

Creators
By
Ronan Elliott

The GM slid a stack of books off the table and set them on the floor. The movement raised a cloud of dust, making him sneeze. It had been several thousand years since their last meeting, and dust had had plenty of time to accumulate.

“You’d think they’d have sent the maid around to this place,” he grumbled, wiping his nose on a handkerchief.

Soroya shrugged. She was nestled in one of the overstuffed armchairs, flipping through a reference book and chewing on a strand of dark hair. “I talked to her,” she said. “She’s busy.”

“It’s been quite a while now.”

“She says there’s an infinite number of possible realities,” Soroya explained. “And only one of her.”

Vardo nodded. He was at the other side of the room, scribbling with a passion into an enormous notebook. “That’s why she never gets anything done,” he said, keeping his eyes on his work. “Because, statistically speaking, she might as well not exist. Because anything divided by infinity is effectively zero, you know?”

The GM nodded. “You’d think they’d hire another one.”

“No, it doesn’t matter how many they hire. The net output divided by infinity is still—”

“Thank you, Vardo.” The GM massaged his eyebrows. His headache was starting. It usually waited at least half an hour.

The clock on the wall was a three-dimensional metal matrix, with thirty-one numbers and six hands. The medium hand was on the $\sqrt{-5}$. The GM sighed and dropped into his chair. “We really ought to get started,” he said. “Where’s Gabriel?”

“Late.” Soroya gave a theatrical groan. “*Again.*”

“It’s the eighty-fifth time in a row,” Vardo said helpfully.

“That must be a record.”

“No, he actually got a hundred seven a few eons back, and there was one Creator on a planet a few light-years from here—”

“*Thank* you, Vardo.”

“You’re welcome.”

The door opened halfway and was stopped by a stack of reference books. Through the gap squeezed a boy. He had cloudy eyes, and limp blond hair that looked almost brown in the yellow light of the lamps. He was holding a bunch of grapes. For a moment, the GM caught a glimpse of the swirling blackness between dimensions. Then the door closed, shutting them in.

“*Incredible*. He’s here.” Soroya rolled her eyes up to Gabe, then back down to her book. Gabe gave a half-wave, the grapes swinging like a pendulum.

Vardo jumped to his feet, snapping his notebook shut. “Are we ready?” he asked.

The GM nodded. “I suppose so. Should we—”

“Great!” Vardo flipped open the notebook and slid it in front of the GM. “I’ve got a couple new things. See, I call this the spitting cobra. I took a normal snake and converted the injection muscles in its fangs, so doesn’t have to bite its prey anymore, it can just spit its venom into their eyes, blinding them, often proving—”

“*Vardo*. Please.” The GM took a deep breath. He turned the page around and examined the notes and the scientific diagram of the animal, which had googley eyes and tiny stick figures running away from it.

“So,” he said. “This creature—”

“The spitting cobra,” Vardo prompted.

“This *spitting cobra* can spray its venom into the eyes of its prey—”

“Accurately.”

“*Accurately* into the eyes of its prey, rendering them blind—”

“From a range of up to two meters.”

“*From a range of up to two meters.*” The GM frowned down at the paper. “And it appears to have pointy eyebrows.”

Vardo coughed. “Those are just, um, scientific representations. For how angry it is.”

“I see. Does it spend a lot of time that way?”

“Yeah. It’s got to attack things. Otherwise, what’s the point of the venom?”

“You do realize reptiles aren’t allowed to have—”

“Hair, I know.” Vardo waved a hand. “I told you, it doesn’t really have eyebrows. They just kind of ended up in the drawing, I guess. Anyhow, everything else is totally within the rules. I double-checked.” He gave a winning, puppy-eyed grin. “So can I Create it?”

The GM turned the notebook back and forth. He tugged at his beard. “You know my opinion on giving creatures ranged weapons,” he said.

“If you’re still thinking about the buffalo incident—”

“You tried to give them gun turrets, Vardo.”

“Well, you *told* us to think original. So I thought, ‘what’s one thing nobody’s ever put on a bovine before?’ The obvious answer was ‘high-caliber projectile weapons,’ so you can’t totally blame me for—”

“Buffalo do not need gun turrets, Vardo.”

“I’m past that,” Vardo said defensively. “That was early on. You know everything I do is allowed now.”

The GM knew. He knew it all too well. Everything Vardo did was allowed. He could Create a shark the size of a school bus, and it would be allowed. He could make a spider whose venom could paralyze a mammoth, and it would be allowed. The GM had been a bit skeptical about mammoths themselves, but Vardo had pointed out that, once again, they were allowed.

The GM's main job was to keep track of the rules. But there was a reason he was called the Goal Mediator. He also had to make sure the species on earth were balanced, so that mass extinction didn't occur. Since day one, Vardo had seemed committed to making his job difficult.

He drummed his fingers on the notebook. "See, I don't like to veto things, but ever since the mantis shrimp—"

Soroya rolled her head back. "Oh, *gods*. The mantis shrimp."

