

Dreams of Innocence

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Jamie sat in the third row watching the florist arrange the displays. The hall was all set up for the wedding, but every other seat was empty. It was still hours away.

Over a year ago, Jamie had agreed to be the best man. He regretted it now.

The only girl he'd ever loved, Innocence Cooper, was about to marry his best friend, Elliot Fisher. And he was going to have to smile like it didn't kill him inside and give a speech all about how those two were meant to be.

"So," a voice said from behind him, "I take it you're not over her?"

Jamie glanced over his shoulder. Walking down the aisle in a summer dress was Cinder – Elliot's ex-girlfriend. Like Jamie, she was dead, but unlike him, she couldn't appear solid in the real world anyway. She was just a ghost.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Cinder took the seat beside him. "Same thing you are, I assume. Wallowing in self-pity over this momentous occasion."

"I don't do pity," Jamie replied.

Cinder laughed. "Sure looks like self-pity. You couldn't get the girl."

Low and cold, Jamie said, "I could have."

"Yeah, right."

Almost to himself, he murmured, "She already loves me. That would be the hard part to do with magic. Making her forget him – I could do it like" – he snapped his fingers – "*that*."

Cinder's gaze lingered on him, trying to read his expression. Then her expression broke into a mocking grin. "No, you couldn't."

Jamie raised a hand, palm up, and filled it with dark energy. "Maybe you haven't heard – I'm part dark master. I can do whatever I want."

She shook her head. "It would be the perfect crime, making them forget each other. They wouldn't remember enough to get hurt over it, and you and her could be together. But you don't have it in you."

Jamie stared at the ground. "Maybe I do."

"You don't. Else you would have done it by now."

"Because you know me so well," Jamie said.

Cinder shrugged. "I know enough. I'm good at reading people." She leaned a little closer and mock-whispered, "That's how I know you're wallowing in self-pity."

Jamie glared blankly. "Don't you have somewhere else to be? Haunting Elliot maybe?"

“Actually, I came here because he was looking for his best man,” she said. “I thought I could help out by finding you.”

Jamie sighed and transported out.

When Jamie checked in with Elliot, he found out Elliot’s tie was missing. Elliot had searched his entire hotel room for it, and he couldn’t go back to the house because Innocence was there.

Jamie hadn’t wanted to see her before the wedding.

She knew. Of course she knew that he loved her, but it was one of those things neither of them liked to talk about. Least of all on her wedding day. He didn’t want her to send him those sympathetic looks, to apologise again about choosing the other guy.

But there he was on her doorstep, his hand raised to knock. For a moment, he considered becoming invisible to her and sneaking in to find the tie. Then he tapped on the door.

Blaze ripped it open. “What? The hair lady was late and burned Erin’s neck with a curler, the make-up lady didn’t bring any foundation pale enough for that Cooper skin, and no one bought blister patches for these nightmarish heels, so you had better not be here to tell me the groom has run off.”

Jamie couldn’t help it. The corner of his mouth twisted up. If Elliot just *left*... He shook the thought away. “Actually, he just thinks he left his tie here. Can I take a look?”

Blaze gave him a strange glance. “Why do you even bother asking for things these days? No one would dare say no.”

Jamie simply stared.

“Okay,” Blaze said. “Come in.” She waved him forward and disappeared down the hallway.

Jamie made for the bedroom Elliot and Innocence now shared. He knocked on the door, and, finding no answer, entered.

Elliot’s black tie was immediately obvious, sitting on the floor by the bed. He must have dropped it while packing. Jamie leaned over, picked it up, and turned around.

And there she was, dark hair curled and pinned into a bun, eyelashes dark and perfect, her white dress flawless and hugging her curves.

His lips parted, and he didn’t know what to say. He’d always thought her beautiful, but today she was iridescent. He couldn’t look anywhere else.

She smiled. “What are you doing here?”

He held up the tie.

“Right. How’s he doing?”

Jamie shrugged. “A little stressed, I think.”

