TITLE: Balance, Bloodshed, and the Art of Shaking on It
FANDOM: League of Legends
PREMISE: A lead on General Du Couteau's whereabouts brings Talon to Ionia — more specifically, to the fighter's pit of a half-vastayan named Settrigh. Little does he know that they've been set up to take each other out.
TAGS: Talon, Sett, Implied Catstab/Settal?, Canon Universe, Runeterra, Assassination Attempts, FAILED Assassination Attempts In Fact, Vomit, The Mildest of Gore, Talon Overthinks, Sett Thinks Just Enough, In Fact Sett Is Galaxy Brained, Talon Gets His Shit Rocked, BUSINESS DEALS!, Mother Of God Is That A Draven Mention What's He Doing Here, Just Two Dudes With Daddy Issues That Are Trying To Find Said Dads I Fear
CONTENT WARNINGS: Vomit reference in the first paragraph. Mild gore. A teeny bit of suicidal ideation on the very last page, but only if you squint.
WORD COUNT: 4711

If Talon were the type to voice his complaints instead of keeping his opinions to himself, he would tell you that braving the stormy coasts of Ionia had always been one of his least favorite things that he had ever done for contracts. He would illustrate to you, point by point, how the lurching of the ships he'd stow away upon would always bring bile to the back of his lips, how the luxury of sleep he was normally able to find on vessels to other lands was all but robbed from him. The idea of not feeling a true solid ground underneath his feet was a disturbing — yet unadmitable — one, and it was the contracts that shipped Talon off to Ionia that he always dreaded the most.

He, of course, wouldn't dare admit this to you. After all, in the Noxian's eyes, the idea of complaining about unfavorable circumstances carried the subtle implication that under those circumstances, he was weak, and could be bested in them — thus diverting from the level of perfection he chased after so vigorously. Two things in life mattered to Talon: his loyalty to the Du Couteau legacy and finding the whereabouts of the very man who had brought him within the open arms of that legacy, the man who had given him purpose.

General Marcus du Couteau.

It was his absence that had brought Talon to Ionia, in a way: "officially," he was here to eliminate a target that had become a thorn in the sides of multiple liaisons of the House of Couteau. In the literal sense, the assassin was here thanks to a simple rumor about said target: that he had a lead on where the general had disappeared to.

How a half-Vastayan pit boss and leader among Ionia's criminal elite managed to have some sort of legitimate lead as to where General Du Couteau could be, Talon had no idea. He would be lying, though, if he said that there wasn't some semblance of desperation driving him to follow this lead. After all, it may as well have been an *eternity* since there had been a trail of information to walk down, let alone one that led anywhere substantial. Additionally, if it came to pass that this lead had been a waste of his time, this Settrigh fellow would be dead all the same.

The boat lurched to the right as the massive chain links making up the anchor's rode grated against each other and the side of the ship, slowly descending towards the bottom of the dock — a suddenness that launches Talon out of his thoughts. It marked that, at long last, three arduous days of travel had come to an end. The assassin had finally arrived, after days of pitch black darkness and resigning himself to silence, to the nation of balance. Soon, the doors to the cargo bay would be opened, giving way to his freedom, and though there would be a day's worth of travel to follow, just about anything beat slowly rotting away in a musty, dark, and cramped cargo hold of a boat for days on end.

Eventually, the moment came: the boots of a vastayan stevedore thumped against the wooden flooring as he made his way down the aisle, and Talon silently emerged from behind the crate he'd been hiding behind. He slipped from hiding place to hiding place, dodging crew members one by one, until finally, he was greeted by *the sun*. Relief flooded his veins — but knowing he had to keep moving so not to get caught, he carried onward, effortlessly slipping into the crowd of passengers slowly departing the ship, as they slowly made their way into the small port city beyond.

In another life, perhaps Talon would have paid more mind to the bright colors that painted the picture of the city before him. Maybe he could have noticed the intricacies of how seamlessly Ionian architecture transitioned from manmade structures into the trunks and branches of trees. Instead, his eyes scanned the rooftops for perches and hiding spots in the form of dark alleys, anywhere that he could melt into and become invisible, as if he were simply never there. A place to dash to, in case he were somehow to be found out. With a mind only primed for the shadows from his childhood within the Immortal Bastion, the perfect balance between man and nature was all but lost on the Noxian.

Balance.

Again, the word rings in Talon's mind. *Balance.* He knew what the word meant on paper, but *his* idea of balance wasn't like that of Ionia's. If the concept of balance were a language that could

be spoken, the Noxian was fluent — though he was fluent in a different dialect than the standardized form. To the ordinary, balance could be found in a still pool of water, undisturbed by the wind, and creating a mirror for the sky above. One could see it in the hues of the morning dawn, the oranges and yellows, pinks and blues, and the quietness amongst the birds in the fragile moments before the sun rose, greeting Runeterra with its beams of light.

