

Jason (Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter)

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"Enjoying pain with your pleasure is something you either get, or you don't. If you get it, then you don't really need it explained, because you know how good it feels, and if you don't get it then no amount of talking is going to convince you it makes sense."

But sometimes you have to explain the unexplainable, especially if the love of your life needs to understand, or she'll leave you. Jason Schuyler is one of Anita Blake's best friends and favorite werewolves, with benefits. J.J. is his lady love, an old flame from childhood who dances at one of the top ballet companies in New York. She's accomplished, beautiful, and she's crazy about him, too. Neither of them wants to be monogamous, so what could go wrong?

J.J. is enthusiastically bisexual, with an emphasis on the female side of things. She plans to keep sleeping with women, because Jason can't meet that need, just like she can't meet Jason's need for rough sex and bondage. J.J. doesn't understand why Jason isn't content to go elsewhere for a need she can't fulfil, so Jason asks Anita to help him explain.

Anita is having her own relationship growing pains with her only female lover ever, Jade. Jason suggests that J.J. might be able to help Anita with her girl problem, while she helps him with his kinky explanations. With some encouragement from a few other lovers in Anita's life she reluctantly agrees, and J. J. makes plans to fly into town for an experience that none of them will ever forget.

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JASON SCHUYLER, ONE of my best friends and favorite werewolves, stood in the morning sunlight of the kitchen. His yellow hair gleamed in the light, so that his boyishly handsome face was haloed with sunshine, but as I looked into the pure, soft blue of his eyes I knew that devil's horns were more his style than halos, and pure was only a way to describe his eyes, not him. He'd been a precocious teenager and his day job was still assistant manager and exotic dancer at Guilty Pleasures. The body that showed around his tank top and jogging shorts proved that he stayed in shape for his job, but none of that was what made halos seem wrong for him. He had a streak of mischief in him so strong that he couldn't quite resist pushing . . . everything. If the situation was tense he had to resist not making a wisecrack at the wrong moment; since I had the same urge, it was one of our bonding moments. He and I both tended to poke the proverbial badger with a stick until it rushed out of the hole and tried to eat us. We'd both learned over the years to curb this urge, and were much happier for controlling that part of us, but Jason still had that edge of devilry to the smile on his face, and the shine in those spring-sky eyes.

I pushed my own thick black curls away from my face; they fell right back against my cheek, but sometimes it's the effort that counts. I sat at the kitchen table in my long silk robe, sipping coffee and watching that smile on his face. Either he was enjoying the hell out

of getting us all out of bed at this outrageously early hour, or he was hiding behind the smile. Most of us have our blank face, a version of the cop face, and Jason hid behind a grin usually, but since he also spent a lot of time actually smiling, laughing, or grinning, it was great camouflage for whatever else he was thinking.

I tucked my robe a little closer across my chest, not because Jason hadn't seen me nude in the past, but because he'd asked for a conversation as his friend, not a friends-with-benefits booty call, so flashing breasts seemed inappropriate. It was tricky sleeping with someone who was actually your friend but never quite your boyfriend, a thin line to walk between true friendship and hey, baby.

"We all work nights, Jason; what was so important that you got us up this early?"

His grin widened, and he stepped forward enough that I could see his straight blond hair without the sunshine special effects. He'd cut his hair again, almost businessman short. He was one of the few men I knew who really did look better in shorter hair; it seemed to open up his face and make you see that he was handsome in his own right, when he wasn't clowning around or being irritating, though honestly that last part had almost gone away. I'd met Jason when he was nineteen; now at twenty-five he had grown up. I was only five or six years older than he was—depending on the time of year, our birthdays made us seem to gain or lose a year on each other. At twenty-five and thirty it wasn't a big age difference; at nineteen and twenty-five it had seemed like more.

"Let's wait for everyone else," he said, and sipped his own coffee. He didn't really drink a lot of coffee; he sipped at it, and would eventually put it down about half drunk and cold. Since we ground our own beans and used a French press to make the coffee, it was a waste of good, hot caffeine.

I huddled around my third cup of it, determined to make up for Jason's lack of enthusiasm.

Envy walked into the kitchen. She was five-eleven, so she towered over Jason and me. I was five-three and he was five-four. She'd combed her thick, almost shoulder-length blond hair, but hadn't bothered with makeup any more than I had. The strong cheekbones of her face seemed unfinished without the makeup, so that you got a glimpse of what she might have looked like at fifteen instead of the very grown-up early twenty-something. She'd thrown an oversized man's T-shirt over her, and on me it would have hung to midthigh, or even my knees; on her it barely covered her ass, so that she was all long golden legs as she padded barefoot into the room.