She smoothed her already-perfect dress. “What does he have to be stressed about? I’m the one who has a mountain of work piling up on her desk because I dared to take three days off.”

“He wants today to be perfect,” Jamie said softly.

Innocence shrugged a shoulder. "I don't mind what today is like. Not really."

"You don't? You're the bride."

"I get him for the rest of my life," she said. "What's one day in all of that?"

What's six months? Jamie wondered. Because that was how long Innocence had been his, and it wasn't enough. It seemed like it wasn't anything anymore.

"I can't read you." Innocence stepped closer, her words suddenly soft. "What are you thinking?"

He stared her down.

"Trev, tell me."

She called him Trev when she really meant it – when she wanted under his skin. But he just gave a single shake of his head.

Innocence took his hand, her skin soft against his. "Please tell me you're okay."

"I'm okay," he said coldly.

"I don't believe you."

He'd been weak – human – too often before, and now she knew how much he was hiding. And when he was hiding it. Almost solely to calm himself, he drew dark energy into his free hand. Then, with as much enthusiasm as he could manage, he said, "I want this for you. I want you to be happy."

"I want you to be happy too."

Then marry me, Jamie wanted to say so much it almost hurt. Instead he straightened and pulled out a cruel smirk. "I have more power than a thousand witches. I can make this world bow to me. I'm sure I can find a way to be happy."

Innocence sighed, her gaze vulnerable and searching his. "Sometimes I'm not even sure you know what that word means."

Jamie was suddenly far too aware of her hand in his. He gently pulled away. "I have to get this tie back to your fiancé."

"I'll see you later," she said, voice soft and words somewhere between a promise and a request.

He didn't say another word. He just made for the door.

Elliot was shaking, standing at the front of the hall. Innocence, who was almost never late, had kept him waiting nearly ten minutes.

Jamie tried to be the voice of reason. "She loves you. Of course she's coming."

He hated himself a little for wishing that she wasn't.

The crowd still seemed in good spirits, apart from, perhaps, some of the actual ghosts – Cinder was standing next to the first row, her arms crossed and her gaze fixed on Elliot. Elliot's mother was sitting beside his father, worry lines marking her forehead.

When it ticked past twelve minutes late, Jamie leaned in towards Elliot's ear. "Do you want me to find her?"

"Please," Elliot said. "Tell her I'm waiting right here for her, and I'm not leaving until she comes here and marries me."

Jamie laughed. "If Innocence really didn't want to come," he said, "there's no way in the world that you would out-stubborn her."

Elliot didn't even crack a smile. "For this, I would."

Jamie closed his eyes and focused on Innocence. He could find her – like a tracking spell without the words. And there she was, still at the house.

"I'll be back soon," Jamie said, and he disappeared from the church.

He reappeared in Innocence's room.

She was lying on the bed, still wearing her dress, with her eyes closed. Asleep.

"Innocence?" he murmured, moving to her side. How did one fall asleep when one was supposed to be getting married?

She didn't stir.

She seemed so peaceful, Jamie almost didn't want to disturb her. He glanced through the door, into the rest of the house. Even if Innocence had somehow just fallen asleep, her bridesmaids should have taken care of it.

Now that he was paying attention, he could hear faint thumping. He slipped into the hallway, and heard voices – cries for help.

Through in the dining room, there was a box of dark energy – a trap – and all the sounds were coming from the inside of it.

Jamie raised a hand and drew the dark energy under his control. He pulled the walls down to find Erin and Blaze.

"What happened?" he asked.

Blaze stabbed a finger in his direction. "Your father happened."

"What did he do to Innocence?" Erin asked. "How do we fix it?"

Jamie felt his heart sink. Ayin, the leader of the dark masters and his father, was perhaps the one person Jamie had to be afraid of – the one person who could challenge Jamie and maybe win.

"Jamie?" Erin prompted after a moment too long of his silence.

"Should we get a healer?" Blaze asked.