Talon only knew balance in the form of silence, once the gurgling of a slit throat came to pass. To him, balance existed in a completed contract alone. He'd found balance, years before, once his servitude to General Du Couteau had begun. A life would be taken as Marcus ordered it, and a contract would be sealed in turn — and thus, the cycle would repeat.

In other words, the disappearance of the great general had taken the scales of balance and ripped their strings right off, and cast each of the two pans, bent and broken, to the side. It had taken his perfect idea of balance, within the span of a single night, and it had torn it to pieces. What was there to do, without Marcus there? Without the man who had made him into the weapon he was? How was he supposed to function without what made him whole?

Someone nearly crashing into his shoulder snaps him immediately, again, out of his train of thought — something that he instantly chastises himself for. Ever since he'd set out on this journey to Ionia, since he'd started pursuing this possible new lead, Talon's mind had been…

Elsewhere.

He'd been distractible — a *major* concern, all things considered. An addled mind was a useless one. A mind drifting elsewhere was an invitation to getting himself *killed*. If he really was this close to making headway towards finding Marcus, this was *not* something he could risk.

Supplies, a map of southern Navori, and some food. Within less than an hour, Talon had managed to swipe all of these things and set off, northbound. Only a day's worth of travel remained. Soon after that, he would take a step closer to finding the general — or simply have another dead man's blood on his hands.

Admittedly, Talon didn't have a face to connect to a name, but ultimately, he didn't need it: the probably-soon-to-be-dead man's reputation certainly had preceded him, when it came to his initial research. Settrigh — *Sett,* as was what most called him, amongst other names such as "The Boss," "The Beast-Man Bastard," and "The Champion of Qayanvi" — had started out as a simple pit-fighter who trouble seemingly followed wherever he went. As the years passed, however, he had grown into a local legend. That is, of course, until he had taken control of the

ring he had grown up fighting in by force from the Noxians that had run it, and transformed it into a full-blown empire of gambling, bloodshed, and greed. Sett's name grew to transcend borders, and somewhere along the way, liaisons to the Du Couteau name had grown to have a problem with him.

Rumor had it that his father was Noxian himself, but ultimately, to Talon, that claim was simply irrelevant information. Noxian ancestry or not, Sett would be dead if this possible lead didn't end up being a lead at all. Why would he need to care?

The day passed quickly. The sun overhead slowly sank towards the horizon as Talon hiked across cliffsides and valleys stained with color, and though the path was clearly regularly tread across from the imprints of countless footsteps embedded into the gravel, the Noxian was ultimately met with no one. His only stop was for a brief nap, just a few hours, while high up in a random tree — after all, he hadn't slept for a full three days, thanks to the tossing and turning of waves against the hull of the vessel he'd stowed away upon to get here. More cliffs eventually became valleys, and so on, until eventually, signs of life began to present themselves in the form of warm, twinkling lights deep in the largest valley Talon had seen yet. A settlement — no, not just a settlement. A full-blown *town.* It was small, compared to what Talon was used to, but given how Ionia consisted of scattered communities within allied provinces, this was normal enough.

Qayanvi. That's what it was called. He'd nearly forgotten.

As the descent began, and Talon drew closer to the town, more signs of life began to appear. Despite it being well into the night by the time he had arrived, Talon could pick out people sitting out on their porches (enjoying the night, perhaps?), and eventually, there were even others who began to appear on the path alongside him, going in both directions. Many bid him greetings. Talon only responded with a short nod of acknowledgement.

If he had timed his arrival right — and, being himself, *of course he had* — he was arriving just in time for the main event of the night within Sett's ring, a brutal fight between…

Well. He couldn't actually tell you. That was more irrelevant information to the task at hand.

The lights grew brighter. What was originally an occasional person became small groups, until those small groups grew into full-blown crowds. In no time at all, Talon had made his way into the actual town itself, and soon enough, he found the source of restless energy underneath the surface of everyone he passed.

A massive building, with the largest crowd of all in front of it, guarded by far too many bouncers for what Talon would consider normal for a small town. It made the Noxian wonder: had other assassins come for Sett before, too? Had any of them ever gotten close to killing him, or would he be the first? As he brushed past from person to person, all trying to fight their way to the front, the Noxian's hands traveled through their pockets — that is, until they found what he'd been looking for: an entry ticket to the ring. Surely, the dismay of whatever poor bastard he'd just stolen it from would ultimately be brief, given that they'd be able to avoid getting pulled aside and questioned for murder.

