

Charming: I, Princess Charming, Crown Princess of Lunar Kingdom, hereby choose you, Prince Ellis, as my future partner among the marriage candidates at the ball, and I give you permission to court me for two months before we marry, as per tradition.

I beam at him, waiting for his exclamation of delight and excitement — but my jaw drops at what actually comes out of his mouth.

Ellis: I refuse.

I stare at him for a long moment, certain that I must have misheard him.

What did he just say?

Charming: Excuse me, can you repeat that?

I titter nervously as Prince Ellis shifts in place, his gaze firmly on the ground.

Ellis: I-I refuse. I'm not looking for marriage.

It takes a minute for his words to sink in, and when they do, my eyebrows shoot upwards until they disappear beneath my bangs.

Charming: You *refuse*?

Charming: What are you talking about? Everyone at the ball is looking for marriage. Why else would you attend the ball if you weren't aiming for a chance to court and marry me?

Prince Ellis blinks, a bemused expression crossing his face.

Ellis: *That* was the purpose of the ball?

Ellis: Nobody told me.

Charming: Are you *kidding* me?

I throw my arms up in the air in frustration, angry and offended.

I can't believe I just got turned down. *I*, Princess Charming, just got turned down by this eccentric stranger who can't even *dance*.

Ellis: I-I'm sorry for the misunderstanding.

Ellis: I am flattered by your attentions, but I do not return your affections. I apologize.

Prince Ellis gives a stiff jerk of his body that I assume was meant to be a bow, and I find myself torn between tears and laughter.

I can't believe it.

After I went to all that trouble, convincing my parents to let me choose Prince Ellis, he isn't even interested in marrying me?

Nicholl is going to have a field day over this.

Charming: Don't flatter yourself. I don't hold any *affection* for you. I just need to marry a crown prince. I chose one randomly from the list, and it just so happened to be you.

A lie, but a necessary one right now for me to recover my dignity.

Prince Ellis looks relieved, cracking a small smile at me.

Ellis: Good. Then you can choose someone else.

He's right; I absolutely should.

I open my mouth to inform him that I will, in fact, make another choice right now, but something stops me.

Somehow, knowing that he *doesn't* want to marry me, and that he did not attend the ball with intentions to woo me, draws me to him even more.

Originally, I wanted to choose him as my husband so I could figure out the mystery behind his brothers' deaths and because he caught my attention with his different demeanor. Now, despite his harsh rejection, I find myself wanting to choose him still — particularly *because* he doesn't want to marry me for my magic or my kingdom.

Of all the princes at the ball, he's probably the only one with pure intentions and doesn't want something from me.

It feels freeing.

Most importantly, if neither of us actually want to be married, perhaps in a few years, after Lunar Kingdom is back on its feet with Rose Kingdom's help, we can part ways mutually.

I just need to figure out what I can offer him in return through our marriage that will convince him to marry me for a few years.

Charming: No. Actually, no, I won't.

Ellis: Ex-Excuse me?

Prince Ellis's eyes fly to mine in surprise, and I fail to bite back a grin.

Charming: I like you. I think we'd be good together. We should give it a shot.

Prince Ellis's face turns an even darker shade of red than before, something I had not known was even possible. He begins to splutter, incoherent pieces of sentences escaping his mouth as he struggles to recollect himself.

I giggle, oddly charmed by his lack of composure.

Ellis: I-I-I have n-no interest in marriage.

Charming: Yes, I know you aren't romantically interested in me, and you don't want to marry me.

Charming: But you do have an interest in...

I pause, thinking to myself.

What can I offer him in return to make him see that this marriage would be mutually beneficial?

CHOICE BRANCH:

Option #1: Fairy magic

Charming: You want to learn our secret, right? The secret to magic?

Charming: Whoever I marry becomes the king of Lunar Kingdom eventually. The king is the only exceptional person who is allowed to take lessons on fairy magic despite being an outsider.

Charming: If you marry me, you'll get to learn magic for yourself after we are coronated.

Option #2: Truth behind his brothers' deaths

Charming: Don't you want to find out what actually happened to your brothers?

Prince Ellis flinches, probably at the painful reminder, but I carry on.

Charming: I'm sure you know that the rumors say that you're the one who killed them. I don't believe them, but many do.

Charming: Don't you want to clear your name and find out the truth behind your brothers' deaths?

Charming: I can help you. I have an array of magic spells at my disposal which can help the investigation. I promise you, with my help, you will find out the truth much sooner than you would otherwise.

Option #3: Science research

Charming: Your life revolves around your scientific research, yes?"

Charming: Many don't share your innovative beliefs, but I do. I can help you. We can help you.