Jamie felt tension stiffen his muscles. "Do whatever you want," he said. "I'm going to talk to my father."

Ayin was in the lair.

Jamie was glad to find him alone – he didn't want to deal with the three masters all disagreeing with him and disapproving of his caring about Innocence. Dark energy was streaming from Jamie's skin, and he called out, "What did you do?"

Ayin turned his head slightly, glancing Jamie's way. "I was expecting you."

"On her *wedding* day? Seriously?"

A wrinkle of puzzlement settled in Ayin's brow. "Of course. You didn't want her to marry him."

"What?"

"She's only asleep – you can visit her in her dreams like you used to. And now she'll never do anything to upset you ever again."

Jamie huffed out a sigh of frustration. "Upset me?"

"Your human half is dangerous. And her getting married is clearly making you emotional. Her doing a lot of things makes you emotional."

Ayin was standing there perfectly calmly – almost a little hopeful. He thought Jamie would thank him for this, but Jamie just felt sick. Ayin thought he could lock Innocence into endless sleep, keep her from ever hurting Jamie. And, in his twisted mind, therefore protect the world.

"Do you even understand what you did was wrong?" Jamie asked.

"Wrong?" Ayin echoed. "The spirits won't mind – they let us interfere with the witches who have accepted our power."

"I meant morally wrong," Jamie said. "She deserves to live her life."

Jamie watched his father's expression twist into a cruel smirk. "She doesn't deserve anything. She's just an insignificant witch."

"Let her go," Jamie ordered.

Jamie's father looked over Jamie's hands – the dark energy that was gathering – and said, "No."

Jamie considered fighting. He might lose, but then again, he might not. But either way, it wouldn't wake Innocence up.

He was part dark master. Magic answered to him. He would find another way.

"Screw you," Jamie said. "I'll save her myself."

When Jamie returned to Innocence's room, Sam Fisher was leaning over Innocence, his healing hand raised over her forehead. But nothing was happening – the healing glow skirted over her skin, finding and fixing perhaps a scratch or two, but nothing serious.

"She's not hurt," Jamie said. "There's no damage. She's just asleep."

"She won't wake up," Erin said. She was standing beside Blaze in the doorway, worry lines marking her brow.

Jamie nodded. "My father cursed her to sleep. Permanently."

He didn't explain why. It was bad enough that Innocence knew what was in his heart – he didn't need the whole world to know too.

"How do we fix it?" Blaze asked.

Jamie crossed the room and gently took Innocence's hand. "I'm going into her dream."

"And what will that do? Because there's a hall filled with people waiting for a wedding, so we need to fix this now," Blaze said.

Jamie tightened his grip on Innocence. "Dark master power is based on will. I'm betting Innocence's is at least as strong as my father's. She might be able to pull herself out if I let her know what happened."

"What do you need us to do?" Erin asked.

"Just don't touch either of us." Jamie closed his eyes. "I'll be right back."

As always, slipping into a dream was dizzying – like falling from a great height. But suddenly the dream filled the world in around him.

His heart sank.

Jamie had entered Innocence's dreams many times before. If there was no image of him in the dream, he appeared near her. But if she was dreaming of him, he took the place of his dream counterpart.

This time Innocence's arms were locked around his waist, his arm around her and her head tucked against his chest. They were in her old room at Red Vulture, on the couch in her room.

"In?" he whispered.

"Hm?"

"What are we doing?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "I don't know. What do you want to do?"

Jamie had forgotten how good it felt to be so close to her – to feel her warmth against him. Still, he murmured, "You're dreaming."

"No," she said. "I'm awake. Just a little tired." She leaned forward and gave him a quick peck on the lips.

Jamie pulled back quickly, caught so completely off guard he didn't know what to say.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"You kissed me," he said. "You – you're supposed to be marrying Elliot today."

"What?"

"Innocence," he said. "Don't you remember?"

She blinked hard. "I – I'm dreaming?"

He nodded.

