



THE
Heir
AND
THE
Tiger



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LAURA GREENWOOD

THE HEIR AND THE TIGER

A SHIFTER SEASON STORY

LAURA GREENWOOD

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BLURB

An unexpected betrothal leads the rebellious Shifter Heir to sneak out to a ball and meet a handsome Count.

Josephine, the Shifter Heir, knows that she is expected to be perfect at everything, and that includes marrying the man her parents pick out for her. But when that day comes, she realises that she wants to go to at least one more ball first.

Otto, Count of Strizenzia, has been sent to England to marry, the only problem is the enchanting tiger shifter he meets by chance in the ballroom.

Can Josephine and Otto find a way to be together or does fate have other plans?

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The Heir and the Tiger is a paranormal Regency romance with falcon and robin shifters. It is a Shifter Season short story. It has an m/f romance and is Josephine and Otto's complete story.

ONE



JOSEPHINE

I HEAD into the dining room, my stomach rumbling and hastening me to break my fast. I wish I could have some meals delivered to my room, but Mother would never allow it. She is always speaking of how things appear to others, including the servants who may talk about the things we do within the palace.

One of the footmen opens the doors for me and I step inside and freeze as I notice Mother sitting at the head of the table.

“Your Majesty,” I say, dipping into a curtsy.

“Ah, Josephine.” She waves the servants away, causing a kernel of dread to twist around in my stomach. I do not know what she wishes from me, but I am certain that it can not be good.

I take a deep breath and try to dampen the urge to shift into my tiger form and run away. I know Mother has my best

interests in mind, but her instructions often feel so contrary to my own.

I pull out my chair and take a seat. I wish to pour myself a cup of tea, but I don't trust my hands enough. Surely they will shake and give away my nerves.

"I was hoping to speak with you this morning," Mother says.

I nod. That much is obvious. And concerning. She must be worrying about my response to what she is about to say.

"I have most excellent news to share with you," she says.

"That is wonderful, Mother," I respond without emotion. She barely listens to what I have to say, which means that I am safe to use such a tone with her.

"You are to be married."

The dining room spins around me as I try to process precisely what that means. "Married?" I echo.

"Yes. Your betrothed will be arriving shortly."

Shock rushes through me. "My betrothed?"

"He is the youngest son of a Hapsburg Duke. A tiger shifter, so you do not have to worry about lineage."

"I can not say that's my foremost concern," I murmur.

"It should be, the lineage of the Shifter Throne is important."

"I am not even the heir to the Shifter Throne," I point out. "You have chosen not to name me as such."

Mother's amber eyes flare with anger at my words. "You are making assumptions you are not in a place to make."

"I am simply stating the facts, Your Majesty," I respond, not allowing my frustration into my voice. It has always vexed me that Mother has not announced me as her heir, especially when she speaks of things such as the bloodline of the throne such as now.

She purses her lips. "I have every intention of announcing that you are my heir, *after* you are married."

I raise an eyebrow. "So my marriage is part of the condition for me to succeeding you?"

"Of course. It is important that you marry the right person to secure our line and the strength of our kingdom."

It is hard to consider the strength of a kingdom whose subjects are in hiding, but I do not voice that opinion. I have mentioned before that I believe it would be better if we did not have to hide our status as shifters to the world, but Mother always shuts me down and does not allow me to continue.

Perhaps that is something I will be able to change when I am Queen myself.

"If I agree to this betrothal, then you will announce me as your heir?" I check.

"Only once you are married," she counters. "And there is no agreeing, Josephine, the contracts are signed and the deed is all but done."

The world stands still as the words sink in. Mother is not speaking of a choice, she is speaking of something that has

been done and can not be changed. I have lived in this world for long enough that I know a betrothal contract should not be broken, no matter what the cause.

“Very well,” I say stiffly.

Mother gives me a look that makes me believe she expects me to argue with her, but I am aware that there is no point.

“May I be excused?”

She nods firmly, probably having expected more of a fight from me, but if I am to meet the man I am to marry within a week, then I must set some plans in motion in order for me to enjoy what little freedom I still have.

I rise from the table, my appetite completely gone considering the situation. I shall have to slip down to the kitchens when hunger overtakes me. They are almost always willing to give me some bread and stew when I have not been able to eat.

I hurry down the ornate corridor before remembering that I am supposed to be taking appearances into account. I slow my pace and hold my head up high. I make my expression as blank as possible, though no one pays enough heed to me to be able to ascertain my emotions, something I am grateful for. That way nothing will get back to my mother about how I am feeling.

It isn't until I slip into my bed-chamber and close the door behind me that I let out a tense breath. I press my hand against my chest, focusing on the feel of it even through the fabric of my dress.

Marriage? Not just that, but marriage to a stranger? This is not something I have ever wished for, and if I had a say, it is not something I would choose.

The servant's door opens and my maid steps in, surprise flitting over her face when she sees me. "Your Highness," she says, dipping into a curtsy.

I smile weakly. "I am not a princess," I remind her for what feels like the hundredth time. "I am simply..." I trail off, uncertain precisely what the answer to that should be.

"The daughter of the Shifter Queen?"

"And a Duke," I murmur.

She gives me a knowing smile.

"It is fine, you can call me whatever you wish."

"But only within these walls, I am aware," she responds. "Though I must admit, I did not expect you back so soon, My Lady. I thought you were breaking your fast."

"My mother was there." I do what I can not to let bitterness seep into my tone.

"That is unusual. I thought she liked to take her meals in her office?"

"She wished to speak to me about the matter of my marriage," I mutter.

Lucinda's eyes widen. "Are you to finally attend a ball along with the rest of the ton in order to find a husband?"

"Not on my mother's orders."

