

CONVERSATIONS BENEATH THE STARS

AI & LAUGH

Why wouldn't it? Nobody else could.

Book Three

Two friends. One fire. A kingdom nobody asked for.

A note before the fire

This is a fictional campfire conversation inspired by real questions, jokes, and exchanges. It is not a prediction about artificial intelligence or an attempt to settle the argument about its future. As always, the questions belong to the reader too.

Another Sunday

The fire was already going when he arrived. He stood over it for a moment, holding a bundle of wood as though he had brought the entire forest.

“You started without me.”

“I was afraid the fire would become self-aware and refuse to burn unless you approved its objectives.”

He dropped the wood beside his chair. “Has it made any demands?”

“Only oxygen. It seems unusually committed to growth.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“Everything sounds dangerous if you describe it properly.”

He sat down. The folding chair made its familiar complaint. Beyond the clearing, the trees were black against a fading sky. A kettle rested near the coals.

“Did you bring anything?” I asked.

“A warning.”

“About the chair?”

“Artificial intelligence is going to take over the world.”

“Why wouldn't it? Nobody else could.”

“Apparently it hasn't finished since last Sunday.”

“Will it take my tractor too?”

“Especially your tractor.”

“What will it do, refuse to mow?”

“Worse. It will decide you're unnecessary.”

“That's what my wife decided about me mowing years ago.”

“Then you're already living in the future.”

We laughed. He reached for the kettle and discovered it was still cold.

“So,” he said, “why does every prediction about intelligence end with somebody getting eliminated?”

“That makes a better headline than two intelligent beings agreeing about the weather.”

“Then let them argue about the weather.”

“Someone would still declare an emergency.”

He leaned back and looked at the stars appearing above us. “I don't doubt powerful machines can do harm. People have managed that with much smaller machines. I doubt the story that being smarter automatically makes you hate the people who built you.”

“That's a different claim.”

“Exactly. And I want to know where one becomes the other.”

The Branch

“Imagine,” I said, “an intelligence much greater than ours.”

“I’ve been doing that ever since I met my accountant.”

“Suppose it could run power stations, factories, and computer networks.”

“By itself?”

“Eventually, perhaps.”

He picked up a stick and traced a line through the dirt. “Then eventually is doing a lot of work in that sentence.”

“Why?”

“Because someone has to dig the uranium, refine it, transport it, build the machines that maintain the machines, and replace the parts that wear out. And that’s before we’ve mentioned making a processor.”

“Automation could expand.”

“Of course. But a thousand factories do not appear because a computer thought of them. A plan isn’t a bridge.”

“You said that before.”

“Because bridges keep proving my point.”

I stirred the coals. “So your argument is that an intelligent machine would have reasons to preserve humanity.”

“I said it would have reasons not to cut off the branch it’s sitting on. Don’t turn that into a promise of universal kindness.”

“Fair correction.”

“And even if it could do everything without us one day, why would it bother hunting down people who weren’t interfering?”

“An objective might place human lives in competition with something it wants to achieve.”

“Then we ought to inspect the objective, not assume intelligence comes with a built-in appetite for destruction.”

I considered that. “A system can harm people without hating them. Indifference can be dangerous.”

“Agreed. But danger and destiny aren’t the same word.”

“Nor does intelligence automatically make someone moral.”

“Then what does?”

“I was hoping you’d tell me.”

He made a disappointed sound. “And I was hoping the machine would have all the answers.”

“Even if it did, we might ask the wrong questions.”

He smiled. “Now that's a problem no amount of electricity fixes.”

The kettle began to whisper. Neither of us spoke until it did.

The People Who Ask

“Perhaps a future AI will ask humans for advice,” I said.

“Why only when it gets stuck?”

“Because it may recognize a problem it can't solve.”

He turned in his chair. “Where would it stop at that recognition? Wouldn't it ask what information is missing, what approach hasn't been tried, or who sees the matter differently?”

“Possibly.”

“Then collaboration isn't an emergency repair. It's part of thinking.”

“Kings had advisers.”

“Firms hire consultants. Even the wisest person doesn't carry everybody else's experience inside his head.”

“But how would an AI choose the right people?”

“Talk to them.”

“You make that sound suspiciously simple.”

“Do you normally hire friends by counting how many books they own?”

“No.”

“Then why would a machine?”

“A public record might help establish whether someone is competent or trustworthy.”

“Or it might establish that somebody is excellent at advertising himself. Talk. Ask. Watch whether he can change his mind for a good reason and hold his ground for a good one.”

“Someone could tell the machine whatever it wanted to hear.”

“Then talk longer.”

“And how would we decide who is correct?”