She let go of him. "I... You and I broke up, and..." Realisation was all over her face – horror. "I am so sorry. I am so, so sorry."

Jamie held his expression blank. "It wasn't that bad of a kiss. Consider it forgiven."

"Wait," she said. "Why am I dreaming? Wasn't I in my dress already?"

"That's why I'm here. My father did it."

"It?"

Jamie fixed his gaze on the white wall in front of him. "He condemned you to permanent sleep because he didn't think I could handle you marrying some other guy."

He heard her breath catch. He didn't look at her.

For several moments, neither of them said anything. Finally, she asked, "How are we getting me out of this one?"

"Dark master power is vulnerable to will. That's why you could break through occasionally when Kim was possessing you. You should be able to do the same here – you just have to want out enough that it overcomes my father's spell."

The words he didn't say were that she had to want to be with Elliot more than she wanted to stay with him. He already knew that she did.

"I want out pretty badly," she said. "You have no idea how much that wedding cost."

"Focus on that desire to get back there," Jamie instructed. "You have to feel it."

Innocence closed her eyes, and Jamie watched, waiting for her – and the entire dream world – to disappear. But she didn't.

A solid minute later, Jamie reached over and touched her forearm. "In?"

"I don't know why it's not working."

Jamie sighed and shuffled closer. He lowered his voice, as if they could possibly be overheard in a dream. "If there was any part of you that would rather be here, with me, than out there marrying him... well, that could..."

"Jamie," she whispered. "No."

He could see pain in her eyes. He knew she hated hurting him. It never stopped her from doing it, though.

"You were dreaming about when we were together," he pointed out.

"No. Well, yeah. But maybe that was your father's doing. I don't know. It's not like I control my dreams."

It would make sense that his father had done it. He considered this whole situation a gift to Jamie, why not add extra benefits?

"Then what is it?" he asked softly.

"I don't know."

"Innocence, whatever it is, you have to get over it. I can't break this spell for you."

Her gaze was suddenly too direct, her jaw set. Those ice-blue eyes pierced him. For once, he was certain there was nothing he could hide from her.

“It’s not my will that’s keeping us here, is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Jamie,” she said, her voice failing her, falling into a whisper. “Let me go.”

“I...” He shook his head. “My father cast the spell; I swear it. You know I would never do this.”

“I know you didn’t cast it. But you said it yourself. Your power is based on will. The spell responds to will. And I don’t think you really will for me to go and marry him.”

Jamie closed his eyes, turned his head away. He was still. His heart, his head, were swirls of confusion – storms of chaos. But he didn’t want her to see it.

“Trev.” She brushed her fingers over his forearm. “Please.”

“I gave up on us a long time ago.” He opened his eyes, his tone flat and his expression blank. “But I can’t change how I feel.”

“Then,” she said softly, “I guess the question is, do you love me enough to want this for me?” A tear slipped from her eye and she swiped it away, an embarrassed smile lighting her face.

He reached out, just halfway between them.

She made up the rest of the space and placed her hand in his. He squeezed her hand – the way he’d always used to let her know he needed her. He’d never been able to say it.

She squeezed back.

“Yes,” he whispered.

And then he fell out of her dream, and she awoke on her bed, her hand still in his. Her gaze locked on him, gratitude radiating through.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You did it,” Erin called – she, Sam and Blaze were still in the room, keeping watch. With Innocence looking his way, Jamie hadn’t even noticed.

She sat up. “How late am I?”

Blaze checked the time and winced. “Thirty-two minutes and counting.”

“Forget the car,” Innocence decided. “Let’s transport.”

Jamie helped her to her feet, the wedding dress almost catching on her heels. “Should I go on ahead?”

She nodded once. “Bring him out to me. I have to talk to him before we go through with this.”

He didn’t ask. He simply agreed and transported out, ever the loyal soldier she needed him to be. He squashed any thoughts of their conversation leading to a break up as he walked up the aisle.

Elliot met him a little way down, panic in his eyes. “What happened? Is she okay? Is she here?”