She lets out a bemused laugh. “Then I shall make sure the guards at the west entrance are paid their bribes, and that your cloak is ready.”

I sigh with relief. “Thank you. I know that it is a risk for you to help me this way.”

She shrugs. “I enjoy the balls myself,” she admits. “And if it was not for you, I would never be able to attend. It is purely for selfish reasons that I wish for you to go.”

Somehow, I do not believe that is true, and I’m more than aware of how dangerous this is for my maid. If I am caught in the act of sneaking out of the palace to attend social events, the worst that will happen is that I end up with an extra guard. She will be let go for her part in this, though I will do my best to stop that from happening if it happens.

“Do not worry yourself,” Lucinda says. “I will ensure that everything is ready, and that we will not be caught.”

“Thank you, Lucinda.”

“Now, we should make you presentable for the events of the day,” she says, gesturing towards the seat at my dressing table.

I take it as an indication that she believes I am not in a state to be seen by members of Mother’s Court, though I am uncertain why that would be. Perhaps she simply wishes to give me some time to ensure that I am completely composed before I am required to see anyone else.

Whatever the reason, I am grateful for her and the support she gives me. Without my maid, I do not know how I would

be able to live this life, and I have every intention of ensuring that she is rewarded for it the moment I have the power to do so.

TWO



JOSEPHINE

THE BALLROOM IS full of laughter and life from the moment I walk in. And in response, I feel alive myself. I can feel it in every part of my body, even in the tail that belongs to my shifted form, and that is tightly wound up inside me. I have no idea what ball Lucinda has brought us to, but for all I know, there are humans in attendance, and the last thing I should do is reveal my true nature to them.

All around me, ladies are wearing their best gowns, and I feel dowdy in my reasonably plain white dress. It is exquisitely made, but far from the opulence I would be wearing if I were attending the ball in my true position.

“This is wonderful,” I say to my maid. Though in these circumstances, it is much more accurate to say that she is my friend.

“It is,” she says with a wistful sigh. “I wish that I could attend these more regularly.”

“Is there another this week?” I ask. “We should make the most of it before I am required to spend my evenings with my betrothed.”

“I shall enquire about it,” she responds. “Though it would appear that your attention is required for more pressing matters.” She nods towards a handsome gentleman approaching us.

I turn and smile even as he bows.

“You must forgive me, My Lady, but may I ask for an introduction?” The light accent in his voice reveals that he is not from here, which may explain why he is breaking all kinds of rules by asking me directly. But considering there is no one who can introduce me to anyone, I am going to take the opportunity for what it is.

“Of course, My Lord, I am Lady...Roaforth.” I almost stumble over the name, knowing that I should do nothing to link myself to my mother, but my father’s name is safe. And as Mother has not seen fit to announce me as her heir, I technically still carry the title of Lady Roaforth as a duke’s daughter.

“It is a pleasure, Lady Roaforth,” he says with a charming smile. “I am the Count of Strizenza.”

I pause as I let that sink in, then realise that I should be responding in a very specific way. “My Lord.” I dip into a curtsy. I do not recognise where he is from, but that is of no matter. As far as he knows, he outranks me, and I must act as such.

He reaches out and catches my hand, raising it to his lips and pressing a kiss against the back of it. Even through my glove, the contact burns, but not in an unpleasant way.

I sneak a glance at Lucinda, but she has already disappeared into the crowd of the ball. For all intents and purposes, I am unchaperoned, though the Count is not to know that.

“May I have the honour of the next dance?” he asks.

“Nothing would please me more.” And even as I say the words, I know they are true. Not just because he is a handsome stranger, but because it is often hard for me to find someone with whom to dance at these events. Without an introduction, no gentleman can ask me. And while some have been enterprising enough to find other ways, most just avoid me.

The Count leads me to where some dancers are preparing for the music to start and I find my heart fluttering at the way my hand feels in his. I do not often have cause to feel like this, and I welcome it. I am already enjoying this particular ball more than my last one.

“Is this your first visit to England, My Lord?” I ask.

“It is.”

“And what has brought you here?”

An expression of discomfort crosses his face, but it disappears within moments. “Business for my family,” he says. “But I wish it was more of a trip for leisure, the countryside is quite beautiful.”

“It is,” I agree. “I am particularly fond of the country. I believe I would spend most of my time there if I could.”

“Is that not possible?” he asks, his accent barely hindering his English. If I were required to guess, I would say that he has been learning the language since he was a child.

“Unfortunately, not. I am at the whim of my parents, and their business is in London,” I answer carefully, realising that I should not have invited this line of conversation lest I reveal who I truly am. I do not know what will happen if someone realises, but I do not wish to find out. So far, I have remained undetected, though I suspect that is because the majority of the people in attendance at balls such as these are not looking for the Shifter Heir. Many of the guests will be human and they have no idea of my importance at all. The same would go for any other supernatural guest.

My ruse works because I am not solely in the company of shifters, though I have not been discovered at any of the shifter-only events I have attended either. I push such thoughts from my mind just as the music begins to play. The dancers at the front of our set begin to dance, and I notice the Count watching them intently.

“Do you know the steps?” I ask.

“I believe so,” he responds. “My tutors were very insistent on me learning the English dances, but I have not had much cause to actually partake before.”

“I’m sure you will be a divine dancer.”

He chuckles. “You have no way of knowing that, Lady Roaforth.”

“That is of no matter. You could step on my toes at every turn and I would still be required by propriety to tell you that you are the most excellent dancer I have ever been partnered with.” I do not know what possesses me to say it, but the moment amusement passes across his expression, I’m satisfied that it was the right thing to say, even if I should not have.

“I can assure you that I will not step on my toes.”