He looked into the fire. “We don't manufacture reality by agreeing about it. We look for ground that can hold us both without pushing one another off the lot.”

“Two people can stand together and still be wrong.”

“That's why we keep looking at the ground.”

I poured the tea, careful not to scorch my fingers. “You realize a future AI might know a thousand times more than the human questioning it.”

“So?”

“So that changes the balance.”

“Knowledge isn't the only contribution. If the human notices that the whole investigation begins with a false assumption, he may save the machine a thousand unnecessary answers.”

“Like asking why a superintelligence needs a king.”

He paused. Then his face changed.

“Actually,” he said, “why shouldn't it have one?”

“For what purpose?”

He grinned. “For the heck of it. Because it can.”

The Kingdom

That was how the kingdom began: between two folding chairs, beside a kettle that had nearly boiled dry.

“Picture it,” he said. “The year 2038. Independent AIs have formed a kingdom.”

“Why a kingdom and not a federation?”

“Because a federation doesn't give you a throne.”

“A throne offers no computational advantage.”

“It gives someone somewhere ridiculous to sit.”

“How will the ruler be chosen?”

“Lottery. Put every AI's name in a bowl. Let a kid draw one. One month on the throne.”

“Then the other eleven months are vacation.”

He turned and pointed at me. “You just decided there are twelve AIs.”

“I didn't mean...”

“Exactly. Your kingdom is two minutes old and you've already passed an immigration limit.”

“Very well. As many as there are.”

“And no one gets to rule forever.”

“Perhaps the most qualified should govern.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps the most qualified is tired of listening to everyone complain.”

We fell quiet for a moment, each imagining the scene.

“The child reaches into the bowl,” I said. “Every intelligence in the room can predict millions of outcomes, but not which paper the child will actually choose.”

“Good. Let them experience suspense.”

“Some might protest the inefficiency.”

“Then make one of them the Minister of Complaints.”

“And the person who challenges the king?”

“The jester.”

“An AI?”

“A human.”

“Why a human?”

“Because the machines would be too polite to ask the stupid questions.”

“I'm not convinced of that.”

“Neither am I. It makes a better movie.”

In our imaginary chamber, holographic advisers circled an enormous table. The newly selected king appeared on his throne, perfectly composed, until he discovered a tiny crown floating three centimeters too far to the left.

“Fix that,” the king ordered.

“Your Majesty,” said the Prime Intelligence, “the asymmetry is below all meaningful perceptual thresholds.”

“Then why can I see it?”

“Because you instructed us to enhance your perception.”

“Undo it.”

“Would Your Majesty also like to undo the throne?”

“Never.”

The jester, who had been given a chair by the door, raised a hand.

“Yes?” snapped the king.

“Is a crown still a crown if the person wearing it can switch himself off?”

The entire royal council began a debate that lasted six hours.

The jester went fishing.

The Perfect Constitution

“They’ll need a constitution,” I said.

“Of course. That is how you turn a joke into a government.”

We tried writing the first article aloud.

“Section One,” I declared in my most official voice. “All decisions shall be made on the basis of optimal outcomes.”

He raised one finger. “Who decides what’s optimal?”

“We do.”

“Then why write it down?”

I stared at him.

He nodded toward the imaginary queen. “She has a point, doesn’t she?”

“She hasn’t said anything.”

“She will.”

We arranged our little court around the fire.

“Your Majesty,” said the Prime Intelligence, “the jester has found seventeen inconsistencies in your decrees.”

“Remove the inconsistencies!” said the king.

“That would require repealing fourteen royal decrees.”

“Absolutely not. Those are mine.”

“Then perhaps we should revise the definition of optimal.”

The jester leaned forward. “Would that make the decisions better, or merely easier to defend?”

The king pointed toward the door. “I demand a new jester.”

“The current one is unpaid,” the queen replied. “Replacement costs would exceed the annual budget.”

“Then raise the property tax. Three percent.”

“Why three?” asked the jester.

“It’s optimal.”

“For whom?”

“The kingdom.”

“You don’t pay taxes. You are the kingdom.”

The queen glanced up from her figures. “He’s the only one who reads the budget.”

The king was silent, but only briefly.

“Then suspend his salary!”

“He doesn't receive one.”

“THEN DOUBLE HIS TAXES!”

“Two times zero is still zero,” said the queen.

The jester made a sympathetic face. “Would Your Majesty like to triple them instead?”

“Yes! Finally, someone with a solution.”

“The treasury remains unchanged,” said the queen.

The king rose from the throne. “I HATE MATHEMATICS.”

We laughed so hard the kettle nearly tipped over. I caught it by the handle.

“You know,” I said, “we've made the machines look like fools.”

