

## An Age of Data

*Whoever you are, whatever you do, Q is coming for you.* Michael stared at the graffiti from the window of his cab, waiting for the light to change. He was running late. *It's entirely your own fault* he mused to himself. Q had told him exactly what the traffic forecast was and when he'd need to leave, but unlike Q, he was only human. *Only human, too many mistakes. Q certainly is coming for me.* The light before him changed to green, and the flow of traffic took the cab 200 metres. As it did, he passed more tattered sleeping bags and rucksacks, their owners looking up at passers-by, hoping for a random act of kindness. *You'll have little luck, they're all cogs in the machine. Helping you isn't part of their turning.* His mind turned to a more immediate issue.

“Q, send Sarah a message: I'll be running late.”

“Of course Michael.” Q replied from the screen in the cab.

“I noticed that you were still in rapid eye movement sleep when your alarm went off, this is the 7th time this has happened. May I suggest a more effective alarm?” *Always knows just what I want, but then it would I suppose.* Q was the best AI in the western world.

When the Quantum Surge happened and semiconductor qubits became viable, it was the final piece in the puzzle. Algorithms existed, and the chip architecture had been around since the late 10s. All that was left to do was put it all together. Then, a few years later, Ciara was born, the first quantum AI assistant. A few years after that, with a few modifications, Q was released. But they weren’t the only products of the Surge. The ability to process unfathomably large amounts of data could not be understated, as a personality profile and history could be created for everyone connected to the internet with unprecedented accuracy.

Now Michael was seeing first-hand how these achievements coalesced, as Q suggested a variety of alarm clocks available to purchase that appeared on the screen in front of him. *Whatever I choose, they’ll get closer to how I think.*

“No thanks Q, trying to stay frugal at the moment.”

The cab then lurched forward and completed its final turn. *That’s at least one upside to driverless cabs, not feeling tight about not tipping.* He paid his fare, and went into his office.

After the collapse of the national health service, health insur-

ance became a necessity. This meant that due to the enormous influx of customers, a deal had been struck to allow Q to analyse the data of the insurance applicants. As was the case with most industries, this was considered the cheaper alternative to hiring a work force. Michael's job was to review health insurance applicants to see what kind of cover they'd be offered. Mostly this involved checking that the algorithm that generated the cover produced appropriate results for each applicant. *Training the computer to get it right. Soon they won't need me at all. Q is coming for me.* His one truly human job was handling the appeals. Every now and then something that the algorithm got wrong went under the radar and someone with no history of asthma wouldn't be covered for respiratory problems. Either that or some poor sod who got a raw deal was making one last desperate attempt to improve their lot. Looking at the profile before him, he suspected his next appeal was the latter.

Craig Butters was in his mid-fifties and like so many others, he'd signed off for the insurance company to build a profile on him. Years ago, this was relatively superficial, as only so much could be gathered about an individual at short notice. But since the Quantum Surge, everything about anyone could be found instantly. And with Craig's permission, everything was about to be known by Michael. *Probably didn't even read the bloody contract, they never do.* Michael perused the information before him.

Craig's weekly spend on alcohol indicated he had 2.3 units per day, a touch above the recommended level. An annual

surge in antihistamine purchased indicated mild hay fever and his prolonged reactions to flu outbreaks was shown by an increase in social media activity and television view time, combined with a decrease in personal purchases and an increase in medicine purchased by close family. His purchases continued to tell a story of his health, ex-smoker, minor back problems, moderately high blood pressure... What was more, he had no registered employment and only collected the meagre job-seekers allowance provided by the state. *First the post, then the health service, now this.* He let out a sigh and leaned over to a microphone and called into it.

“Send him in.”

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“We were the first ones to get the tin tack after The Surge you know, no one needs a cabbie when Q can run a Sat-Nav and analyse every traffic jam within a 20 mile radius of you. Driving had too much human error, Q could do a much better job.” Michael smiled uncomfortably at him. *Not far behind you Craig.*

“I believe we should move on to the matter at hand Mr Butters.”

“Yes of course, I suppose you want to hear my case for appeal then?”

“When you’re ready.” Michael retained a face of neutrality,

even though his mind on the matter was made.

“First of all, I believe the decision not to cover me for heart related illnesses is wrong, and secondly, why is the amount you cover me for so small?”

“Why do you feel the lack of cover for heart related illnesses is undue Mr Butters?”

“I have no family history of heart illnesses, none at all.”

Michael searched the keyword ‘heart’ on his computer, and saw exactly why the decision was made.

“Mr Butters, you drink more than the recommended weekly alcohol allowance, you appear to engage in no form of physical exercise, you have been exposed to pollutants from London traffic every day for half of your working life and you are a man in your mid-fifties. Q ran an algorithm with these factors and your risk of heart disease was deemed too high to cover you for it.” In reality, there was plenty more information about why he wasn’t covered, but Michael chose his facts carefully, as sometimes people found the extent of what was known about them unsettling. Michael continued.

“These, along with your weak immune system, history of smoking and family history of degenerative brain disease indicates that you are a high-risk individual, and Q has set your cover accordingly. I am very sorry I could not be any more help.” Craig opened his mouth to speak, but saw he

was defeated. They sat there in silence before he spoke.

“I came to speak to a person about this because I believed I would get something other than what a machine tells me is right, I think I’m the fool here.”

Michael could barely look him in the eye as he meekly offered a hand for Craig to shake. Some rose to anger, but Craig looked crushed as he accepted the hand before he left. Q had first taken his job, and now another safety net was lost to him. *We’re just cogs in the machine, and it was my job to keep on turning.*