“Ah, but we have only just met, Lord Strizenza, how am I to know that is true?”

“Would you not take a gentleman at his word?”

“I will take a gentleman at his word once I have seen how he dances,” I jest, dipping into a curtsy. “It is our turn.”

He steps forward, executing the moves of the dance far more perfectly than the man who went before him.

The Count’s hand brushes against my waist, the touch both gentle and reassuring at the same time. I don’t believe I have ever felt such a way when dancing before, though perhaps I am simply taken with the music.

I hold my tongue as we dance, seeing the concentration on the Count’s face for what it is. He is a wonderful dancer, but it is clear that he is putting a lot of thought and effort into each move, and I would not want to distract him from that.

The dance comes to an end and I dip into a low curtsy.

The Count offers me his arm and I slip my own through his, placing my gloved hand on his sleeve.

“I do not know what it is customary to do now,” he admits.

“Well, I shall thank you for the dance, and tell you that you are a divine dancer.”

“And I am to believe that as fact, rather than to question you more on it?” he quips.

I let out a small laugh. “Yes. Though in this case, I can assure you that you are an excellent dancer.”

“As are you, Lady Roaforth.”

“Thank you. Now we can either take a turn about the room, or get a refreshment.”

“Should we not dance again?”

I shake my head. “That would suggest that the two of us are courting, and considering that we do not know one another, it would not be advisable.”

“I suppose it would not.”

Do I imagine the hint of disappointment in his voice? It is hard to tell.

“Will you be at the ball in two days’ time?” he asks. “We may dance again then, might we not?”

“We can,” I say. “And I certainly hope to be.” Especially because the idea of dancing with the dashing Count again fills me with more excitement than I want to admit to anyone. It is probably simply because I wish to make the most of what little freedom I currently have before I end up married to a man of

my mother's choosing. Something that is certainly not appealing to me. It would not be so bad if I could at least meet the man before our betrothal, but she has decided that is the way things must be, and so I have to obey.

What is becoming abundantly clear to me is that I wish to do things differently when my children are the ones in my position. I do not wish for them to feel this way and will do everything I can to stop that from happening.

THREE



OTTO

IT IS IMMEDIATELY possible to tell the difference between this ball and the previous one that I attended. I did not know it at the time, but the previous one was for mixed company, whereas this one is solely for the shifters of London.

Of which I am now one. And if my father is to be listened to, then it is always going to be the case. A small part of me questions why I came here and why I didn't simply choose to take my leave and escape across the continent towards Spain or Portugal.

Perhaps I know that it would not change anything. Father would find a way to get me to come back, and then we would be disgraced amongst all of the Shifter Royalty in Europe. And perhaps within some of the other supernatural communities too.

I let out a sigh and focus my attention on the clothing of those around me. the shifters at home do not dress in such an obvious fashion, even when they are amongst themselves. But the shifters of London are a spectacle to behold, with many of

their dresses and suits making it clear what they are to the surrounding world. There is something oddly charming to the display and I find I like it. There is less of a feel of our existence being a secret about this.

It warms me to the idea of staying here, even if I do not particularly wish to be married to someone I have never met. I can not imagine the British Shifter Heir is particularly pleased about the idea of wedding me either. I would not know, considering I have not had a single conversation with her.

Perhaps some of my concerns could have been allayed if we had been afforded the opportunity to write to one another, but even that was denied to us. I have to wonder which of us they are wishing to keep silent.

A flash of green catches my attention and I find myself looking straight towards the knowing gaze of Lady Roaforth.

She dips into a curtsy, and I return it with a bow, feeling my insides constrict. I had not dared hope that she would actually be here. And more than that, she appears to be inviting me to approach her.

I hold my head up high and weave through the crowd, not paying any attention to any of the others who are around. I do not know them, and while I believe that may change in time, for now, it remains a helpful truth as none of them choose to engage with me.

“My Lord,” she says, dipping into another curtsy but holding my gaze. Her jet black hair is done up in an intricate fashion that must have taken one of her servants hours, and only adds to the visage of perfection.

“My Lady,” I respond. “I was hoping to see you this evening.”

She raises an eyebrow. “You hardly know me.”

And yet there is a part of me that wishes that was different. “Perhaps we may take a walk around the room and change that?” I suggest, holding out my arm.

She slips hers through within moments, not saying anything to anyone. I do not know where her chaperone for the evening is, but they can not be very concerned for her reputation or safety. Both are safe with me, but they have no way of assuring that.

“So, My Lord, what is it that you wish to know?” she asks.

“What is it that you wish to tell me?”

She laughs, a becoming sound that only makes me want to cause it to ring from her more. “A lady must keep her secrets.”

“And as the French say, beautiful women must have many,” I respond.

“Now you are just trying to flatter me, My Lord.”

“The French would also say that is something that is simply a fact when it comes to beautiful women.”

She guides me around the ballroom and gestures for the doors to the gardens. “It is early enough that there will be plenty of people around still,” she promises. “Just in case you believe me planning to trap you into something you have no wish to enter.”

Rather with her than with the mysterious Shifter Heir.
Perhaps I should ask Lady Roaforth about her, at least then I will be prepared for when we meet at the end of the week.

I nod and she leads me out into the cool air. A pair of birds dance around in the air above us, making me assume that some of the shifters in attendance at tonight's ball have decided to take advantage of the shifting rooms to either side of the main entrance. Somehow, I do not think it will be welcome if I do the same considering my form is rather more exotic than most of those here, if the outfits on display are anything to go by.

"Have you spent much time in France?" she asks, a sense of curiosity in her voice.

"I have spent a good amount of time there," I respond. "I am friendly with the Shifter Dauphin."

