

THE UNIVERSE BUILDERS

Bernie and the Wizards

A young adult fantasy

Steve LeBel



ARGON PRESS

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Cast of Characters

Gods & Goddesses

Bernie, a young god
Suzie, a good friend of Bernie's
Lenny, Bernie's best friend

Shemal, Bernie's boss
Miriam, warranty officer
Titus, sales engineer
Magus, walker
Hannah, Bernie's mother
Simeon, Bernie's father
Claudius, an ancient god
Ashley, a groupie
Madison, a groupie

Denizens of Photox

From Sestion

Torak, a shaman master
Reva, shaman apprentice to Torak
Circun, son of Torak
Gavin, a boy
Wedon, a stranger

From the Enclave

Council of Masters
(Vanor, Toth, Cenna, Leton, Otepon, Herit, Iponne)

Griston's Leadership Council

Ashok, shaman
(Rajon, Ponti, Berda, Nadja, Hukon)

The Universe Builders Series

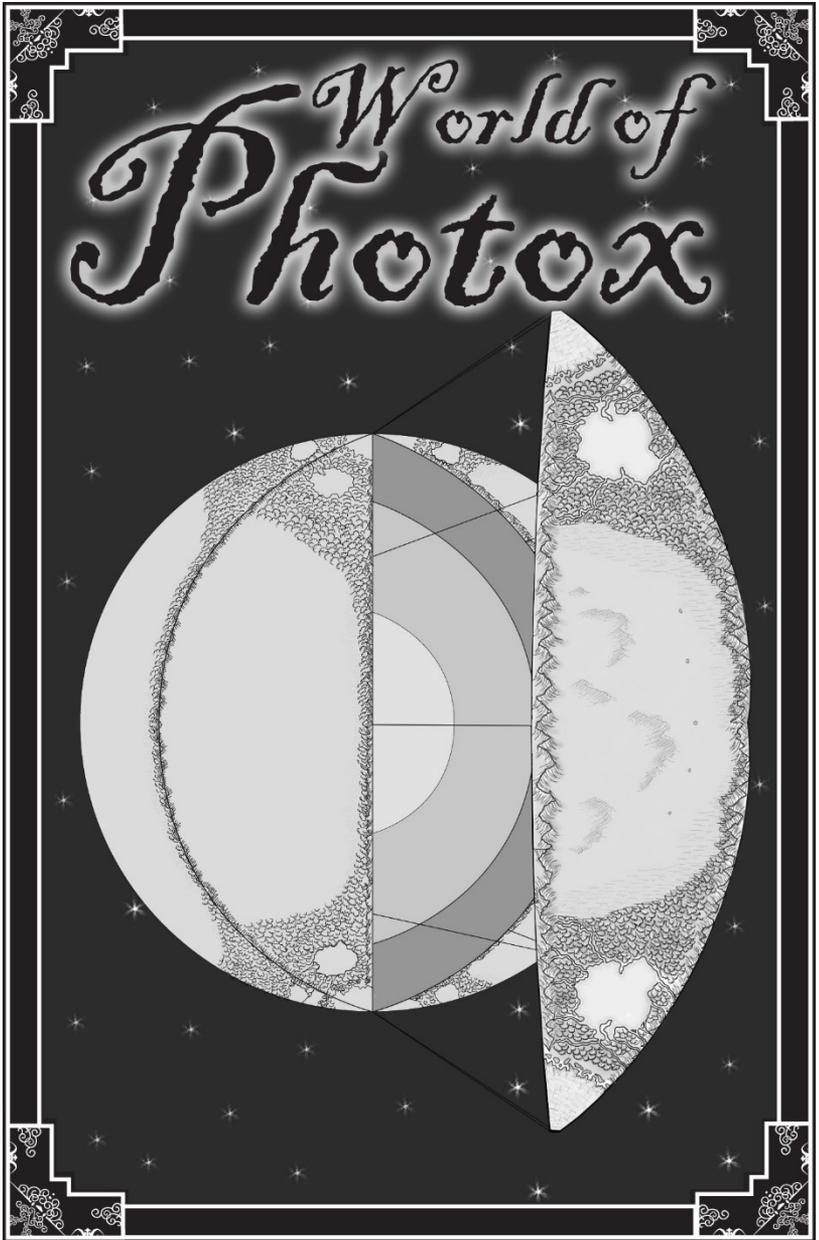
Suggested Reading Order:

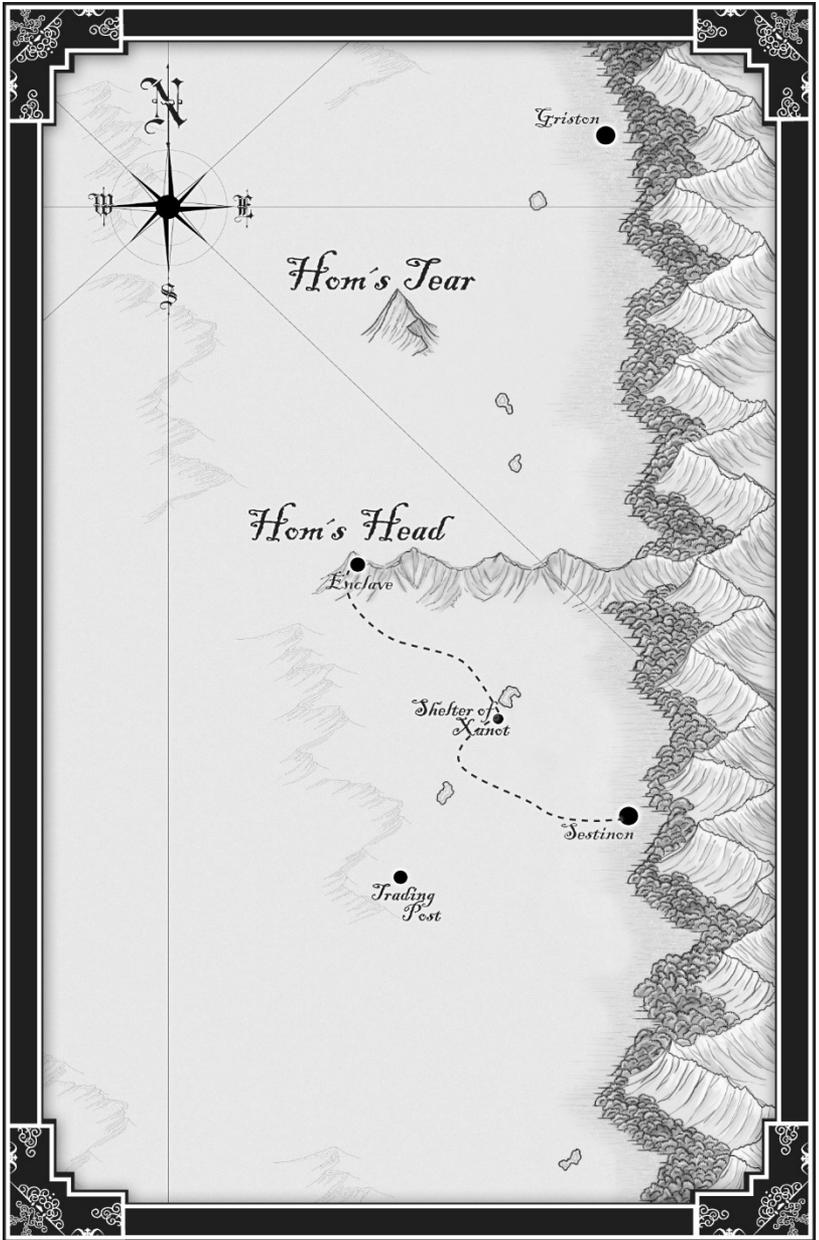
The Universe Builders: Bernie and the Putty

The Universe Builders: Bernie and the Lost Girl

The Universe Builders: Bernie and the Wizards

The Universe Builders is an award-winning fantasy / science fiction series for young adults and adults.





Dedication

To Bernie's many fans who demanded that his story continue.

Acknowledgements

This book has been a collaboration with many wonderful people. I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge the role they played in helping me to make this book the best it can be.