"There's nothing wrong with the mantis shrimp!" Vardo protested.

"You made a *fish* that can move its claws faster than the *speed of sound*."

"Well, yeah, but—"

"The shock wave *alone* is strong enough to kill its prey!"

The GM nodded grimly. "We have to be more careful now. Especially after the dinosaurs."

"What was wrong with the dinosaurs?"

"They were dominating the planet, Vardo." He gave the boy a pointed look. "That's exactly what we're trying to avoid."

"Yeah, but you didn't have to—"

"I *did* have to. The asteroid was a necessity. If management had got wind of something like that, they might have shut us down. They don't like it when single types of creatures get that powerful."

"What's their opinion on grape juice stains?" Gabe called from the back of the room.

"Gabe, did you . . .?" The GM rubbed his eyebrows. "Not again."

"No, I'm just asking. Say, hypothetically . . ."

"Which book?"

"I think it's one of Soroya's. It's got all this stuff about trees."

Soroya went rigid. "You did *what*?"

"Nothing!" Gabe said hastily. "Nothing. Forget I said anything." There was the sound of a book being shoved beneath a pile.

“You need to leave those things behind, Gabriel.”

“But I—I mean, I—” Gabe swallowed something and tried to look innocent. “What things?” he asked.

The GM opened his mouth. He closed it, and let out a sigh that sent flurries of dust swirling into the lamplight. “Just be careful next time,” he said. “And you can sit down, Soroya. Isn’t there something you wanted to share today?”

“What about my cobra?” Vardo asked.

“You can have your cobra. And keep your crustacean. I can’t see an Age of Shrimp coming any time soon. But we need to keep moving.”

“Where should I put the snake?”

“Anywhere you like.”

“How about—”

“Anywhere but Australia.”

“But I like Australia!”

“We’ve noticed,” the GM said sourly. “The place must have more deadly animals per capita than anywhere else on the planet. I feel sorry for the kangaroos. Pick somewhere else for once.”

Vardo ducked his head under the table, hunting for a world atlas. Soroya took a seat and opened her notebook. There was a diagram of a flower, with notes on bulb size, color, and fragrance. Frankly, it was beautiful.

“It’s called a rose,” Soroya said primly.

Vardo poked his head up. “Is it poisonous?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Of *course* it’s not poisonous. There’s more to life than being deadlier than everything else. I don’t suppose you’d know that, though.”

“What about those thorns on the stem?”

“That’s just a defense mechanism. I can’t have it getting eaten before it ripens.”

“They would defend it better if they were poisonous.”

“You *really* need to do plants some time. Maybe you’d learn something about tranquility. Or about *not killing every living thing that touches you.*”

“I’ve done plants before!” Vardo protested.

“Oh, yes. What was the list?” She made a show of counting them off on her fingers. “Poison ivy, hemlock, deathcap mushrooms—”

“Technically, the mushrooms are fungi.”

The GM stared at the clock. One of the hands split in two, the halves spinning around the inside of the sphere and reforming. He’d left his headache tablets at home again. He hated when that happened.

“Thank you, Vardo,” he said, straightening up. “Thank you, Soroya. You’ve both made excellent cases—”

“About what?” Vardo asked.

“I haven’t a clue. But we do need to move on.” He looked toward the back of the room. “Gabriel? Did you bring anything of interest today?”

“No,” Soroya said. “He didn’t.”

The GM ignored her. “Anything at all? It doesn’t have to be perfect. This is a learning process for all of us.”

Vardo gave a rather intricate cough that could have been mistaken for, “Some more than others.”

Gabe nodded cautiously. “Yeah. I do have one thing. It’s a fruit.”

Soroya stared at the ceiling. “Of *course* it’s a fruit. When is it ever *not* a fruit?”

“When it’s a vegetable,” Vardo said.

Gabe hugged his notebook to his chest. “It’s fine. I can wait till next session. I can come up with a—a—something.”

“No, just sit down. Ignore them.” The GM shot warning glances at Vardo and Soroya, who sat up straight and tried to look innocent. “Show us what you have. I promise we’ll *all* be respectful.”

Gabe opened his notebook to a diagram. “Here’s the inside. Instead of being all one chunk, it’s divided up into slices, so you don’t need a knife to cut it. And the insides are already soft, so it won’t bruise when you drop it. And the skin is thick and breaks off into chunks, so it’s really easy to peel.”

The room was silent, except for a soft ticking as the clock tried to keep time in seven spatial dimensions at once.

“So, this . . . fruit,” the GM began. “What color is it?”

Gabe blinked. He obviously hadn’t thought this far.

“Orange?” he suggested.

“Good. Good.” It seemed like a safe thing to say. “And what have you named it?”

Gabe blinked again. He chewed his lip.

“An orange?” he said.

Soroya raised a hand. “If I may say something—”

“You may not.”

“—I just want to point out that the *orange* is the *worst* name for a fruit I’ve ever heard!”