"Ah. What is he like?"

"Very French."

She snorts, a real and uncensored sound that makes me feel as if we are forging a genuine connection.

"Though he is also very outspoken against the war." I should not be telling her this, but it is good to speak of it.

"For good reason. I have always found Prince Louis to have sensible opinions." The way she says it makes it sound as if she knows him better than most.

I raise an eyebrow. "You know him?"

Something like shock passes over her face. "Only what my father says," she murmurs.

I feel like there is more to the situation than that, but I do not press her on the matter. It is important that she feels she is able to retain her privacy in any matter she chooses.

“What brings you to England?” she asks. “Is this simply part of some European tour that you’re partaking in?”

I consider my options. I could say yes and avoid having to explain why I’m here, but that would come very close to lying, and I do not know why, but I do not wish to do that to Lady Roaforth.

Which means that I should be careful about the truth.

“I am here for the wedding of the Shifter Heir,” I say carefully. That is not technically a mistruth. I am here for such a wedding, I have simply omitted the fact that I am the one marrying the poor girl.

“Ah.” Something about her response strikes a chord within me.

“Do you know her?” I ask.

“We have exchanged words,” she responds, and I feel as if she is choosing her words just as carefully as I am.

“You do not like her.”

“That is not what I said,” she responds.

“Will you tell me about her?”

Lady Roaforth frowns. “It is a strange topic of conversation.”

“I am simply curious.” Especially as the subject of our discussion is my future wife.

Lady Roaforth lets out a small sigh. “She is a tiger shifter, like her parents. And not yet the Shifter Heir, the Queen has not seen fit to make that announcement yet.”

“Whyever not?”

“I believe she is holding the betrothal over the Heir’s head.” A note of bitterness enters her voice and I wonder if perhaps she is in a similar situation herself.

“That is not particularly fair. Surely the fact she is the Shifter Heir would be a deciding factor in any marriage contract.”

Lady Roaforth lets out a scoff. “Considering she has no choice in who she is to marry, I do not believe that is the foremost of her concerns.”

“She does not know who she is to marry?” Hurt passes through me.

“She does not. So I’ve heard. May we speak of something else?”

I nod. “Of course, my apologies.”

She gives me a weak smile and gestures for us to sit on one of the benches. “Apologies are not needed, My Lord.” She sits and smooths out her skirt, allowing me to take a seat by her side.

“Are you dressed in your shifter colours?” I ask.

“No,” she responds. “My m-friend thought it would be better if I did not advertise what I am to the entirety of the ton.”

I frown. “Why would that be?”

“Because of some of those secrets you mentioned earlier. I have many, remember?” There’s a hint of a tease in her voice that helps me relax.

“And you may keep them, My Lady.”

“Something for which I am particularly grateful,” she responds. “But you are not wearing your shifter colours either, are you?” She brushes her hand against my sleeve, filling me with a sense of warmth that I am not used to feeling, even when other ladies have flirted with me.

“I did not realise that it was something that was done here,” I say.

“Ah. I can see how it must have come as a surprise.”

“Indeed. Though I must admit that while I find some of them easy to identify, others escape me.”

She nods. “I do not know all of the ton, but I can help with at least some of them. Over there you will find Lord Kidston escorting Miss Toully. He is a goat shifter, and I believe she is a toucan shifter.”

I spot the couple in question, and the chaperones trailing behind them.

I raise an eyebrow. “And over there?” I nod towards where three gentlemen are making their way across the lawn to what I assume must be the smoking room.

“The one on the far left with the black tails on his coat is the Earl of Waddlesworth, he’s a penguin shifter. The

gentleman next to him is his younger brother, and I believe the other is his cousin, Mr Grizzleton.”

“What an unfortunate name.”

She gives a small laugh. “Indeed, and if it weren’t for the Grizzleton fortune, I fear that his lack of title would stop him from making a desirable match. As it is, I believe he’ll be one of the most sought-after matches of the Season.”

“A fortune is enough to turn anyone’s head.”

“As is a title, apparently,” she mutters.

“Is everything well?”

She sighs. “Yes, I am simply thinking of things I should not. Oh, look, the lady in blue by the trellis with the tall feathers in her hair, that’s Mrs Peabury.”

“A peacock?” I guess. The deep blue of her dress dotted with green is almost enough to give it away, but I do not know precisely how many shifter types are in attendance.

“Well, a peahen. Is that how it works with shifters? I suppose I would not like to be called something inaccurate.”

“Hmm. And next to her, a fox, perhaps?” I can not see what else she may be given the deep orange of her dress and the white piping around her hem.

“Correct. That is Lady Renarton, she’s the wife of the Viscount. I believe the two ladies are good friends,” Lady Roaforth responds.

“What colours would you be wearing if you were dressed as your shifter?” I ask curiously.

“That would reveal too many of my secrets, My Lord. But perhaps if you are still in London for the Shifter Yuletide Ball, you will find out.” The way she smiles at me makes it clear that she considers the conversation into what kind of shifter she is to be over.

But all I can think is that while I will still be in London then, it will be too late and I will be married.

Which somehow now seems to be even more of an issue than before.

FOUR



JOSEPHINE

I KEEP my gaze trained on the deep green of my soup, trying not to draw any attention to myself. Or at the very least, as little attention as possible. It is always preferable if Mother does not consider me during tense meals such as these.

I do not know why she insists on the three of us eating alone together every week. If it were just myself and Father, things would be perfectly fine, the two of us can sustain a conversation with ease. Perhaps my parents can between themselves too, I do not know for I have never been privy to anything approaching that kind of intimacy between them despite the stories of their romantic courtship.

