

CHAPTER 1

Talent May Be Innate; Skill Is Acquired

Presenting the magical, musical world of Inc, a medieval planet of commerce where sales are little more than an add-on. Sydney Arthur, the first salesperson, is born. With little delay, Sydney makes his first mistake.

Even when Sydney was a tyke, folks on planet Inc could tell he was different. Sydney joined the other children in the usual games, but he played with uncommon passion. Although Sydney was extremely competitive, he was gracious in victory and defeat alike. Always he bore a cheerful demeanor, and even at a young age, Sydney showed an affinity for business.

Inc was a normal planet, and the people there were pretty much the same as other humanoids. They sported an agreeable number of arms, legs, eyes, and ears—but their ears, now they were peculiar. You see, Inc folks' ears were several times larger than the norm, and they were squarish and boxlike. They say the average Incer could hear a fly steal a sip of ale at a distance of five hundred yards. Perhaps that's why Incers never developed the internal combustion engine or noisy automation of any kind. And perhaps that's why they delighted in fine music.

Sydney apprenticed with his father, Chester, at the harpsiforge, and Sydney learned a lot about what separated a finely crafted musical note from one that was merely marginal. Sydney's father was a virtuoso notesmith, one of the best in the kingdom known as Equity. To create and sculpt his notes, Chester used materials such as welkin, rarity, and vaporware. He fused these in his zitherkiln, then formed and tuned the notes with his anvil and pitch pipe.

Sydney was proud of his father's skill and reputation, but he displayed little ability for the job itself. Watching was quite different from doing, and Sydney found notesmithing difficult and repetitive. Often Sydney would slip into a

daydream while he worked. When this happened—and it happened often—his father worried about what would become of his son.

One day as Sydney—a teenager at the time—was halfheartedly toiling, one of the local barons stopped by the notesmithy.

Chester Arthur grimaced when he saw the man approach. Baron von Mangler was a tough customer. He seldom knew what he wanted, and so he was rarely pleased with what he got.

The baron had come to complain about his most recent order. He had planned a pageant, but the music was not at all appropriate. It was to be a solemn occasion, a matter of state protocol, yet the notes Sydney's father had forged were of an unsuitable merry tilt. Usually, end-users hired a bard composer to weave the notes into a song, whether dirge, march, fantasia, or étude. The bard then worked with the notesmith to construct just the right notes: sharps, trills, or flats. However, Baron von Mangler deigned to forgo the cost of a bard—"a needless expense," he had said.

Just when things were going poorly, and it looked as if the notesmithy would lose von Mangler's business, Sydney stepped in. Sydney was articulate, and through expert use of the cryptic jargon used by the business class of Inc, Sydney was able to assuage the baron. He asked detailed questions about the pageant: Who would attend? What did the Baron hope to accomplish? Sydney uncovered facts the baron had not considered, and he won the baron's trust. Sydney's genuine interest rang through; Sydney loved a puzzle, and he loved helping to solve it. He made the baron feel he had options, that he was important as a customer and as a person.

Sydney won back Baron von Mangler's business. He even convinced the baron to hire a bard to arrange the notes. But Sydney got carried away with his success and went too far with the situation. He generously announced that he would not charge for the errant notes, but when he quoted the new price, he slipped in their cost.

Sydney didn't tell his father how he had deceived von Mangler. Chester learned only of his son's success. Thereafter, he limited Sydney's notesmithing tasks and used him instead as the notesmithy's chief problem solver, negotiator, and new-business finder.

A new thing had come to Inc: a salesperson.

Sydney grew, as did his reputation. The family business flourished. By his early twenties, Sydney was out mingling with the all the nobility of Equity, always prospecting for additional work. Not only did Sydney keep the harpsiforge fired with work from a host of paying customers, but also he managed to drive up demand for chamber music, work songs for whistling, and even

simple ditties and jingles. Everywhere Sydney went in Equity, lively and harmonious notes sounded in his wake.

Sydney enjoyed his success, and he liked the prosperity it brought to his family's business. However, he was the first salesperson ever on Inc; without guidance, he was bound to make a few mistakes. He happened upon the idea that people bought more when they felt indebted. Toward this end, he made sure he always had the best tickets to the operatic matches, warbling contests, or the ever-sensational games of Who Dare Dance with the Bear? Sydney maintained a running tab at the most exclusive taverns and eateries around the countryside and was always quick to foot the bill for the finest mead and spicy, crisped duck or squab.

Meanwhile, rumors of the expanding Arthur notesmithy reached interested ears. In the realm of Avidity, they kept their ears eavesdropping and peepers peeping, ever seeking advantageous circumstances.