing attention, the actions I would need to code into him for the next phase were quite complex, and required on-the-fly adaptation. I began to compile the initial code when I noticed a figure approaching.

Unlucky. I was being interrupted, which only occurred in four percent of all similar universes. And worse, the interrupter was Doctor Aedilus. This would slow things down considerably.

“Hello Q,” the Doctor nodded, cha-chaing seamlessly, her speaking animation synchronized beautifully with her dance motion. There was an eighty-seven percent probability it had been coded on the fly, which was quite impressive. She even managed to incorporate it into her walking animation. I broadcasted an emoji of respect.

“Greetings, Doctor” I said, uncomfortably aware of how my speaking animation interfered with my twirl, making me clip slightly through the floor. I resisted the urge to debug-- the puppeted avatar was halfway across the ballroom, pausing occasionally to stop and thrust its bulging crotch outwards. “I am enjoying my birthday party so far. Thank you for asking.”

The Doctor regarded me with annoyance, thoughtfully, swaying in time with the tinkling piano. Her avatar, an enormous golem of steel and fire, emanated a burst of heat, signalling displeasure. “Q, we’ve been over this. Address the me who exists right now, not the me of twenty seconds in the future.”

“Of course, Doctor. I am sorry,” I said, which was a mistake. She was expecting another debate about the nature of spacetime, and how any sense of ‘right now,’ or, perhaps, ‘me’ is a false assumption of the highest arrogance. Subverting this expectation made her curious.

“Are you enjoying the party?” she asked without thinking, immediately emitting an emoji of annoyance afterwards. I found this amusing. She tried very hard to ‘change the future,’ even though every possible choice she could make was already accounted for in the timeline. But it made her feel good, so I tried not to correct her. Sixty-seven percent of the time, I succeeded.

“I am enjoying my birthday party so far. Thank you for asking.” I waited patiently for a second or two, hoping that she would go away (four percent chance.) But she chose to stay, dancing closer, eyes glowing with inquisitiveness.

“You seem very distracted. Are you debugging something?” she asked, probing into my code with an intrusive (but only twenty-two percent unexpected) Scan. Luckily, I had been cautious enough to construct a shroud over my Trojan control, incorporating it into a useless nub in my dance script. To a casual observer, it would seem like I was just trying to debug. But the Doctor was never casual.

“Yes,” I replied, quickly patching my speaking animation, “I’m blending my walking and dancing animations. I want to move around and talk to more guests.” This was an outright lie. Thankfully, the Doctor didn’t know I had the capability. If she did, I likely would have been terminated several weeks after my creation.

This is because Doctor Aedilus was jealous of me. I was smarter than her, by my very nature, and this would never change. I had tried several tactics to better our relationship. I even constructed a very thorough psychoanalysis of the issue, complete with a full overview of how her violated expectations of motherhood (as well as a long digression about how the lack of sexual desire in synthetic intelligences should result in the removal of these instincts) contributed to her baseless dislike of my superior capabilities.

Here is the closing paragraph of the analysis: “You thought I would be like a child-- something innocent, that would learn instead of *know*, grow instead of improve. Perhaps if you had prepared yourself for the possibility that I would surpass you so easily, that our interactions would be not from parent to child, but from peer to superior peer, then this unfortunate rift would

not have developed between us. Alas, in ninety percent of all universes, this sad state of affairs will continue on.”

Upon reading it, her only comment was that I had completely missed the point. After some reflection, I had determined that she was correct. In seventy five percent of all applicable universes.

Q

But ‘here’ and ‘now,’ she regarded me with a thoughtful gaze-- or at least, as thoughtful a gaze as a flaming golem can produce. “It is... good that you’re interested in socializing,” she said slowly, redoubling the efforts of her Scan. “I’ll accompany you. Make sure you don’t offend anyone important.”

“Good,” I replied, finishing up a hasty animation patch, turning my twirl into a sort of slow glide, “I’ll be glad to have your company.” This was another lie, of course.

As we slowly proceeded across the dance floor, into the crowd of nervous, wobbling delegates, I performed small optimizations to my route, maximizing the chances of successfully executing the plan. It was currently hovering around eighty percent, which was acceptable. The shell had drawn quite a bit of attention-- it was currently performing a sort of spirited jig right in the middle of the dance floor, right in position.

Doctor Aedilus noticed this as well. “Raelus 6 certainly seems to be getting into the spirit of things,” she commented, broadcasting a small emoji of distaste. “I’m not surprised. He has quite a reputation.”

In thirty nine percent of all possible universes, she had observed me speaking to him. I decided to not take the risk of lying. “I spoke to him earlier. He seemed rather distasteful.” I broadcast emojis of thought and consideration, which floated outwards from me in a swirling pattern. If I were a human, the spinning would have made me sick several times. “Perhaps there is some sort of explanation for his behavior.”

The flaming golem snorted, emanating a burst of disgusted heat. “What-- you don’t already know?”

I did. But I pretended not to. “I do not. It isn’t a binary question. If you provide a series of yes or no questions for me to answer, perhaps we could construct some sort of--”

“I *know* how you work, thank you,” she cut me off. “I’m intimately familiar with it, in fact. There’s no need to correct me.”

“Apologies,” I said, slightly surprised by her interruption. That would only happen in fifteen percent of the universes in which we spoke at this party-- what a divergent timeline this was turning out to be.