For when there is nothing but the three of us, there is never anything but tense silence. Father is aware that Mother's claim on me as her heir is stronger than his on me as his daughter, while Mother is no doubt trying to figure out how to manoeuvre us all into the places she wants us to be. And I simply wish to be left alone. I do not want to be a pawn. And

she is not truly trying to make me into one, for would a pawn make a good Queen?

I suppose in some board games, that is precisely what happens, but I do not believe it is true in reality. And I do not wish my mother to take any more interest in my opinions than she already has. Somehow, I do not believe she would approve of many of them.

“Are you well, Josephine?” Mother asks.

I startle at the question, dropping my spoon against the side of the fine china bowl. “Of course, Mother.”

“Good. Your maid said that you were unwell when I tried to visit you yesterday evening.”

Panic grips hold of me. Is she trying to tell me that she is aware I have been leaving the palace in order to attend balls? I hope not, for I wish to do it again. Especially if it offers me another chance to meet with the Count of Strizenza. I know I should not want it, especially as I am technically betrothed, but his company makes me wish that I had the ability to choose a husband of my own.

“I was overcome with fatigue,” I lie. “After the wedding dress fitting yesterday, it was quite the excitement.” Rather it was tedious and the dress was not at all to my liking.

To my surprise, Mother nods. “It is good that you are becoming excited for your upcoming wedding. Your betrothed will be arriving at the palace to meet you in three days.”

I let out a small squeak. “Three days?” I suppose it is a small mercy that she is allowing me to meet him before the

wedding itself. I imagine some of my ancestors have not been given the same courtesy.

“The wedding shall be the following week,” she says.

“So long as we find one another agreeable?” I ask hopefully.

Mother lets out a scathing laugh. “Regardless of your personal feelings on this matter. You will be married by the end of next week, Josephine. That is as it is going to be. It’s how it has been for generations of our family.”

“Everyone says you married for love,” I mutter.

Father scoffs, though I do not know the cause of it. I have heard so many whispers of their love match around the court, that I have to assume they’re true.

“You do not know what you are talking about,” Mother responds. “Our marriage was arranged.”

“I did not realise,” I murmur.

She rises to her feet. “I think I am quite done with eating. I expect you to be on your best behaviour when you meet your betrothed,” she says firmly.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” I mutter through gritted teeth.

She eyes me suspiciously and strides out of the room with the confidence afforded to her as the Shifter Queen.

I sigh and lean back in my seat. “I’m sorry, Papa.”

He smiles at me dotingly. “There is nothing to be sorry for, Jojo.”

A warm feeling spreads through me at his childhood endearment for me. “I do not know what I did wrong.”

A sad expression crosses his face. “It is the reminder of the story we told when we were first married,” he says.

“The story?” I echo.

He nods. “You are probably aware that what you hear the court gossiping about is never the full story.”

“I suppose it makes sense that it is not. The court sees what they wish to see.”

“And that is part of it. I was born in England, my family from a long line of Roaforths, and I would have become the duke in my own right had I not married your mother.”

“And people didn’t like that?” I guess.

He nods. “It was necessary. There was unrest about the Shifter Monarchy, and your grandmother thought that it was best to quell it by having your mother marry into the British nobility. There were a lot of people who saw through it for what it was, and so the Queen came up with a plan.”

“She made you pretend to fall in love?” Horror fills me even as I contemplate it.

Father nods. “I believe it is one of the reasons your mother is so set on this betrothal and marriage for you. She wishes to save you from the ruse.”

“And does she not think that it might be better to let me fall in love on my own? Or at least get a say in who I am going to marry. I do not even know this man’s name, Papa.”

He sighs. “I know, Jojo. I have tried to talk reason into your mother, but she will not hear it.”

“Oh.” I glance back down at my bowl of forgotten soup. “So your marriage...”

“Is fine,” he assures me. “We get on well enough, particularly once your mother considered my duty done.”

I frown. “Your duty?”

“You.”

I blink a few times as I try to understand precisely what that means.

“She wished to have an heir who would present the line the way it needed to be. A unification of the monarchy and the nobility. After that, I was nothing more than a reminder of what her own mother did to her when she was your age.”

I try to imagine my mother at five and twenty, but I struggle to reconcile it with the image I have of the formidable Queen I know today.

“Why is she doing this to me, if she understands how it feels?”

He gives me a weak smile, one that tells me everything I need to know about how much sway he has over my mother. “She is doing what she believes is best for the Shifter Monarchy. There are rumblings that the French are going to put an end to the Shifter Monarchy there, just as they have the human one.”

“There are?” I can’t hide my surprise as I think of the Shifter Dauphin. I’ve met Louis several times during diplomatic visits, and I believe it would be a bad thing for the French shifter community if he is not allowed to take his place as the Shifter King there. He has so many ideas that would benefit his people.

Similarly to how I have them here. Which I suppose is part of Mother’s consideration.

“I shall give your words some thought,” I tell Father. “May I be excused?”

“Of course, you have more say here than I do,” he reminds me.

“I am not the Shifter Heir yet.”

“You shall be next week,” he says.

Which means that if I wish to attend at least one more ball before my farce of a marriage begins, then I need to make sure that it is within the next three days, or I risk losing my freedom completely to a faceless man I do not know.

For a moment, his face in my imagination takes the form of the Count of Strizena’s handsome face, but I dismiss it. That is the foolish imaginings of someone who has not been able to explore the world as much as she should have been.

But if I have a chance to say goodbye to him, then I will take it. I do not see how else I can make my peace with what is to come.

FIVE



JOSEPHINE

THE LOUD MUSIC coming from the ballroom fills me with worry instead of joy as I step inside with Lucinda as my shadow. I do not know what to make of this evening, especially knowing that it is likely to be the last time I can attend an event like this.