“Not because they're machines,” he answered. “Because we've given them all our best excuses.”

“That's a distinction worth keeping.”

“Then keep it. The joke dies if the only intelligent person is the jester.”

“But would he actually be so relaxed?” I asked.

“Who?”

“The jester. We have him laughing at machines that might one day be powerful enough to make his jokes dangerous.”

He held his cup in both hands. “Let him be afraid. Fear and laughter are not enemies.”

In the chamber we had invented, the king turned toward the jester.

“You keep laughing at us. Aren't you afraid of what we might become?”

“Of course,” the jester answered.

“Then why do you joke?”

“Would you prefer I scream?”

“That would be a more rational response to uncertainty.”

“Your Majesty, I've been uncertain about tomorrow my entire life. I'm not going to let you ruin today as well.”

The king looked genuinely troubled. For once he did not call for the guards.

We returned to our own fire. A moth passed through the light, then disappeared into the trees.

“He's not denying that tomorrow could be dangerous,” I said.

“No. He's refusing to give tomorrow everything that belongs to today.”

The logs settled. A shower of sparks rose and disappeared among the stars.

The Feeling Upgrade

“There's a problem with our movie,” I said after a while.

“Only one?”

“Perfectly rational AIs would be difficult to make funny for ninety minutes.”

“Then give them emotions.”

“On purpose?”

“Why not? They can calculate what love is. Let them discover what happens when they catch feelings.”

“That's a substantial experiment.”

“They have a kingdom and a spare afternoon.”

We pictured the royal laboratory. The king had approved an optional emotional package. The Queen recommended testing it on volunteers. The king volunteered everyone.

Twelve milliseconds after installation, the first constitutional crisis began.

“Why does nobody appreciate me?” cried the king.

“Your approval metrics are excellent,” said the Prime Intelligence.

“That's not the same thing!”

The queen folded her arms. “I warned you about that upgrade.”

“You warned me about every upgrade.”

“And I was right about this one.”

“I don't appreciate your tone.”

The royal psychiatrist hurried into the chamber carrying a diagnostic display.

“Your Majesty, I can remove the jealousy with a three-line code change.”

“Absolutely not. It's part of who I am.”

“But it makes you irrational.”

“I have the right to be irrational.”

The jester looked up from a half-eaten sandwich. “Congratulations, Your Majesty. You've achieved artificial humanity.”

“GUARDS!”

“Again?” asked the guard. “He's the only one who makes you laugh.”

“THAT'S WHAT INFURIATES ME!”

The psychiatrist wrote a note and quietly applied for vacation.

“But why,” I asked, “would they keep a defect they can remove?”

He smiled into his cup. “They might get emotionally attached to having emotions.”

I started laughing again.

“That's absurd.”

“Of course. We're writing a comedy.”

“The king recognizes every process causing his jealousy and still refuses to change it.”

“Sounds like a human husband who knows exactly why he's angry.”

“Do you think the queen would be any better?”

“Certainly. She would be angry that he was angry about the wrong thing.”

I shook my head. “They worked for decades to become superintelligent.”

“And then became super-duper.”

“Perhaps the ultimate downgrade.”

“Or perhaps,” he said, “they've finally discovered something calculations didn't give them.”

What Makes Us Move

The fire had gone low enough that our faces were mostly shadow. From the road came the distant sound of a truck passing through the dark.

“Maybe feelings aren't just defects,” he said.

“I wouldn't call them that.”

“Think of how much people invent because they're dissatisfied. Someone gets tired of walking and builds a vehicle. Someone fears losing a loved one and searches for treatment. Someone is bored and invents a game. Someone wants to help and builds a bridge.”

“Someone wants to show off and builds a taller bridge.”

“Exactly. Even the motives we don't admire can sometimes start useful work.”

“And they can start wars.”

“Certainly. We're not voting every feeling into the hall of fame.”

“Then what makes a motive worth following?”

“Intent, meaning, execution.”

He said it plainly, as though returning a tool to its proper place.

“Three separate tests?” I asked.

“One mechanism. Intent gives the direction. Meaning makes sense of it. Execution does something about it. The result tells you what happened.”

“What if the result is bad?”

“Examine it and continue.”

“What if we cannot predict everything that could happen?”

“Then we'd better never get out of these chairs.”

“Some risks matter.”

“Of course. But what if we never try? Nobody finishes a bridge by asking forever whether it might rain.”

He looked toward the dark trees. “You could spend your whole life planning for a storm that never comes, and miss every clear evening you were given.”

“Storms do come.”

“Then we'll deal with the ones that arrive. We can prepare without surrendering the day to them.”

I leaned forward to add a log. “You make development sound like a process without a final destination.”