She was everything I'd wanted to be when I was a little girl: tall, blond, and Nordic-looking like my father and stepmother, and stepsister, and half brother, and . . . But I'd made peace with my mother's Mexican heritage that had given me black curls and dark brown eyes, and could even acknowledge that my skin was paler than Envy's and she tanned better than I did, which just seemed wrong. She blinked pale blue tiger eyes into the sunlight as if she were startled. None of us were morning people. The tiger eyes were literal; she was part of the golden tiger clan, which was one of the few inherited types of lycanthropy, and

one of the ways they proved their pure bloodlines was that they were born with permanent tiger eyes in their human faces. Most of the other were animals I'd seen with animal eyes in human form had them because they'd spent too much time in their beast form. You could get stuck, and usually the eyes were the first thing to stick.

"Coffee's hot," I said.

"Tea," she muttered.

I started to tell her to help herself, and then realized she didn't know where the tea was, or anything. It was the first time Envy had stayed overnight at the house in Jefferson County. She lived at the Circus of the Damned with the bulk of our people, but she'd been dropped off here after her date with Richard Zeeman, wolf king, Ulfric of the local werewolves, and college biology professor. He had a house out here in Jefferson County, too, so it had made more sense for him to drop her here than driving her all the way back into the city to the Circus, but I wasn't sure I wanted them to make a habit out of it. Richard was sort of my ex; we'd even been briefly engaged. We still had sex occasionally, so having his current lover dropped at my house for a sleepover was a little weird. He'd offered to sleep over with Envy here, but I, and she, had vetoed it. We were all polyamorous, which means to love more, so everyone knew what and who everyone else was doing, but that didn't mean there weren't moments when too much sharing was, well, too much. Richard's work schedule was almost the opposite of mine, which meant that though we were lovers, it wasn't that frequent. Sex with him was great, but we'd both done a lot of emotional damage to each other over the years, and . . . the needs he'd met in my life were now met by other people, who liked, or loved, each other and got along a hell of a lot better with the other men. Richard was trying, but in some ways he'd worked out his shit too late to truly be a part of our happy little poly group. He sort of floated on the edges of my life, and I on his.

Envy had slept in one of the guest rooms, but still it was the first time she'd curled those long legs underneath my kitchen table.

Was I supposed to wait on her? Fetch her tea? I felt the first bubbling of anger, which was still one of my best things, when I didn't know what else to do.

"What kind of tea do you want?" Jason asked. He put his coffee down and went to the cabinets. He'd stayed over enough to make tea without having to ask directions.

"Mint," she said, and laid her head on her arms so that she looked like she was going to take a nap on the table.

"Peppermint, spearmint, or a medley?" he asked.

"You pick," she muttered, not raising her head.

"Rough night?" I asked, sipping more of the strong black coffee.

She moved her head enough to roll an eye at me through the fall of yellow hair. It reminded me disturbingly of Dev, her cousin, who was also a weretiger of the gold clan, and one of my lovers. Dev was short for Devil, which was a nickname for Mephistopheles. Envy had gotten one of the better family names.

"You really need to have sex with him more often."

"You mean Richard?" I asked, because she was also sleeping with Jean-Claude, head vampire of the United States and my fianc[?]. I did mention that we were polyamorous, right? It wasn't cheating, because everyone got everyone else's permission, but it was complicated, sometimes very complicated.

"Yes," she said, still just looking at me with that one inhuman eye.

"Did Richard ask you to talk to me?"

"No," she said, and just looked at me as if waiting for me to say something. Was I supposed to pry information out of her?

"What made it a rough night?" Jason asked. He'd filled the rapid-heat electric kettle, and it was starting to warm up. He had a mug, and a tea bag was trailing out of it, waiting. There was actually loose-leaf tea in there somewhere, but no mint outside bags.

Envy turned her head enough to look at him, so that all I could see was the thick hair. "I don't think you'll understand."

"Try me, I'm very sympathetic." He grinned when he said it, which left a debate on whether he was really sympathetic or just kidding.

"He really is a good listener," I said.

She rolled her head back to look at me, and I realized that her hiding her face in her hair might be a stress reaction. What the heck had happened last night?

"He says you and he just can't get your schedules to match up for sex lately, is that true?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, and drank more coffee; maybe if I just drank enough of it, I could do this conversation without losing my temper.

"Do you enjoy the sex?"

I drank more coffee. Maybe if I drowned myself in it? "Yes."

"When he's really rough in bed, how do you get him to stop?"

"You get him to stop by saying "No, stop." I said.

She rose up enough to shake her head. "No? I can say no and he'll respect that? I mean, how do you tell him it's too rough?"