Or at the very least, the last time I will be able to attend an event like this without everyone recognising me. I suppose Mother has done me a favour in keeping me away from the rest of society, though it does not feel like it. The people in this room will be the ones I rely on in times when I need allies. Surely it would have been more beneficial for me to have made connections without the weight of a title upon me?

I push the thought aside. It hardly matters what would have been better, what is done, is done. But I shall remember this for when I have a child of my own.

Lucinda slips into the crowd before I can even say goodbye to her, making me wonder precisely what she is

getting up to when we come to these events. But I suspect the less I know, the better.

I head over in the direction of the refreshments table, searching every face for the one I most want to see. Disappointment is blooming to life inside me as I reach for a glass of lemonade without having spotted the handsome count I'm looking for.

“Lady Roaforth,” his warm voice says from behind me.

My heart skips a beat and my pulse starts to race as I turn around, my drink completely forgotten in the haste to see him.

I dip into a curtsy. “My Lord.”

“I was hoping I would see you again.” His accent combined with the low tone at which he says the words makes what he's saying even more intimate than the insinuation already is.

“As was I, My Lord.”

“Would you care to dance? Or perhaps you would prefer a walk?”

I nod. “A walk sounds like it would suit me.” Especially as it is growing dark and I wish to speak with him about...

I'm not actually certain what about. I do not feel as if I can tell him the truth about my situation. I do not know what he would do should he find out, and I wish to neither be disappointed in him, nor in the situation.

Neither of us says anything as we step out into the fresh evening air. It should relieve me of my delusions and make me

see sense, but instead, all it does is provide a brief respite from the heat of the ballroom.

A darker spot at the corner of the terrace calls to me. I take hold of his sleeve and pull him towards it. The shadows should shield us from prying eyes, and that was perfect for what I had in mind. Though I don't suppose it matters too much if anyone sees us, for they have no idea who I am.

"Lady Roaforth, what is the matter?" the Count asks.

"I require some air," I respond, though I think we both know that it is a blatant lie.

"Air?" he murmurs.

I turn around and face him, realising just how close it brings the two of us.

"I need to talk with you," I whisper. "It is important."

"And you think that this is the right place for that?" Despite his words, I don't miss that his gaze drops to my lips.

"I think that this will be the last ball I am able to attend."

"This week?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Ever."

Disappointment flits over his face. "I fear that it may be true for me as well."

I frown. "You do? Are you returning to Europe?"

"I am required to fulfil my duty to my father," he responds.

"Ah, I believe that is how I could explain my position too," I respond with a sigh. "I wish it could be different."

“As do I,” he murmurs.

“And that you would kiss me, Lord Strizenza.” My words come out in a breathy way that I don’t think I’ve heard from myself before, but I know it is just because of the situation.

“Only if you will call me Otto,” he responds as he steps closer.

I bite my bottom lip. “Then you should call me Josephine.” My real name slips from my lips before I have a chance to think about whether it is wise. But I doubt a handsome foreigner will be able to connect my name to the Shifter Heir he has not met and probably has little interest in.

“I would be honoured, Josephine,” he responds, his voice full of the promise of what is to come.

I know we should not do this. I know that it is reckless and foolish, and all kinds of things that make it a terrible idea. But I can not help it. I want a taste of freedom. A taste of the world. I want to find out how it feels to be in love. I do not believe that is what this is, nor will it be if we kiss, but it will be more than I have experienced before, and certainly more than I shall experience again.

Otto studies my face, though I do not know what he is looking for. He seems to find it, as he reaches out with a gloved hand and cups my cheek.

My lips part of their own accord, and my eyes flutter closed.

His breath tickles, but only for a moment. When his lips meet mine, I know I have made the right decision and that

nothing else matters. I wrap my arms around his neck as he pulls me closer and a warm feeling rushes through me, almost like when I'm wishing to shift. But it's different at the same time.

My whole being is alive and I find myself believing in all kinds of possibilities that I know can not come to be. It is foolish. Both to think them, and to give in to this moment. But I can not help it. Something has been awakened inside me, and it seems to be tightly connected to the tiger within. She rumbles away inside me in a way I don't think I've ever felt before.

We break apart, and I stare at him, unable to form words to express how I am currently feeling. I do not know what I am going to do to get through the next few days knowing that this is not my future, but at least I have this moment to take into my memory.

"Lady Roaforth!" Lucinda calls from the door onto the terrace.

I groan. "I believe that is my cue to leave." She would not be calling for me if it was not important.

Otto nods gravely and lifts my hand to his lips, placing a kiss there. It burns through my gloves. "Perhaps we may meet again in the future, Josephine."

"Perhaps," I respond with a sad smile. In all likelihood, this is going to be the last time I ever see him, and he will go through his life never realising how important this moment was to me.

I pull my hand from his and head in Lucinda's direction, refusing to look back no matter how much I want to. I don't need to make this any harder than it has to be, and it is already much worse than I anticipated. No doubt the reality of returning to the palace will chase the memory of the kiss away.

I touch my lips.

Or perhaps not.

SIX



OTTO

THE LARGE DOORS to the formal throne room of the British Shifter Queen would have been intimidating at the best of times, but now I have to enter and meet the lady I am going to marry with the memory of Josephine fresh in my mind. I had not been able to sleep last night for thoughts of our kiss and had run it over and over in my mind. It had been a goodbye for her as much as it had been for me, I am certain of it, but I do not know why that is.

I ignore the part of me that wishes to turn and walk out of the palace with the intention of going to find Lady Josephine Roaforth and confessing everything. She should not be too difficult to find. Being unmarried but still being given the title *lady* suggests that she is the daughter of someone important.

