

Chapter 61 - Financial Review

“Ugh,” Grugg stared blankly at the bespeckled and horned man. “What?”

Best do as he says; there is a strange power to him.

The Detective and Claudia made for two of the chairs, both looking as confused and unsure as each other. Gregor folded his arms and leaned on the doorframe. “I’ll stand,” he hissed through clenched teeth.

“As you wish. My name is... Trekk Foulhoof, or well - my true name has a lot more consonants in it, but that seems to be hard for your kind to pronounce. I am a Tax Demon, and I am here to audit you before you may proceed.”

Aside from the sound of the Demon moving paperwork around on the table, the party remained in silence, bewildered at what was happening.

“Let’s start with you, Miss Ollen. Your business, *Threads*, in Helpart, seems to be doing well; a slight downturn on the annual average, but as far as local taxation goes, you are up to date with what is owed. I believe this is your first official day as an adventurer - please be aware that the quarterly declaration of wealth gained will be due in three months from this date. If you require further information, please ask your local Council or Adventurers Guild about the LOOT schedule - the third section would be especially informative.” Trekk adjusted his small, round spectacles as his yellow eyes lifted from the paper to observe the clothesmaker for a response.

“Okay,” Claudia nodded, overwhelmed by the lengthy information flowing forth from this apparent Demon now lecturing them about their taxes owed.

“Good, good, you are free to proceed. Next, let us deal with... Mr Grugg of no last name?”

“Grugg left tribe, and tribe name left Grugg.” The cyclops looked down at the table, twiddling his thumbs in his lap.

“Understandable, I am required to ask these sorts of questions as mononyms are often used by those trying to defraud or avoid the tax authorities. From your record, however, it looks like you have held no formal employment and have lived on the outskirts of society as a scavenger. Perhaps you may like to accompany Miss Ollen in procuring the legislation regarding your legal obligations as an official Adventurer of the land.”

Grugg smiled and nodded, if only because the weird Demon had suggested he spend some time with Claudia - and that gave him a warm feeling inside. Most of the other words he didn’t quite get, but it didn’t look like Trekk was threatening him, just based on body language.

“As a functioning member of society, you are expected to pay back into the general wellbeing of those around you so as not to be a leech.” He gave the cyclops a dry smile. “You might want to check in with the Captain when you return to town, as you are not officially on their payroll, according to my records.”

“That can’t be right,” Claudia protested as the cyclops paled, “Maybe you don’t have access to-”

“I assure you, Miss Ollen, I have access to a lot more than you could imagine.” As his voice rose over that of the clothesmaker’s, his yellow eyes glowed brighter in contrast to his dark red complexion. “But as it stands, if Mr Grugg makes his quarterly Adventuring Proceeds return declaring the amount received from the Town Guard, then his tax matters are currently clean enough to where he may proceed.”

This Demon talked a lot more than even the wizard did, Grugg thought to himself, and made even less sense. There was still unease and uncertainty amongst the group as to what was actually going on - it felt like a weird fever dream and was grossly calm and measured. The cyclops didn’t even feel like standing and clobbering the wordy Tax Demon; it just didn’t seem like the done thing to do in this situation.

“Now, this is an interesting case. Mr Béraud? Apologies if I butchered the accents, the Ethay dialect is one of the mortal languages I never quite mastered.”

‘I should have guessed that you knew of my presence.’

The Tax Demon shrugged, the dark fabric of his suit shuffling silently. “Despite being reported dead, here you are before me, Adventuring. Naturally, this raises alarm bells in terms of potential fraud.”

‘My death was... an accident, and my soul exchange into this hat was not intentional.’

“Normally, the burden of proof would need to be of a much more material standard,” Trekk removed his spectacles to wipe the lenses with a cloth. “However, as you were a consistent taxpayer in life and have only taken up Adventuring post-mortem, as it were, I do not believe you would have a reasonable cause to subject yourself to being an inanimate object just to save on a bit of gold. I would advise making your existence known and officiated, as should you come across another Tax Demon not as understanding as I, they may take a dim view of your continued choice to ‘play dead’.”

‘Are... are Tax Demons common?’

“Not at all; we are actually quite stretched thin.” Trekk looked up to the ceiling wistfully. “Not many make the choice to major in taxation; you have to have a very niche taste to enjoy the suffering of the souls of those who- ahem.” He turned back to the wizard, catching himself getting off track. “You are free to pass, Mr Béraud.”

Wow, I am sure glad I am not capable of sweating. Otherwise, we would both be drenched.

“And finally,” the Demon placed his paperwork down and leant forward at the table, “We have Mr Gregor Wh-”

“Skip the formalities,” the ratman seethed through his fangs.

“Very well. Much like Mr Grugg, it seems you have lived most of your life as a miscreant outside of the normal function of society, and thus taxation. Recently your volunteer work at

the Wide Goat tavern was recompensed by benefits in kind, and your supposed employment under Mr Grugg and the Town Guard would again fall under the Adventuring Proceeds return, etcetera.”

“So I’m free to go then too, ser Demon?” Gregor turned his head away from Trekk and glared at the wall instead.