First, I have an awesome group of beta readers who offered everything from encouragement to editing assistance. Some are authors in their own right. They came together from all over the world (Australia, Canada, England, India, Ireland, and USA). Even though I've only met two of them, every one of you provided suggestions and ideas that made the book better. It was a humbling experience for me. In alphabetical order, they are: AnnMarie Bozek, Monique Ferrier, Namrata Ganti, Julie George, Karissa Ann Godwin, Lou Grimm, Terry Hairston, Connie Heimbach, Theresa Holmes, KJ Hooten, Margaret Lautenschlager, Cinnomen McGuigan, Niki Rose, Andrea Stoeckel, Barb Ward, and Dionne Washington. I will always be grateful for everything you have done for this book.

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My thanks to each one of you. Your contributions have been both humbling and much appreciated.

Prologue

Imagine a world populated by gods. Not just any gods. These gods have the extraordinary ability to create universes. You're probably asking yourself, why would anyone want to build a universe? Isn't it a lot of work? Heck, yes! It's a *huge* undertaking, but it's important to them, and they take their world-building very seriously. For them, becoming a builder is the highest career to which anyone can aspire. And, of course, if you're a builder, then you work for The Business.

It's true you don't need a degree in Building Science or Building Arts to build universes. Many talented amateurs, along with a few not-so-talented amateurs, try their hand at building, although, if they haven't had the training, their work rarely amounts to much. Some can create stars and planets and moons, but life forms and ecological systems are very complicated, and few without advanced training can hope to master such things.

Universe building is important because the entire economy of God Town depends on these universes. You see, the small plateau where the gods live is too small to grow food or to manufacture products. So everything they need — their whole standard of living — comes from importing goods from the worlds they create.

And when a world fails to provide the product for which it was created, there is naturally some concern.

And therein lies our story...

The Riders

Circun struggled to catch his breath as his eyes adjusted to the darkness inside the shaman's hut. "Father," he said, "we have a problem."

"What's wrong?" Torak asked.

Torak's young apprentice, Reva, put down the mortar and pestle she'd been using to grind herbs and turned to face Torak's son. The perspiration glistened on his skin.

"Riders are approaching from the north," Circun said.

"How many?"

"I'm not sure — at least thirty. And they're armed."

"Armed?" A frown crossed Torak's brow. Riders were always uncertain. Any group feeling the need to move with speed and in large numbers had an agenda. But armed? That was highly unusual. He looked at the sky, judging another hour before sunset. "Perhaps they're tired and hungry and merely seeking shelter for the night," he said, although it was more hope than conviction.

"They're gathering on the far side of the north field."

Torak knew their small farming community could not resist armed men. They had no choice but to welcome them and hope they were not hostile. The crops had been good that year, and they had plenty to spare. Weary travelers were always well-received in Torak's village.

"Tell the people to prepare a welcome for our guests. I'll go to meet them."

Torak delayed only long enough to don his ceremonial headdress marking him as the village shaman. Reva, his young apprentice, wanted to join him, but Torak refused, telling her, "No, not this time, Reva."

Since completing his apprenticeship twenty-seven years ago, Torak had been responsible for the village of Sestimon and its people. He had been young then, barely a man. But, like all shamans, he'd trained for seven years with seven masters, and, at the end of his seventh year, the Council had deemed him worthy.

Each year, villages in need of a shaman made the long journey to the Enclave for the Gathering. No village would willingly be without a shaman. They were critical to a village's ability to survive in the harsh conditions of their arid world. Most villages, knowing the young shamans would soon be thinking of marriage, brought their most eligible young men and women to the Enclave, hoping to influence the shamans' decision. For the shaman, the Choosing was no less important; he or she would spend the rest of their lives within that village.

Torak was one of three shamans sought by five villages that year. In the end, it was Twilla who caused Torak to choose as he did.

Twilla was a year younger than Torak. Possessing a sturdy build from life in a farming village, she wore her long black hair up during the day, but let it fall past her shoulders in the evening. Her flashing eyes were quick to take in everything around her, and, some said, she was even quicker to voice her opinion. Torak knew from the moment they met that she was the one, although an observer might not have judged their first meeting much of a success.