“It was my father,” Jamie murmured, aware of every guest’s eyes on him. “He put her in a permanent sleep. Or so he thought. She’s awake. She’s on her way. But she wants to see you before the ceremony.”

Elliot didn’t need to be told twice. His gaze locked on the exit and he made for it. Jamie followed behind.

Seconds after they reached the door, Innocence appeared before them, not a hair out of place.

Elliot stepped forward. “Innocence? Are you okay?”

She sighed, chewed her lip. “I kissed Jamie.”

“What?” Elliot asked, more stunned than anything. His gaze swerved to Jamie.

Jamie shrugged. “It was in her dream. I went in to pull her out. She was confused – she thought it was back when we were together. No big deal.”

It had been a big deal to him. But he couldn’t admit that to her.

“Oh.” Elliot turned back to Innocence. “So it didn’t mean anything?”

Her gaze swept over Jamie like she wished he wasn’t there. “I...” she said. “I thought it might have, but it didn’t.”

Jamie let his heart fill with cold darkness, kept his expression still. Let her think he didn’t care. That was almost worse than her just saying no – admitting in her own mind there had been a fraction of a chance for him, and that one kiss had crushed it.

But he was a dark master, powerful beyond measure. He wasn’t going to let his enemies ever see him hurt.

And he finally had to admit that she was his enemy. His weakness. She did nothing but hurt him, nothing but hold him out there at arm’s length, knowing she’d never want him closer. Innocence Cooper was stone-cold evil, despite how hard she pretended to care. She could have been the one person to grant him happiness, and she didn’t.

The funny thing was, knowing they were on opposite sides, knowing that, whether on purpose or not, she always hurt him, but seeing her there, smiling sweetly at Elliot, he knew it didn’t matter. Jamie loved her. Jamie would love her for eternity.

He would always protect her.

He would never be with her.

If anything destroyed him, it would be her.

“So, you forgive me?” Innocence asked Elliot.

He took her hand and nodded. “I trust you. Completely.”

“Alright,” Jamie said turning back to the hall. “Let’s get this wedding started.”

The ceremony was sweet, and the speeches and the dinner had passed in a blur. Now Jamie was alone at a corner table, eyes on the bride as she smiled and spoke to some of her guests.

“Are you even blinking?”

Jamie turned slowly, shooting a dark glare. “Cinder. Isn’t it clear I want to be left alone?”

“No,” she said. “You don’t. You really don’t. But if you want we can mope together? Because I don’t get it either. I mean, she’s not prettier than me. She’s not smarter than me. She certainly doesn’t dress as well.”

Jamie blinked. “I’ll give you two out of three.”

Cinder’s expression tightened. “Which two?”

“If you were that smart, you wouldn’t have picked a fight you couldn’t win.”

Cinder grinned. “So you agree I’m prettier. As for you – no offence, Elliot’s better looking. But I think we both know you’re smarter and stronger than he is. So clearly she’s just shallow and you’re better off without her.”

Jamie chuckled. “What about you? You love him too, so are you shallow?”

Cinder shrugged a shoulder. “Maybe a little. But it’s not like I was ever choosing between you two. You never gave me the time of day.” She smiled, her expression softening. “I just fell for him because he was sweet.”

“You never asked me for the time of day.”

Her lips twitched. “Most guys never made me ask.”

One side of his mouth pulled up into a smirk. “I was never most guys.”

Before she could respond, Cinder gestured behind him. He turned, and Innocence was standing there, like an angel in her white dress.

“Hey,” she said. “What are you doing over here all alone?”

Jamie flicked Cinder a glance. “Talking to a pretty girl.”

Creases appeared in Innocence’s forehead. “Um…”

“A ghost,” Jamie explained. “Remember I can see those.”

“Oh.” She hesitated. She held out a hand. “I wondered if you wanted to dance.”

He stared. “Why?”

Her hand drooped a little. She shrugged. She glanced over her shoulder at her new husband. “We would never have made it here without you.”