“There are some discrepancies... One of the things we cast our eye over when a mortal - er, a citizen has no lawful need to declare earnings from any source we look into their living situation. For example, Mr Grugg here had definitely been living within his means as he lived in a cave and ate whatever he was able to find out in nature.”

“Sometimes goats, but they run fast,” Grugg added in an attempt to be helpful.

“Whereas you, Gregor, have a number of assets that are beyond your anticipated means. Especially very recently-”

“Are you accusing me of stealing?” the glare of the ratman quickly snapped back to the Demon as he shifted to face Trekk, his red eyes blazing as the question filled the room.

Trekk leaned back in his chair and arranged the top pages on the desk neatly. “I’m not a Law Demon,” he rolled his yellow eyes. “Whether they were stolen, or you found them in the gutter or even birthed them from a rat egg-”

A what now?

“- I want you to be aware that any large, unaccounted-for increases in net worth can be the trigger for an investigation. Now, it isn’t unusual for your common mortal to happen upon a magical item that has great worth or the capacity to generate it, and we would generally certify that at arms-length without the need to interfere.”

‘When you have the time to, as you are stretched thin, right?’

“Indeed,” Trekk sighed as he looked at the hat, “It makes little sense to me, with all the paperwork we could be scouring through against the bigger fish who try to hide whole company profits or property schemes - and instead we get tasked with a field investigation to document a man that has fewer brain cells than teeth but has somehow found a magic stick that can turn ducks into gold.”

“Have you ever thought of a career change?” Claudia ventured. “You seem like a smart Demon; there must be better options.”

A sad look of resignation crossed over Trekk’s face. “Alas, after you spend half a century specialising in something niche, it’s hard to move away from it. Plus, the Tax department needs me - any fewer Demons in this field, and they’d have even bigger issues upholding the legislation.”

“What would Trekk do instead?” Grugg asked, mostly hoping it would be something with shorter words.

“No, I can't - it's just...”

‘If there is something in your heart, you have to chase that desire, at least sometimes - otherwise, what is the point of existing?’

The Tax Demon bit his lip as his brow furrowed in thought. “Well...” he lowered his head, eyes closed, “One of the reasons I took up this Dungeon job is because I had always dreamt of being one of those kinds of Demons.” He raised his head, eyes now brimming with excitement. “You know, the ones that get summoned by cultists or are up to some nefarious plot and must do battle against a ragtag group of good guys-”

Grugg placed his hand gently on top of the Demon's clenched fists. “Trek, we are ragtag group of good guys.”

Some of us more than others.

“You... you'd fight me?”

The cyclops turned to Claudia, who nodded as she paled. On the other side by the door, Gregor met his eye and shrugged with a sigh. Lastly, Grugg looked upwards at the wizard's hat atop his head.

This frenemies thing is getting a bit out there, but sure - I'm in.

“Yup,” Grugg grinned, “Let's fight-”

An explosion of air blew them back as the table flipped over their heads, Gregor having to roll away from the door as the airborne furniture slammed into the opening, effectively blocking it. Trek had stood up from his chair, and large blood-red wings had burst from his back, tearing holes in his suit. Grugg watched as the Demon held out an open hand, and a pure white sword slowly materialised out of the air before solidifying, gripped tight in clawed fists.

A wide smile of tiny sharp teeth spread across the Tax Demon's face as his eyes burnt like yellow candles, flickering as he started to approach the party.

Gregor's whip cracked through the air as Trek grabbed the end of it with his free hand almost effortlessly. Then, with a possessed fixation, he darted towards the ratman, his wings boosting his speed as they buffeted the air, almost extinguishing the wall torches. The pure white blade slashed down, practically screaming through the air before the large mass of the cyclops barrelled into the Demon and knocked the strike wide.

Trek backed off away from Grugg and deflected The Storm with his sword as the giant needle flew past the ear of the Detective.

Third scroll, the one with the white ribbon - grab it and keep hold of it.

It was perhaps a terrible idea for Grugg to look down at his belt straight away to see which scroll had the white ribbon, a rare case where immediately following the wizard's instruction wasn't the best option. Trek lunged towards him with the white sword slashing upwards,

aiming for the distracted eye of the cyclops. Another crack as the tip of the whip flew in from the side and struck the sword - not enough to halt the attack, but the weapon veered off course and cut a gash into the right shoulder of Grugg.

The Detective roared in pain and swung Thud around in a large arc, sparks flying as the steel cap grazed the ceiling of the room. Trekk dodged to the side as the clang of the club cracked and split the stone floor where it struck. With the reverberating metal sound echoing through the room, the Tax Demon did not hear the displacement of the air, dodging a little too late as Claudia's weapon found a target in his neck. The flying needle twisted in the wound and made a wet pop as it removed itself to return to her. Black blood ran out of the opening, soaking into the white shirt beneath Trekk's suit.

"Not bad," the Demon licked his lips as the wound slowly closed with a hiss of steam.

Oh, I was kind of expecting some sort of taxation-based pun to taunt-

"They say in life nothing is certain, except Death and Taxes. Well, today, *I am both.*"

There it is. Six out of ten, tops.