After all, there would be plenty of other pit fights. But for Talon, there *wouldn't* be another lead to the missing General — not like this, anyway.

After what felt like an eternity of being jostled and shoved around, the Noxian finally reached the front of the crowd. One bouncer, a fair-skinned, red-haired woman who was probably twice his size, glared down at him expectantly, her arms crossed as she stared down at him expectantly. Talon, in turn, held up his ticket between two fingers with a stone-cold deadpan.

As she pulled away an arm to pluck his ticket away from him and inspect it, he silently began to plan an escape route in case something went wrong — he had at least six knives on him that were within his arm's reach, and more hidden in his boots. If he needed to, he could pull on, go for the throat-

"You're good," she noted simply, cutting through his thoughts for a *third* time. Talon simply snatched his ticket back and headed through the doors. He was met with a large room that snaked in both directions, presumably surrounding and providing entryways to the arena itself. The room was painstakingly loud, thanks to everyone yelling over each other as they placed bets on the remaining fighters, as well as the metallic clinking of coins, but louder still was the roaring of voices coming from the inner room.

Though the noise painfully grated against the Noxian's ears, he wasted no time. He pushed past better after better until he reached the doors of the ring itself.

Inside, the arena was *massive*. The room, rectangular in shape, had two separate levels of seating: the ground level, where the majority of the crowd (and Talon) stood, and a set of upper balconies where the more affluent patrons sat. A separate balcony was also set in the center of the room, decorated grandly with designs carved into its walls, red banners adorned with gold trim, and columns so high they reached the ceiling. Talon paid no mind to the fight occurring in

the pits below. After all, his eyes were glued to the man lounging in a throne-like chair on the balcony above.

Clad in a massive fur coat that left his muscular chest nearly entirely exposed, a red-haired man with tall, pointy ears in a matching color leaned back in his chair, his chin raised as he stared down menacingly at the fighters in the arena far below him.

In an instant, Talon knew.

This was him. Sett. “The Boss.” The Champion of Qayanvi, and the Beast-Man Bastard. Arrogance in the flesh.

Talon had to sneak into his office — and *fast.* Given the outcry that suddenly burst out from everyone in front of him, this fight wouldn’t last much longer. He needed to get Sett on his own. Where better than his office?

Backing into the hallway once more, Talon continued to weave in and out among the crowds of people until they slowly began to wear thin, and there was just the occasional security team member making the rounds, to which the Noxian ducked out of sight and melted into the shadows to avoid. It was easy. *Far* too easy. It made him wonder, in fact — surely there was normally a security team to pat him down, and make sure he wasn’t bringing in any contraband? Where were they? Where was the rest of the security? If Sett was so high profile, then why didn’t the team meant to protect him reflect that fact?

Surely it wasn’t cockiness. Right? Surely, it wasn’t an invitation to try his hand at killing him? No one was that stupid.

Another roar, the loudest yet, ripped through the inside of the arena, just a mere wall away, warning Talon that he was running out of time. He quickened his pace, ducking, weaving, avoiding, leaving no trace behind, until there it was, at last.

The door to Sett’s office.

Talon pulled a lockpick from one of his side pouches. After not even thirty seconds of fanangling with the lock, the door gently swung inward — and inside Talon went. Just as lavish as his balcony was, Sett’s office was adorned in a level of gaudiness that honestly reminded him of the Glorious Executioner Draven himself, and all of his narcissism. That was about as much as he

could pick out, however, before his gaze traveled upward as it always did, to the rafters and high ceilings above.

Some of his favorite hiding spots.

Talon took hold of a tree trunk that doubled as a column, quickly scaling upward until he reached the closest rafter — and, after testing his weight on it, he quickly moved across them until he was closest to the window on the other side of the room. He'd wait for Sett to look outside, and then strike. He'd force his lead on Du Couteau out of him, and if he knew, then he'd threaten The Boss into folding, and if he didn't, he'd kill him. It had to work. It *had* to work. He'd come all this way, surely this journey couldn't culminate into *nothing.*

Outside the door, the thumping of footsteps approached, leading into the jingling of keys and the door haphazardly swinging open. From high above, the assassin could barely pick out the redness of Sett's hair as he came into the room.

The Noxian hadn't expected him to make a beeline for the window, but as his only lead came closer and closer to him, Talon only grew more uncomfortably aware of the blade in his hand — a feeling he shoved to the side, in favor of forcing himself not to think at all. The Boss eventually came right under where he was crouched in the rafters, shifting into a more relaxed stance under him, as muttered something to himself about how tonight's matches had been "a total goddamn letdown" — and wasting no further time, the Noxian silently pushes himself off the rafters once and for all, his blade held high above his head.