“Repeat after me,” Cinder said. “I don’t need your pity dance.”

But Jamie dropped his hand into Innocence’s. He didn’t have it in him to deny her such a simple request.

She gave him a smile in return, and for a moment he forgot his pain. Until she said, “You didn’t have to save me before, so thank you.”

“Of course I did.”

Her lips twitched, a touched smile flickering then fading.

He pulled back and spun her into a slow turn. Then he drew her close, so she couldn't see his face, and with his lips near her ear, he murmured, "You might be his, but I'm yours. Yours to bend, to break, to hurt. Yours to love, to hate, to not give a damn about. What little heart I was born with, it belongs to you."

Her voice was a little choked as she replied, "So you're mine to set free?"

He didn't answer. She could unlock the cage – she could tear down the walls – but he wasn't sure he'd ever leave.

"You know," she said, "you *are* human. With or without me."

"I don't have to be."

She laughed a little, touched his wrist then his hand. "It's not a choice. Even for you."

She had no idea what it meant to for him to be part dark master – not really. But he didn't want to talk about it anymore. He didn't want more of her pushing him away. He nodded politely. "Thanks for the dance. And congratulations." Then he let himself become invisible to her.

She sighed, crossed her arms over her chest. "Thanks for coming, Jamie."

He watched her walk away.

"Well that was a train wreck."

Jamie turned to see Cinder only a step behind him. Since she was a ghost, she could still see him. "Didn't ask you."

Cinder shrugged. "What are you going to do? Kill me?"

He looked her up and down. "You know, I could do a lot."

"I also know you *won't*. Good at reading people, remember?"

"If you're so good at people," he said, "then tell me: what the hell do I do now?" He was still looking at Innocence, his heart heavy.

Cinder laughed. She reached up, touched his jaw and turned him to face her. "In general, you're going to brood awhile and then get over her. For right now, you're going to dance with me."

He raised his eyebrows. She'd never seemed interested in him before.

She smirked. "Don't flatter yourself. You're the only guy here who can actually see me, so yeah, you win. But by default."

"Don't flatter *yourself*," he countered, his own smirk crossing his face. "Who says I even want to dance with you?"

She smiled, watched him doubtfully. He guessed she didn't get turned down very often – if ever.

"Maybe I don't want your pity dance."

Cinder just kept looking at him, her eyes sparkling. She certainly had that flirtatious look down.

The current song died down, its last few notes ringing out. Jamie wanted to leave – to go back to the lair, where he didn't have to deal with anyone – but something stopped him.

Jamie held out his hand, and Cinder smugly took it. "You *do* want my pity dance."

The next song started, slow and intimate. Cinder guided Jamie's arms around her waist and laid her head on his shoulder. He'd never been that close to any girl but Innocence. He was surprised at how easy it was – how comfortable. Her warmth made him feel somehow peaceful, dulled the pain in his heart.

She didn't say a word as they moved in time with the music. He slowly spun her, let her step away and then pulled her close.

She *was* awfully pretty. He felt his muscles relax, a little of the tension he'd been carrying all day fading. A hint of a real smile began on his face. And then, in the distance, behind Cinder, he caught sight of Innocence. The girl he'd rather be holding.

Again Cinder reached up and turned his face so he couldn't see Innocence. "You don't need her. You're the strongest guy I know."

Jamie didn't reply, just listened to the music. Just kept his eyes on Cinder, didn't dare look away.

A minute later, the song started to fade. He felt like he had a hold of himself again. Like he could keep loving Innocence from afar, and shut out the hurt that had broken through today. With calmness returning, he was almost ashamed of how emotional he'd been – of how much he'd let himself feel.

He vowed never to let his heart show so much again. Never to let it rule him.

He let go of Cinder, nodded. "Thanks for the dance."

She smiled. "Anytime, Jamie."

He squashed the part of him that really hoped she meant it, left his expression blank, and walked away.

The End