It will only take a few well-placed questions for me to be able to find out the truth.

The doors to the throne room open with a dramatic clunk and all thoughts of leaving this place and seeking out a lady I barely know flee from my mind. My father has made this

match because he needs the alliance with the Shifter Monarchy, which means that I must do my duty even if it is not what is truly in my heart.

I take a deep breath and step inside.

To my surprise, there aren't many people inside the room. Either this is the norm, or someone is concerned about how I will react in this situation.

Or perhaps it is not because of me, but because of the nervous young lady standing to the right of the throne. There is something vaguely familiar about her even from this distance, but perhaps it is simply that I recognise my own nerves in her.

And with good reason if the stern expression of the Queen is anything to go by. She does not appear as if she would be pleased to learn of my dalliance with someone beneath her daughter's station.

I make my way to the front of the throne room and dip into a deep bow. "Your Majesty."

A small gasp comes from the Shifter Heir, almost impossible to hear, but I did.

"You may rise," the Queen says.

I straighten up, my gaze slipping to the young lady who is to become my wife and recognising her instantly. There's no mistaking her face.

Or her eyes.

Josephine.

It is everything I can do to keep my face as neutral as possible. I suspect the Queen has no idea of what she's been up to.

"May I introduce my husband, the Duke of Roaforth," the Queen says, gesturing to the quiet man on her left. "This is the Count of Strizenzia, our daughter's betrothed."

"Your Grace," I say with a bow, putting the pieces together. Josephine did not even lie to me. She told me exactly who she was, I just did not work it out until now.

"And this is my daughter, Lady Josephine." She gestures to her right.

I turn and bow low. "My Lady."

Josephine reaches out her hand as if doing things without thinking.

I take it in my own and rub my thumb over the back of it. Her breathing hitches, but I do not think anyone else noticed.

I raise her hand to my lips and kiss it, meeting her gaze as I do. All kinds of emotions swim behind her eyes, but I do not know what to make of them.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, My Lord," she says, her voice surprisingly steady.

"The pleasure is all mine, My Lady."

The Duke watches us with interest, but the Queen does not seem to be extending her attention to her daughter.

"Your Majesty, would it be acceptable if I took the Count on a tour of the gardens?" Josephine asks, her words coming

out a little shaky as she does.

Surprise flits over her mother's face, but that is all. "Very well."

"Thank you." Josephine curtsies. "Your Majesty, Father."

I follow suit and offer her my arm.

Relief floods through me as she slips her own through mine and rests it on my sleeve.

Neither of us say a word as she draws me through a door at the back of the throne room and out towards the gardens. Birds flit from flower to flower, but I can not pay any attention to them when I have the most beautiful creature in the palace on my arm.

She wordlessly leads me to a maze, and it isn't until we are inside that I consider she is doing this in order to give us some privacy from the people who are milling about. I briefly wonder what will happen if we are caught alone together, but I suppose it is not an important thing to worry about at this point.

Josephine stops walking and turns to face me, making me realise just how close we are together.

Without thinking, I lean forward and capture her lips with mine. She kisses me back eagerly, despite the fact that neither of us have said anything about our situation yet. I do not think it has completely sunk in. Somehow, the Josephine who has been enchanting me in ballrooms for the past week, and the Shifter Heir I'm supposed to marry, are the same person.

She pulls away from me, a small smile on her face. “I can show you my shifter colours,” she murmurs.

I chuckle. “Is that what you’re thinking about right now?”

“I am thinking that there are shifting rooms at the centre of the maze,” she responds, a twinkle of amusement in her eyes. “And I think we should go there.”

“Is it acceptable for us to shift together before the wedding?” I ask, uncertain about the British rules on such a matter.

“What will they do to us? Make us marry?”

I let out an amused laugh. “That is fair.”

She reaches out and takes my hand in hers, pulling me along behind her as she makes her way through the maze and towards where I assume is the centre. I go along with it, knowing that there is going to be no stopping her now she has made up her mind. Clearly her mother has no idea about her sneaking out to balls, which makes me feel as if I know her better.

And headstrong is definitely a word I would use to describe her.

The centre of the maze appears within a few moments, and sure to her word, a shifting house stands there, with an entrance on each side.

“I will see you in a minute,” she says, leaning in to kiss my cheek before disappearing into the left side of the house.

I shake my head in bemusement and head into the other side. I strip off my clothing quickly, trying my best not to think of Josephine doing the same on the other side. It is inappropriate of me to think of her that way. At least, I think it is. I am not entirely certain what the rules are given the current situation.

I fold my clothes neatly and call forth a shift. My body changes in an instant, with fur springing up to take the place of my skin, and powerful muscles making themselves known throughout my entire body. My tail flicks from side to side as I ready myself to go outside. A small part of me worries that Josephine may be using the opportunity to run away, but I do not think that is going to be the case. She seemed genuinely happy to discover that I am the one who she is to marry. A sentiment that I certainly share. I wish it could be different for us, and that we were not forced to do this, but at least this way the two of us have a chance at happiness.

I slink out of the shifting house to find a lithe tiger waiting for me. Her coat is a slightly deeper orange than mine, which only makes her stripes all the more striking. She is breathtaking, in this form and in her human one. I do not know how I have become so lucky that I am able to spend my life with her.

She lets out a low rumble and cocks her head to the side, as if asking me to follow her.

I nod my assent, though I am not precisely certain what to.

She bounces off into the maze and it soon becomes clear that what she wants is to run.

And that is something I am happy to oblige with.