"Do not stare at me as if I were a beast, young shaman," she had said.

Overwhelmed by the Choosing and the importance of making the right decision, Torak had been lost in his own thoughts. Shocked by the young woman's words, he responded, "I'm sorry. I meant no disrespect. My manners were elsewhere, I'm afraid."

"You should bring them with you, if you hope to impress us. You should know the Choosing works both ways. I have a vote as well."

"May I know your name?" he asked.

"Twilla. I am granddaughter to our last shaman, who, I might add, had excellent manners."

And so it had gone.

Twilla was even stronger than she was beautiful. His third master had told Torak to seek such a wife. 'The life of a shaman is easier if you have someone with the strength to share your burden,' she had said. Torak was convinced Twilla was such a woman. And so she was.

Married before the end of the first year, the couple was blessed with two sons. The firstborn, as was his duty, completed his apprenticeship and now served as shaman in a southern village. Their younger son, whom they'd named Circun, served the village in other ways. Torak and Twilla couldn't have been more proud of them both.

Three years after sending his firstborn to begin his apprenticeship, Torak was called to the Enclave to meet with the Council of Masters. After they tested him in the seven skills, Torak was named a Master of the healing arts, fit and ready to train others. That very year, Torak returned home with his first apprentice. Each year since, he made the long trek to the Enclave, and each year he returned with a new apprentice. Torak took his duties seriously, and only once had he been forced to tell the Council his charge had failed to learn as he had hoped.

Reva was Torak's eighth apprentice, and he was well-pleased with her. Since her arrival, she proved a hard and conscientious worker. Her quick mind and deep respect for others made Torak's job easier. Although everyone knew Reva would only be with them for a year, many already called her a friend. Torak would be sad in four months when he would have to return the young shaman to the Enclave for her next assignment. He was confident Reva would complete her remaining four years with equal success, just as he knew she would be a fine shaman someday.

With Circun and Reva trailing behind, Torak hurried to where Circun had seen the riders. Word spread through the village, and many gathered at the edge of the field to watch the strangers as they milled about on the far side. The leader was easy to recognize. He wore leather armor with shiny black plates sewn on the outside. His helmet was decorated with long white hair taken from the mane of one of the beasts that bore him; his own black hair extended down his back in a single braid. Strapped to his side was a long sword.

The animals that carried the riders were gondars, great lumbering beasts with long manes and even longer tails that trailed on the ground behind them. Every village had them, and they served many purposes, from plowing fields to pulling wagons. Their white coats and hardy disposition made them well-suited for use by traders and others who made long treks across the hot desert.

Reva's hand moved to the green stone that hung from her neck. It had been a gift from her mother on the day she left for her apprenticeship. Staring at the men across the field, Reva sensed only hostility. The riders were dark and silent.

"Torak, they reek of evil," she said.

"Yes, I see that," said the shaman. Reva knew her master's powers were great, but what could he do against so many?

"Then we must flee, Father," urged Circun. "There's nothing you can do."

"We can't defend ourselves from them. Our only hope is to change their minds. I want both of you to stay back."

"But, Father..." Circun said as Torak walked onto the field.



Reva watched as her master walked alone across the field. Torak's every move was scrutinized by the mounted men and women from the other side. Torak stopped thirty paces from the strangers. The leader, flanked by two of his riders, rode toward the shaman.

In the gesture of peace and friendship, Torak held his hands open before him and called, "Our greetings to you, travelers. I offer you the hospitality of our village."

Young Reva studied her master. Someday it would be her responsibility to lead a village, and there would be times she would be required to show such courage. She watched the riders for signs of hostility, but, except for the leader and the two riders advancing with him, the others remained at the edge of the field.

Their speed increased as the three riders approached Torak. The hoof beats pounded louder and faster as they advanced. With a shout and a kick, the leader urged his gondar into a full gallop. Then, in a single swift motion, he drew his sword, brandished it high, and lowered himself in the saddle.