In the milliseconds of Talon falling, he could see Sett's closer ear twitch once and then flick towards him, which was surprising enough. Nothing, however, could have prepared the Noxian for Sett's arm snapping outward, snatching Talon's forearm and leaving him dangling in the air with a yelp. The blade clattered to the floor below him, knocked out of his hand by the sheer amount of force behind the movement.

"Another fucking Noxian assassin? *Really*?" the half-beast asked, incredulous and with a scoff. With next to no effort, he lifted Talon higher, as if studying him. Sizing him up. "Why am I not surprised?"

Of course. Of course he knew. He'd been *played.* With an angered cry, his free hand darted for the closest knife he had on him, tucked away in his belt — only to get knocked aside with a slap. Sett lunged forward towards the wall, bringing that same arm against his neck and pressing *in,*

with the combination of Talon's back slamming against the wall and knocking the air out of his lungs, and the pressure against his neck, making it impossible to breathe.

"Who sent you this time, huh?" Sett demanded, baring his fangs as he got right into the assassin's face. "What goddamn *idiot* just led you to your death? C'mon. Tell me. I wanna see if it was any of the ones who've tried before."

Talon thrashed against him. He attempted once more to break himself free, this time by bringing his legs up in an attempt to knock him away, but The Boss simply came closer to him, positioning his body to allow Talon as little room to move as possible. He couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. The adrenaline in his veins screamed at him to keep fighting, but there was simply no room to.

"Listen, I know your type. You assassins are all the same: quiet, broody… *defiant*." He chuckled. "The least you can do for me before I toss your ass in a *corpse cart* is to tell me who sent you to kill me, so I can deal with them next."

The pressure on Talon's throat lightened just enough to allow him to speak — but what was he supposed to say? He'd been caught. He *failed.* Even if he tried bringing up the lead now, Sett would just call bullshit, wouldn't he?

"Nothin'?" The Boss's head tilted, his frown disappointed as he tsk-tsked under his breath. "That's on you, then. You had your chance." His forearm pressed against his windpipe once more, this time with even more pressure than before. Dark spots began to dance around Talon's vision as his thrashing became weaker and weaker, until-

"Wait-"

"Wait?" The plea clearly surprised them both, by the way Sett's eyebrows shot up in response. "That's a new one. You're the one who tried to kill me, and now you're tellin' me to *wait?"*

"Marcus… du Couteau!" Talon choked out, the compression of the half-Vastayan's forearm against his airway making it damn near impossible to get a word out. Sett's eyes narrowed, his scowl deepening. The Noxian, unable to pick out any sense of recognition in his eyes, tried once more — a final shot in the dark.

"Looking-" A gasp for breath- *"You have- Lead-"*

He wasn't able to get more than a few words out before the larger man yanked his forearm away, finally allowing Talon to breathe — but before he could land on his feet, Sett grabbed him by the collar of his hood instead, continuing to leave him suspended mid-air.

"Who?" he asked, voice scathing, as Talon's entire world shattered in an instant.

He doesn't know. He <u>doesn't</u> know. The lead was fake, none of this was real, and Talon had, once again, been led astray. He had, once again, traveled to an entirely different nation in search of information on a man no one could find, and he had, once again, been met with *nothing.* And this time, he had not only failed to procure information towards Marcus's whereabouts, but he'd also failed the other half of his mission: striking down his target in a single, precise blow. He'd gotten *caught.*

Now, he may as well have been looking the Kindred in the eyes.

That is, until the look in Sett's eyes dimmed. His thick brows furrowed as he scanned the Noxian's face.

"Who," he repeated, through gritted teeth and sharp fangs, "is Marcus du Couteau? I know a Du Couteau, but I sure as hell don't know a Marcus with that name."

What?

<u>How?</u>

This couldn't be. No, this couldn't be. It had to be a coincidence. Maybe Katarina had wound up here at some point. Surely, *surely,* his liaisons hadn't…

"My father," Talon admitted, his breathing heavy to make up for the prior lack of air. "The House of Du Couteau sent me here to kill you, but there were rumors that you had a lead on his whereabouts." A beat of silence, save for the gasp of air from the assassin. "It's been *years.* I've been trying to find him for *years*."

Sett stared at him for a few seconds longer, and the Noxian could practically see the synapses firing behind his eyes. His brows furrowed, his eyes darted to the side, away from Talon, for the first time, and *finally,* the assassin was lowered a bit closer to the ground — not entirely, but much closer.

“I think I know what’s going on here.”