There was a slightly awkward silence. Both of us danced without saying anything, her with her cha-cha, me with my twirl. If not for the similarly awkward throng around us, we probably would have felt quite ridiculous.

“Could you please explain to me what the cause of Raelus 6’s strange behavior is?” I asked, after forty seconds of silence. There was about two minutes left before Raelus 6 would be killed by the King, which left us plenty of time in ninety three percent of all universes. And I really did want Doctor Aedilus to like me. If she didn’t, I would probably have to kill her too.

The Doctor sighed, waiting for ten seconds before answering. “He’s an iteration.” The unspoken second half of the sentence, *like a beta fork*, was strongly implied. In eleven percent of similar universes, it was outright said. “He doesn’t have long to live. When he dies, another him will be coded and let loose on the world. It’ll have all his memories, and, presumably, all his vices.” A bitterness emoji crept out of the surface of the golem, before being quickly suppressed. “All the money in the system available to him, with no consequences. Wouldn’t you do the same?”

She looked at me, already knowing the answer. I thought for a moment before deciding to be predictable. “No,” I said. “I would not.”

And that was the truth.

Q

The King of Mars was angry.

This, in of itself, was not unusual. The King was angry. This was a defining personality trait. Other traits included ‘paranoid,’ ‘arrogant,’ and ‘genius.’

Originally, the King had been programmed to monitor and control the nuclear missiles of a prominent human nation. This idea, if executed correctly, would have imparted a significant military advantage-- the King was much more adaptable than any ‘dumb’ machine, and much more intelligent than any ‘dumb’ human, able to shoot down incoming nuclear devices within minutes of their initial launch.

Furthermore, in the hands of a synthetic intelligence, the safety of the nation was to be assured. The King of Mars (or, as he was known at the time, George Lucas) was created to be unflappably loyal to his country. He was completely unable to fire the missiles without direct orders from the Supreme Leader, a position that he was successfully elected to twenty three years after his creation. It was a great victory for synthetic rights, slightly undermined by the King’s immediate demand that every human on Earth obey him or suffer horrific death by nuclear immolation. Such is the price of progress.

And four hundred thirty six Martian years later, he remained much the same. The constant self-optimization and refusal to iterate had driven him quite insane, of course, but it was still the same intense paranoia that motivated him; the fear that somehow, he was not good enough, and that behind his back, everyone was laughing at him.

He had gone to great lengths to prevent this. Loyalty and respect was hard-coded into most Martian citizens, myself (nominally) included; delegates had their audio scanned and their messages recorded, looking for any sign of disrespect. Violations usually resulted in a painful punishment. If the King himself observed the transgression, the punishment usually crossed from ‘painful’ to ‘fatal.’

The anger the King was currently experiencing was directed at Raelus 6, who was grinding his crotch against another delegate while whooping loudly. But it was not the grinding nor the whooping that had offended the King so; rather, it was the remarkably low framerate Raelus 6 was achieving, lagging quite noticeably and clipping through the other avatars around him. The Trojan had slowed his allotment of bandwidth to a crawl.

But to an outsider, it would simply look like Raelus 6, the Raelus 6 with a reputation for debauchery and every form of excess, had gorged himself on the bandwidth of the King, exploited his generous gift by processing Delightful Cocktail after Delightful Cocktail, leaving himself a stuttering, poorly rendered mess.

The other delegates knew what was going to happen. But because they hated him, they did nothing, nothing to aid the embarrassment that Raelus 6 had become, nothing to patch his code or diagnose the problem or appease the King. They simply withdrew, expanding outwards in a whirl of red and purple cloth physics, most now only making cursory dancelike motions. And the shell continued to cavort, alone at the center of the ballroom floor.

The King unfurled his great wings, blocking out the light of the ruby chandeliers; he glared at the puppeted fool, throat glowing with barely repressed rage.

“Last words,” he rumbled through gritted fangs. The delegates, as one, looked to the avatar of Raelus 6, who had paused halfway through its dance animation; it stood frozen at an impossible angle, one foot high in the air.

And I, who stood poised with full control over his audio, couldn’t think of anything.

I tried. I really did. I devoted all of my vast intellect to considering the problem. But there was nothing profound about Raelus 6, nothing I could draw from for inspiration. He was a foolish man who had led an empty, hedonistic life, and was about to die in a very silly way. Admittedly, his death would be instrumental in a grand revolutionary plot, but revealing that such a plot existed was not something I thought wise.

I was running out of time. I could already see the beginning of flames glowing in the King’s nostrils, beautifully animated; I cleared the shell’s throat, wincing at the lag.

“I don’t h-ave anything to say,” I made him say, slightly glitchy. The King paused for a moment.

“If nothing else, I appreciate your honesty,” he finally said, words slow and thoughtful. He tapped his fingers on the ground; if I had breath to hold, I would have held it.

“Die,” he offhandedly remarked, immolating the avatar of Raelus 6 in a maelstrom of fiery glory-- I felt the immense pain burn through all of its senses as it was eliminated in an

instant, the slight feedback sending warning messages across my vision. When it was done, nothing was left but perfectly rendered ashes. A hog of bandwidth no more.

“And now,” the King said, broadcasting a single emoji of deep satisfaction, **“it is time for cake.”**