Torak saw the danger, but there was no place to run. The two riders on either side kept him from dashing sideways. Torak's hands rose to block the oncoming strike. From across the field, Reva saw Torak's outline sharpen as he called on his protective powers. The leader shouted as he swung the heavy blade and

struck Torak on the shoulder. Miraculously, it glanced off, although the shaman stumbled from the vicious blow.

Regaining his balance, Torak turned to face the leader as the mounted man wheeled his beast for another charge. Reva heard Torak call out, "Why are you doing this? We're no threat to you."

Reva yelled, "Leave him alone!" Before she could dash to her master's side, Circun's strong grip on her shoulder held her back.

"Stay back, Reva. You can't help me," Torak shouted.

The three riders circled Torak, who tried desperately to stay facing the leader. The other two guided their beasts around Torak in a large circle, but made no aggressive moves. Torak had no weapons to defend himself, nor was there anything in the empty field he could use.

Suddenly, the leader kicked his mount and galloped straight at Torak, this time swinging his sword in an upward slash. Torak heard the thundering hoofs of the great gondar as it charged getting louder with every stride. The shaman stood still, but jumped aside at the last moment, barely evading the sharp edge.

Torak had only a moment to recover before the beast turned and charged again. This time, the sword was held like a spear, straight at him as if to impale him on its deadly point. Again, at the last moment, Torak jumped aside. The gondar brushed him as it thundered past.

Three more times, the black-armored man swung his sword. Each time, Torak narrowly avoided its deadly touch. Reva dared to hope that her master's powers would prove great enough to avoid the fate that threatened him.

But then Reva heard the leader call out, "I tire of this. Finish him."

From behind Torak, one of the riders threw his spear. Reva's master never saw it coming. It struck him in the back with such force that the spear went through his body, leaving the bronze tip protruding from his chest. Torak stumbled forward from the force of the blow, but remained upright.

The shaman master turned his hands inward, grasping the tip of the spear, but it was too much. Even if it had happened to another, Torak's powers would not have helped. The spear had torn through his heart in the most mortal of wounds. He balanced for a moment longer before finally falling forward, leaving the

spear standing straight up from his back, a silent marker to the fallen master.

Frozen by the horror of what she'd witnessed, Reva was jerked back to reality by the strong grip still on her shoulder. "We must run," shouted Circun, as he pulled Reva toward the village. "Everyone must run!"

If there was any doubt of the wisdom of Circun's words, it vanished when the leader raised his sword and thrust it in the direction of the villagers. This time, all the riders kicked their mounts and shouted as they began a wild gallop across the field.

Their leader waved his blade and led the charge.

The Complaint

“I’m so angry I could just blink,” thundered the god.

Clenching his fists, Lucius glared at the large viewing window that hung on the wall. Inside the window could be seen a red sun and three planets.

In a fit of anger, Lucius kicked the empty cart in front of the window, sending it to crash into the wall. His shimmer radiated a fiery red aura three feet in every direction, painting the walls and ceiling of the small import company in the color of his anger.

Lucius’ assistant cringed. His boss had become more volatile with each passing day. “What is it now?” he asked.

“I haven’t had a delivery for days. The farmers are burning their crops and leaving their villages. I’m getting nothing, and it’s ruining my business,” Lucius growled.

“Why would they do that?”

“How should I know? I think I got a lemon world.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to take it back, that’s what I’m going to do.”

Lucius grabbed the viewing window and pulled it off the wall.

The next sound was the slamming of the door as the angry god stormed out with the viewing window tucked securely under his arm.



Fifteen minutes later, Lucius was pacing The Business’ lobby, waiting for Titus.

Titus’ career with The Business had begun as a builder. He had excellent building skills, but what most impressed his bosses was Titus’ way with people and how easily he could persuade them to accept his ideas and suggestions. When the Sales Department had an opening, Titus had been recruited as a sales engineer. His new boss had been delighted with the way Titus applied his building expertise to help customers select the best universes to accomplish their goals.

Lucius was shown to a small conference room. After a few minutes, Titus came in, accompanied by a goddess. Lucius did not recognize her, but she was clearly an elder god, her tight shimmer and the way she glided across the floor being proof enough. Both the elder goddess and Titus wore somber expressions, and their shimmers showed concern.