His grip on Talon’s collar relinquished itself entirely. Sett dropped the Noxian to the floor so quickly that he stumbled, wasting no time in immediately crossing the room. He immediately began to rifle through the papers on top, and the drawers, searching fervently — until he snatched up a letter, close to the top of it all.

“This insignia,” he said, hurriedly crossing back to Talon to pretty much shove the paper in his face. “Do you recognize it?”

The Noxian, with a brief glare up at Sett, snatched the paper out of his hands. He couldn’t read the Ionian script for the life of him, but the black stamp marking the bottom of the parchment… It was unmistakable. His heart sank through the floor. The Du Couteau insignia, on a letter to a man Talon had no idea they had the connections to — to send him to his death?

Why?

“Like the back of my hand,” he replied in a murmur.

“So it was a set-up, then.” Sett huffed, taking the letter back — more gently this time. “Because this shit? *Warned* me about you. So clearly, someone wanted *you* dead, and someone wanted *me* dead.”

“Where did you *get* this?” Talon demanded, though the sorrow in his voice made it sound weak.

Disgusting.

“The *letter* came in a week ago. The only reason I didn’t toss it was ‘cause I recognized the name — I know all my regular patrons’ names, and a few different people with the Du Couteau name buy up an upper balcony a couple times a month. They cycle out. They bet good, and they’re polite enough for Noxians, so I figured it might be worth keeping it.”

A beat of silence loomed above them.

“You’re not lyin’ about the search?” Sett asked.

Talon shook his head. “Ask any Noxian about the great General du Couteau, and they’ll tell you the same thing I did. He’s been missing for years. No one has any idea where he went.”

“Shit. Your little mystery world tour just saved your ass, then. You got a name, pretty boy?”

The assassin glared daggers up at him, folding his arms.

“Go to hell. And don’t call me that.”

“It’s what I’m callin’ ya until you give me a goddamn name.” Sett grinned. His head tilted to the side again — so *catlike,* the Noxian’s brain noted. “I got an idea. How about we make the most of this little encounter, and I strike up a little deal with you? We can put all this mess to the side.”

“A deal,” Talon repeated. “Right.”

“Hey, I don’t think you’re in a position to be sayin’ no to me, pretty boy.” He raised his hands in mock surrender, still grinning. “Besides, I think you’ll like what I’m offering.”

How a half-Vastayan pit boss and leader among Ionia’s criminal elite could manage to have something that could actually interest the assassin enough to agree to some sort of deal, Talon had no idea — but how was he supposed to return home, knowing that those in the house he shared a name with had plotted to end his life? Not knowing who or how many among them had signed off on the deed? They would only try again, Talon was sure of it. And besides, an agreement with Sett here wouldn’t even be truly binding — he could leave Ionia after, and simply continue pursuing Marcus on his own.

“Fine,” he finally conceded. “What?”

“It just so happens that we’re both looking for a guy,” Sett started. “Right? I’m thinkin’ we help each other out searching. You go looking for my guy, I use my contacts here to try to find yours. No more worrying about this ‘overarching Du Couteau manipulation’ shit. I’m just sayin’, we could make both of our lives easier...”

“You don’t know that,” Talon insisted. “*No one* has come close to finding the General. Not even me.”

“See, but you’re only lookin’ at things from *your* perspective. Approaching it in the ways only *you* would. I, on the other hand… work a little differently.” He shrugged. “And hey, I’m having

the same problem. I'm not above admittin' that — I'm completely *stumped* looking for *my* guy. Perhaps you worming your way into things might help me out a little bit with getting closer."

"And who are you looking for, then?" Talon asked, eyes narrowed as he glanced up at him.

"Let's just say, pretty boy, that you and I both got the 'looking for a missing dad' thing in common," Sett replied with a grin. "So… whaddaya say? Shake on it?"

He offered out a hand, and Talon stared down at it with hesitation. It was scarred. Callous. Worn with years of pit fights under his belt. Though every part of him screamed at him to not shake on it, to not take this deal, to take death instead because after all, he had *failed* — he ignored it.

There was no hope in refinding balance within Noxus, after all. No hope in pursuing Marcus when those who shared his name wanted him dead. If there was a way forward, a way to refind a balance like the one the General had once provided him — it was *here.*

"Fine."

Talon offered out a gloved hand. Sett took it, pulling him into a firm handshake with a grin.

"That's more like it," he chided.

The Noxian rolled his eyes. Inside, however, he knew: the lead he's traveled here for had certainly been fake, but perhaps it hadn't led him completely astray. Perhaps the road to Marcus simply required diverting down a new path. Trying something new.

Allowing in, at arm's length, another who also understood the void that a father's absence left behind.