I fought not to frown at her. "I say, "Ow, that hurt, stop it."

Jason piped up, "Or my favorite, "Do that again and I'll kill you."

"You're not saying it right, Jason; it's "Do that again and I will fucking kill you."

He laughed. "Oh, yeah, I forgot that part." He leaned against the cabinets, grinning at both of us. I didn't feel like smiling, so I glared at him. His grin widened, eyes sparkling with it.

I shook my head and went back to huddling over my coffee. Jason was incorrigible; trying to corral him just irritated me and amused the hell out of him.

"Ow really is a safeword for me," I said.

"Richard says you like rough sex-was he lying?"

I stared into my coffee, debating on whether to get up and add to the cup, or if I had the courage to look her in the face while we had this conversation. Fuck, courage it was.

I turned to look into those beautiful otherworldly eyes and said, "I like rough sex. I like sex with Richard. Now, what's up? What do you want to know, or say?"

She sat up straighter, squaring her shoulders. "Well, that is direct."

"I'm pretty sure I've had this conversation with other girlfriends of his over the years, so just say it, Envy. Did the sex get too rough last night?"

"Yes."

"And what do you want me to do about it?"

"Do you really like sex as rough as he does?"

I shrugged. "Yes, sometimes, not every night, but yeah."

She shivered. "Fine, Anita, you want to be direct, I can be direct. I had to tell him to stop, or ease up, constantly last night. He'd been great, the sex would be wonderful, he'd bring me to orgasm and then he'd start being too rough again, as if once he made me come he thought it earned him the right to be too rough and hurt me."

"Most women can take rougher intercourse after enough foreplay," Jason said. "He wasn't trying to be mean, just thought he'd done enough prep work to have sex the way he wanted to have it, and you'd enjoy it, too."

"Well, I didn't, and I had to keep telling him to stop. I finally told him to get off me, that was it."

"Do you mean for last night, or do you mean done as in done forever?" I asked.

She looked at me, and her eyes darkened the way that human eyes do when they start to get angry. "Forever. The sex is amazing if he can control himself, but he's so big that if he just starts pounding it hurts, and it drowns out all the orgasms, or even stops me from orgasming, because it hurts too much."

"I'm sorry he hurt you," I said. What else could I say?

"How long has it been since you've slept with him?"

"A while," I said.

"You can't remember?"

I shrugged again. "He's not one of my main sweeties. I . . . Maybe six weeks? He's trying to date some human woman, and it takes time to really date someone. Our booty calls had to take a backseat to him date-dating someone."

"As opposed to just fucking them," she said, and she sounded angry again.

"Yeah, dating takes more time than just fucking," I said. I fought not to get angry, or be offended, not to add any more emotion to what promised to be an emotional minefield.

"I enjoy sleeping with Jean-Claude, he's wonderful, but Richard is a brute in bed."

I so wanted out of this conversation, but it was like a train wreck—you knew it was coming, but sometimes you're still along for the ride.

"He can be, I guess."

Jason came to stand beside me, touched my shoulder. "Say the rest, Anita."

I looked up at him. "What rest?"

He looked at me, and it was that you know look. There weren't many people I'd take that look from, but Jason was on that short list.

"I like that he's rough. Sometimes a brute in bed is exactly what I want," I said.

She shuddered. "You can have him, I'm done."

"I don't want him as a boyfriend either, but the occasional sex is great, that was always fabulous between us."

"You look delicate, like he'd break you."

"Looks can be deceiving," I said.

Jason squeezed my shoulder. "The fact that Anita likes rough sex is one of the reasons I wanted everyone to meet this morning."

The comment made me look up at him. "What does that mean?"

The tea timer went off and he went to rescue it, and also neatly avoided answering my question.

I called after him. "What do my sexual preferences have to do with anything?"

"I'm getting the tea," he said with his back to us as he fished the bag out of the mug.

"What is this little meeting about this morning?" I asked, suspicious now.

Nathaniel spoke as he came into the kitchen. "It's about helping everybody in our poly group feel better."

He'd pulled on a pair of his favorite jeans, the ones that were nearly white with washing and had begun to thread out across the thighs. His knees peeked out of actual holes as he padded barefoot toward me. His ankle-length hair was in its usual braid so that it was mostly hidden behind him with only glimpses of the thick auburn rope peeking from behind him as he moved.

My smile of greeting changed to something less happy. "What does that mean, and why do I feel like you and Jason have been plotting behind my back about something?"

He smiled, and it was the real deal, not the one that he flashed at Guilty Pleasures to get customers to shove hundred-dollar bills down his pants. If they could have seen this smile full of love and lust and just . . . Nathaniel, they'd have found thousand-dolla...

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