Charming: We may not be able to invest money in your research, but we have magic at our disposal. I think we can greatly improve the speed and accuracy of your experiments with our magic spells. We can do practically anything you need help for.

Prince Ellis's head shoots upwards, and I can tell I've caught his attention.

I grin, and the knot in my chest that's been present since the start of this marriage of convenience business loosens a little.

Perhaps this will work. Maybe I can find a way out of this after all. I just need to endure it for a few years.

Right now, I just need to convince Prince Ellis to take this deal.

IF CHOSE OPTION #1:

Charming: What do you say?

Charming: You're a researcher, yes? Your life's goal is to gain as much knowledge as possible, and you clearly have an interest in magic.

Charming: I'm offering you a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to finally find out all about fairy magic. All you have to do in return is marry me — it doesn't even have to last forever; we can part ways mutually if we want.

IF CHOSE OPTION #2 OR #3:

Charming: Well, what do you say?

Charming: That's quite a generous offer, no?

Ellis: You — You are good at magic? What kind of spells do you know?

I frown in confusion. That was not what I expected him to focus on.

Yes, I am. One of the best mages in the world, in fact.

Charming: I know practically every spell that exists, even some of the ones that are exclusive to fairies only. Any that I cannot perform, I'm sure I can ask Nicholl to help us. He's half-fairy, and he's my best friend and magic tutor.

IF CHOSE OPTION #2:

Charming: I guarantee that we will be able to discover the truth in no time with our magic.

ELSE IF CHOSE OPTION #3:

Charming: I guarantee that you can reach new heights with your scientific experiments and research with our help.

Prince Ellis opens his mouth, but no words come out. He seems to hesitate and deliberate with himself for a moment before he finally makes himself speak.

Ellis: Will you teach me? Magic, I mean.

Oh. So that's what he wants most of all.

I flash him a bright smile, nodding.

Charming: Whoever I marry becomes the king of Lunar Kingdom eventually. The king is the only exceptional person who is allowed to take lessons on fairy magic despite being an outsider.

Charming: So if you marry me, I can teach you magic after we are coronated, yes.

Prince Ellis's eyes brighten, and I was sure I had him until his face falls, clouding with suspicion.

Ellis: Why? Why would you offer that?

Ellis: What do you want from me?

I shrug, giving him a wry smile.

Charming: You don't know that either? I thought everyone would have heard the rumors by now.

Charming: Lunar Kingdom's broke. Our treasury is almost empty.

Charming: We need another kingdom's resources and trade connections to get ourselves back on our feet.

Charming: Afterwards, we can have a divorce, if you like. It will be frowned upon, but if it's mutual, and both of us are eager to part, perhaps the priests will grant us an exception.

Prince Ellis's brows furrow, his lips pressing together into a thin line.

Ellis: Why me? Lots of other rich princes.

Charming: I told you. I like you. You're interesting. Can't say the same of many nobles at the ball.

Charming: Besides, you don't actually *want* to marry me. I have a much better chance at divorcing you after we've both gotten what we want out of our marriage than I would with any of the other princes who went to the ball with the intention of wooing and marrying me.

Prince Ellis seems to be deep in thought, pondering my words carefully.

When he actually nods, I have to hide my expression of surprise. I have to say, part of me didn't think he would really agree to this deal.

Charming: So you accept my offer?

Ellis: Y-yes, I do.

I feel like I should be offended at the pained expression that crosses Prince Ellis's face. Is it really so bad to be married to me?

Still, I'm too relieved at this new turn of events to dwell on it.

Charming: Perfect. We can begin the courting process at any time.

Remembering how clueless Prince Ellis seems to be about everything related to politics and foreign affairs, I give him a sideways glance.

Charming: You do know how the courting traditions go, yes?

Prince Ellis hesitates, then gives a small shake of his head.

Charming: Since we met in my kingdom, the courting should take place in your kingdom, so that we can both be familiar with each other's kingdoms.

Charming: I'm assuming you haven't made any preparations before you came here for our ball. In that case, we can delay the courting process for two weeks and give you some time to prepare for our journey to Rose Kingdom.

Prince Ellis looks alarmed, his brows furrowing and his lips twisting downwards.

Charming: Is anything wrong?

Ellis: N-no. Never mind. I'll figure it out.

Charming: Great. Then we're in agreement?

He hesitates again, but he does eventually give a tiny nod, his lips twitching into a small smile.

Charming: Wonderful.

Charming: Here's to a mutually beneficial engagement and marriage.

I offer my hand, and it takes him a few moments before he grabs it, shaking it briefly before immediately letting go. The entire time, he decidedly avoids my eyes, and I notice his cheeks turning a bright shade of pink again.

Yes. This is going to be an interesting engagement, indeed.