After everyone was seated, the goddess began the conversation, "Lucius, my name is Miriam. I am the Warranty Officer here. I understand there is some sort of problem."

"This universe is the problem," Lucius declared putting the viewing window on the conference room table. "Like I told Titus, it doesn't produce what you promised. I want it fixed."

"In what way is it broken?" she asked.

Lucius drew in his breath and pointed his finger at Titus, "He was supposed to give me a universe that produced guid-peppers and maganoons. But I haven't had any guid-peppers in weeks. It's a complete dud."

Miriam turned to Titus. "Why don't you tell me about the project?"

"Well," said Titus as he looked through a folder, "Lucius came in 817 years ago and asked us to build a standard universe. Said he wanted to produce guid-peppers. He said they were popular, and he wanted to capitalize on the demand. He also wanted a second crop of radoots, but environmental conditions are not conducive to growing both crops on the same planet. We talked about building a second planet for the radoots, but he said he didn't want the additional cost. We talked about other crops that would do well on this planet, and he settled on maganoons."

Turning through a few more pages, he continued, "Magus was assigned as the Walker, and he signed off on the final product. See?" He pointed to a signature at the bottom of a page full of check-marks. "Delivery was made on the date promised."

"Why do you say it's a dud, Lucius? What's wrong?" asked Miriam.

"It produced fine for a while, but now all I get is maganoons. That's not the important crop. What I need is guid-peppers, and it's not producing them." Lucius' shimmer displayed flickers of red.

"Did you ask your people what the problem was?" asked Titus.

“I can’t. The guid-pepper trading post has been abandoned, and the people are scattered. I can’t find any of my trading partners.”

“Were you paying them properly?” asked Miriam, trying to avoid an accusing tone in her voice.

“Of course I was. That wasn’t the problem,” Lucius said with some irritation.

“I have to ask,” she continued, “did you do anything to cause a natural disaster or other cataclysmic event on the planet? Anything like that automatically voids your warranty.”

“No,” said Lucius as the red flickers in his shimmer grew into ribbons. “Do I need to get my attorney involved?”

“Oh, no. I’m sure that won’t be necessary. What exactly do you want us to do at this point?” she asked.

“I want you to fix it right away. I paid for an extended warranty. My vendors are upset because they’re not getting their products. And so am I.”

Miriam glanced at Titus, who nodded his head and pointed to the Extended Warranty Agreement. “We guaranteed the planet would produce guid-peppers and maganoons for one thousand years. It’s still got another 183 years to go.”

Miriam took the warranty agreement and looked at it carefully. “It appears to be in order. Very well, Lucius. On behalf of The Business, I accept this return under the terms of the warranty. We will begin our investigation and do whatever is necessary to restore your universe to the production quotas as called for in your warranty agreement.”

The Friends

The Business fed a lot of employees. The large, well-lit cafeteria had two serving stations set in opposite corners. The central area, filled with tables and chairs, was laid out in a simple maze-like design with planters, screens, and other boundaries creating alcoves and nooks where diners could easily find a secluded place to eat alone or with friends.

In one such nook, a dozen tables were spaced far enough apart for privacy. Seated at one table, actively engaged in conversation, were three young gods.

“What exactly does a troubleshooter do, Bernie?” asked Lenny.

Lenny was the oldest of the three, although only by a year, which, when measured by the time scale of gods who live forever, didn’t matter much. The three friends had known each other in school, and their bond had grown even stronger in the last few months.

“I’m not sure. All I know is Shemal said I’m getting my first assignment this afternoon,” said the soft-spoken young god with wire-rim glasses.

For all the attention Bernie had received the previous week, he appeared much unchanged. Bernie had become an instant celebrity — the talk of The Town. No one his age had ever won a Universe Award before, let alone one that rocked their world. Bernie’s creation of a world of intelligent creatures that looked *exactly* like the gods was a stunning achievement, and he’d had no end of requests and even demands for

interviews and media attention. Bernie wanted no part of it.