Gabe sunk back in his seat. “I—well, it’s orange, so it sort of works, I guess . . .”

“Sure, it *works!* But it’s about as creative as calling your fruit a blueberry just because it’s a berry and it’s blue!”

“He did that already,” Vardo grumbled.

The GM rubbed his eyebrows. “Soroya—”

“At *least* have it make some kind of evolutionary sense! You can’t have a fruit that slices itself!”

“But you’re always making birds colorful just so they look pretty,” Gabe pointed out.

“That makes sense! They can use that to attract a mate!”

“Can’t my orange try to attract a mate?” Gabe asked hopefully.

Soroya’s eyes widened, like they were trying to escape their sockets. “*Are you ins—*”

“*Soroya!*” the GM barked.

The girl’s shout trickled off. All three turned to stare at him.

The GM tugged at the lines on his face. He hated this job. Oh, he loved it too, of course.

There was something special about looking down over a lush jungle, knowing it was your efforts that allowed it to exist for more than a month without falling apart. But getting it there—that took extreme patience.

“*We need to stop fighting,*” he said, his voice rough and tired.

Vardo began to say something that could have been, “She started it,” but quickly thought better of it.

“You have to understand that every ecosystem on the planet depends on you working together.”

Soroya rolled her eyes. “You’ve given us ‘The Talk’ before, you know.”

“*And I’ll keep doing so until you start listening!*” He took a breath. “The three of you— together, you’re responsible for this planet. All of it. You can’t mess around. You can’t Create things just because it strikes your fancy. I’ve hit the planet with an asteroid once. I don’t want to do it again. But we will start over if we have to.”

Vardo folded his arms. “If you don’t like how we’re doing, why don’t you bring in some more Creators?” he asked. “There’s an infinite number of us, right?”

“That’s because there’s an infinite number of worlds. Switching planets is tricky. There’s never anyone to spare.”

“We’re Creators, aren’t we?” Gabe said. “Can’t we just Create some more of us?”

The silence was like a knife.

“*No.*” The GM shook his head sharply. “No. Absolutely not.”

“But—”

“There’s no way. We can only make things on the planet. And we couldn’t give them our abilities. We’d need magic to work with, and we don’t have that here.”

Gabe shrugged, sinking back in his seat. “It was just an idea,” he mumbled.

“What if we just didn’t give them magic?” Vardo suggested. “We could put them on the planet and it would still work.”

“Ah, but then they wouldn’t be Creators.”

“Well . . . no. But they’d still be intelligent. They’d work to keep nature in balance. If one of us messed up, they could bring down whatever animal we Created.”

“No. We are not unleashing creatures with our level of intelligence—”

“But they wouldn’t be just creatures.” Vardo was obviously warming to the idea. “We could make them look like us. And act like us. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Soroya?”

Soroya shook her head slowly, unsure. “I really don’t know . . .”

“What’s the biggest problem you have whenever you Create a pretty bird or flower or something?”

She shrugged. “Something of yours comes along and kills it. But I don’t see how—”

“What if we made them like art as much as you? Then they’d protect all the beautiful things. They might even create some of their own.” He turned to Gabe. “And if they like food, they’ll cultivate the plants you make. You won’t end up with another fruit that disappears because none of the deer can invent a Pishquat slicer.”

Gabe nodded. His expression shifted from disappointed to hopeful. “So my idea might work . . .?”

“Might? Of *course* it’ll work!”

“It could work,” Soroya conceded.

“It won’t work,” the GM said flatly.

“Why wouldn’t it?”

“If you want to pick one thing—and there’s not just one—there’s the fact that these ‘Creators’ would be dead within minutes.”

“What if we don’t put them in Australia?” Soroya asked.

“This isn’t about Australia, it’s about us! We don’t have any natural weapons! They’d have no way to survive!”

“We’d evolve them in slowly,” Vardo said. “You know. Give them time to make tools, build a society. We could start with chimpanzees as a base. I always thought we looked a little like chimps.”

The GM opened his mouth, prepared to offer a withering counterpoint to Vardo’s ridiculous idea. But he stopped when he realized he had no idea what to say.

There wasn’t anything wrong with it, specifically. It might turn out fine. But his gut said otherwise. The GM had had this job for billions of years. He’d learned to listen to his gut. Right now it was telling him that Creating a race of Creators would be the worst thing since the ice age. Worse, even.

But when he looked around the table, he saw three hopeful faces. Faces that remembered his lessons on creativity and originality, no matter how much he was regretting them now. Faces that could handle more responsibility than he gave them credit for.

“You really think this is a good idea,” he said.

They all nodded.

“Fine.” He opened the team’s log book and started taking down notes. “But for the record,” he added, still scribbling, “I don’t think this is going to end well.”

“Noted,” Vardo said.

He closed the book. “It’s done. I’ll start instituting the changes within the next century. Within a few millennia, we should begin seeing results.” He sighed, the lines on his face standing out sharply under the yellow lamplight. “And, for better or for worse, we’ve just made Creative history.”