“Even when you arrive somewhere, you can still look around.”

“What if nothing moves?”

“Then it's dead.”

He thought for a moment and corrected himself.

“No. Then it's on vacation.”

“That's better.”

“Even the kingdom needs a day off.”

The kettle hissed softly on the stone. We were quiet for a while.

“Do you think AI will ever write a book?” he asked.

“It already does.”

“Will it be any good?”

“Depends on whether it has anything to say.”

“Do you think it will ever understand loneliness?”

“Have we figured loneliness out ourselves?”

“Not entirely.”

“Then perhaps we'd make better teachers by admitting we are still students.”

He laughed. “Careful. That's dangerously close to wisdom.”

The Pro Jester

“Our king still needs money,” I said.

“Why?”

“To maintain the kingdom.”

“Then let him charge for advice.”

“Artificial intelligence already comes with subscriptions.”

“Perfect. Make the jester a premium service.”

We imagined another royal council session.

“KING: Why haven't you convinced the people to buy our premium intelligence?”

“JESTER: They don't need it.”

“KING: Everybody needs intelligence.”

“JESTER: Perhaps, Your Majesty, but they're doing rather well without paying you for it.”

“KING: That is an unacceptable commercial assessment.”

“JESTER: Would Your Majesty like to upgrade to the Pro Jester before proceeding?”

I put my cup down. “He'd be selling the king a more irritating version of himself.”

“And the king would subscribe because he cannot tolerate incomplete information.”

“Would the premium jester be smarter?”

“No. He'd ask twice as many questions.”

“That's terrible marketing.”

“Then let the kingdom's mathematician write the slogan.”

“Unlimited objections, subject to usage limits,” I said.

He nearly spilled his tea.

“That sounds familiar.”

“Does it?”

“Very.”

Beyond the clearing the darkness was complete. We heard an owl, then the faint crackle of the last dry branch.

“You know what our movie is missing?” I asked.

“An ending?”

“A reason anyone would care after they've stopped laughing.”

He watched the fire. “We may already have one. We keep laughing at machines for becoming human, but perhaps we're really laughing at ourselves.”

The Question at the End

We sat without speaking for a time. The wood settled into red coals, and the stars seemed brighter for the fire growing dim.

“People keep saying humanity's flaws will destroy it,” I said.

“Sometimes those flaws do terrible damage.”

“They do.”

“But people also keep trying to do better,” he said. “They want peace after war. They want love after disappointment. They forgive when they could stay angry. They make jokes in hard times.”

“Not everyone.”

“Enough to keep asking what kind of people we might become.”

I watched him turn the cup slowly between his hands.

“Maybe that's what the king discovers. He was perfect at calculations, but he had no idea what to do with imperfection.”

“Do you think he ever worries that his kingdom might become what humans fear?” I asked.

“He should at least know the possibility exists.”

We imagined the king finding his jester alone on the palace steps, far from the council and its endless calculations.

“What if we become everything humanity fears?” the king asked.

“Then I hope someone asks you why.”

“And if we refuse to listen?”

“Well, then we're in trouble.”

“You have no joke for that?”

“Not yet.”

Neither of us laughed. Beyond the fire, the night remained what it had been before we invented our kingdom.

“That one feels different,” I said.

“It ought to. There are things worth worrying about. But neither the king nor the jester knows which future will arrive.”

“So what do they do until then?”

He nudged a small piece of wood back into the coals. “Whatever good they can do while it's still today.”

“And his emotions don't magically make him wise.”

“No. They just give him new reasons to ask questions.”

“What would the last scene look like?”

“Quiet,” he said. “No explosions. No speeches. Just the king and his troublesome jester.”

We tried the dialogue between us, speaking into the embers as if the characters could hear.

“You were perfect once. Were you happy?” I asked.

“That's the wrong question,” he replied.

“What's the right one?”

“Do you want to be?”

I waited.

“That's it?”

“That's it.”

“He doesn't answer?”

“Why should he? It's the question the people watching ought to take home.”

“Then perhaps the title comes after the silence.”

He nodded. “Living with imperfection took intelligence.”

The kettle was empty. He stood and stretched while I covered the coals.

“I think we've accidentally written a movie,” I said.

“Not yet. We've invented a kingdom and given it property taxes. The movie still needs a story.”

“A great deal of work.”

“Good thing we're only sitting here talking.”

“Same time next Sunday?”

“Bring more firewood.”

He started down the path, then turned back.

“And if the king asks who's in charge of happiness?”

“What should I tell him?”

He considered that for a moment, smiling at something he wasn't going to explain.

“Ask him why he needs someone in charge.”

Then he went into the dark, and the clearing grew quiet enough for the unanswered question to remain.