On the other hand, Bernie's father, the Great Simeon, would have been pleased to bask in such glory. Some people called Simeon the greatest universe builder of all time, and perhaps he was. No one could recall any god who had ever won three Universe Awards before. Many people assumed the Great Simeon had helped his son win his Award, but nothing could be further from the truth. Bernie hadn't seen his father in years. Simeon had abandoned his family after winning his second Award, claiming the 'strains' of being a father and a husband were too much of a distraction. So Bernie had been raised by his loving mother, who worked and sacrificed to help her son get through school and realize his dream of becoming a builder. For her love and devotion, Bernie was forever grateful.

"Being a troubleshooter is an important job, Bernie," said Suzie, who worked for the Personnel Director. She had started as a co-op student and, after she graduated, had been delighted when they offered her a fulltime job. "We're all so proud of you."

Bernie couldn't help but smile when he felt a soft patting on his back from an unseen force.

Bernie would have described that unseen force as the bane of his existence, and most people would have agreed. The invisible cloud had been a part of Bernie since before he was born. His mother told stories about unusual things that happened during her pregnancy. She never had to worry about not being able to satisfy any sudden cravings because that food had already found its way into her shopping cart the day before. She was the first to know how powerful her son's cloud would be.

In truth, all gods had invisible clouds. Fortunately, most were never heard from. Coming in just three flavors, clouds were either orderly, chaotic or somewhere in between. Bernie's case was unusual because his cloud was *extremely* chaotic, and whenever a cloud reached either extreme, it lacked the counterbalancing forces required to keep it in check. Extreme clouds were very active, which was precisely the problem. Although Bernie struggled to control and minimize his cloud's effect, there wasn't much he could do. The cloud had a mind of its own, often leaving Bernie embarrassed and apologetic. His impulsive cloud was not one to consider consequences before acting.

"They're setting up a big meeting. Shemal said there'll be a warranty officer, a sales engineer, and a walker there. I don't know what they are."

Suzie brightened. As administrative assistant to the Personnel Director, she knew a lot about the positions that made up The Business. "A warranty officer makes sure The Business keeps its promises. If one of our customers complains about something, a warranty officer is assigned to fix the problem. Most of them are elder gods; they have a lot of authority."

"Sales engineers are former builders who work with customers to help them make good choices about the universes they want us to build," offered Lenny. "They really know their stuff."

"Sales people have to be builders?" asked Bernie.

"Sure," said Lenny. "People come in all the time asking for crazy things in their universes. At least half of them can't possibly be built. A good sales engineer tells them what we can and can't do."

The wrinkled brows on both Bernie and Suzie's faces prompted Lenny to keep going. "Well, suppose

someone comes wanting to produce huge glotawats,” he said, pointing with his fork at one of the vegetables on Suzie’s plate. “You would think ‘hydroponics’, right? Low gravity planet, plenty of liquid, and some advanced science skills for your farming species. Well, a lot of times, the customer comes in with their own ideas of the perfect environment for glotawats, but they haven’t thought at all about the farmers. We have lots of farming species, but most can’t survive in an environment that makes good glotawats. The sales engineer’s job is to get them to compromise between what they want and what we can build.”

“Okay,” said Bernie. “Now, what’s a walker?”

“After the customer finishes ordering what they want, the project is assigned to a walker. That’s the person who oversees the project and moves it from one department to the next, making sure it’s done right,” said Lenny.

“I just assumed they would give the project to one of the builders, and they would build whatever was needed,” said Bernie.

“Oh, no,” said Lenny. “This is much more efficient. Everyone specializes in what they’re best at, and it takes less time to build it this way.”

“Okay, but why do they need a walker?”

“It’s some sort of quality assurance thing. They oversee the whole project every step of the way. If they don’t approve that department’s work, then the universe won’t be moved to the next department until it’s fixed. That way we don’t end up with design flaws that make it impossible for later departments to do their work. Shemal can tell you more about that, I’m sure.” Bernie’s boss, Shemal, had a reputation for fanaticism when it came to quality work.

“I’ve seen their training and evaluation forms,” said Suzie. “Walkers are selected for their attention to detail. Shemal probably likes them.”

To continue the story, [please click here...](#)