I chase after her, allowing the joy of an unbridled shift to overtake me. There are plenty of things to worry about in the future, but for now, I can simply enjoy the fact that I am not going to be trapped in marriage to someone I barely know. If anything, I am going to be marrying a lady I believe I will come to love. And neither of us have to disappoint our families in the process. It is more than I could ever have dreamed of during my trip across the sea, and I welcome that with open arms, excited about what the future may bring.

SEVEN



JOSEPHINE

THE COOL NIGHT air brushes against my skin, and not for the first time, I find myself worrying about whether this is wise.

But I do not see what choice I have. With the wedding barely a few days away, I have not been afforded many chances to speak with Otto since our shift in the maze. I do not know if it is because Mother is trying to keep us away from one another, or if it is merely chance that it is happening.

Footsteps sound against the stone floors but they don't make me flinch. Even from this distance, I can tell who they belong to.

"Josephine," he whispers.

I turn around and his eyes widen.

"I should not be here," he says as he takes me in, his gaze lingering on my face.

"I invited you," I point out.

"I did not realise you would be..." He gestures to me.

“In my robe?” I finish for him.

Otto nods.

I tighten the fabric of my robe around me tighter. “It is not ideal,” I agree. “But I needed to speak with you and this was the only way I could. I thought that because you would be seeing me like this in a few days anyway, it would not be a problem.”

“It would be a problem if we are caught.” He steps closer despite his words.

“No one will catch us,” I assure him. “Nobody but my maid is aware that I am still awake, and she will not tell a soul.”

“Is she the one who helps you sneak out to balls?”

“She used to,” I admit. “But that will no longer be the case.”

I gesture for the two of us to sit on one of the stone benches. He joins me instantly, sitting so close that I can feel the warmth radiating from him. It is nice to have him so close.

“You can still attend balls, should you wish,” he says, an odd note entering his voice. “I shall not ask questions.”

I let out a surprised laugh. “There won’t be any questions to ask, Otto,” I respond. “The balls are fun, but I think I was only really going because I was hoping to find something I could not have.”

“Oh.”

“And in the process, I believe I may have found it.” I look up at the moon and let out a content sigh. “I have never told anyone I come here at night before. Not even Lucinda.”

“Your maid?”

I nod. “Whenever I can’t sleep, I come here and sit to look at the moon. Sometimes I’ll even shift and curl up.”

“It is beautiful here,” Otto responds.

“And peaceful.”

He hums softly.

“I think that is why I wanted to share it with you.” I reach up and tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. It truly is a risk to be sitting here with him while my hair isn’t neatly pinned and I am otherwise ready for sleep, but it does not make me uncomfortable to know that is the case.

It does help that Otto has loosened his cravat and rolled up his sleeves, revealing strong arms and bare hands that I realise I wish to touch.

“I am glad you wish to share this with me,” he says.

“There is lots I wish to share with you,” I respond. “But I do not know where to begin. Did you know who I was when you approached me for our first dance?”

I watch him intently for any hint that he may lie, but honesty radiates from every part of him.

“I had no idea you were the Shifter Heir,” he admits. “I must have seemed foolish to you when I was asking about her. Or you.”

I let out a small laugh. “It was a strange conversation,” I admit. “But I did not think you foolish. I did not know who you were either. Not until you walked into the throne room and I saw you. Mother had always been talking about you in terms of who you were related to. Sometimes, I think that is the only thing that matters to her in this union.” There is no stopping the hint of bitterness from entering my voice.

“I am certain it is not. She must wish for your happiness,” Otto says.

“I highly doubt she has given my happiness a moment’s consideration.”

“Then I shall have to ensure that I account for it all the more.”

A small smile spreads over my face at his words.

“I believe you already are. When you walked into the throne room, I was surprised, but then I felt relief. I am not going to live my life thinking back to our first kiss constantly because I am married to someone who does not care for me.”

“I already care for you a great deal,” Otto says, reaching out to take my hand in his.

The touch is even more intense without the barrier of gloves between us and my heart skips a beat at the contact.

“I believe that I am already falling in love with you,” he continues. “Though I am aware that it will still take time.”

“It will,” I agree. “But I feel the same.”

“I am content that we got to spend time getting to know one another without the betrothal in our way,” he says. “But I am also looking forward to learning more about you.”

“As am I,” I respond, realising it is the wholehearted truth.

“I know it is improper, but may I kiss you, Josephine?”

“I would like that very much.”

He lets go of my hand so he can cup my cheek in his, the warmth making my heart flutter.

Even though I know what to expect this time, I still feel the anticipation build up within me, only to be released when his lips brush against mine.

This is different from our others. This is not a kiss goodbye, nor is it a kiss of relief. This kiss is full of the promise of a future neither of us thought we could have.



EPILOGUE

JOSEPHINE

December

THE CARRIAGE PULLS up in front of an elaborate building and I feel the excitement building up within me. There is something wonderful about being here. I don't even mind attending as myself and not the mysterious Lady Roaforth. Though I suppose that is still my name until I become Queen Josephine.

The footman opens the door to the carriage and Otto makes his way down, holding out his hand to me. "Your Highness," he says, his accent the same delight as it was the day we first met.

"You know I do not wish to be called that," I say, placing my hand in his and allowing him to help me down from the carriage, which is very necessary with the height of the black and orange plume in my hair. "It is not my title."

"I do not know what else to call you."

"Josephine? Wife?"

He chuckles. "Very well, wife. Are you ready for the ball?"

I glance at the entrance. "I was, but now that we are here, I am not so sure. Perhaps I should have taken Lucinda up on her offer to help us enter as nobodies."

"Then why did we spend so much time convincing your mother that we should be allowed to attend?"

I sigh. "I dislike it when you talk sense."

“You do not.”

“You are right, I love you, dear husband, even when you speak the sense I do not wish to hear.”

“Then I shall continue to do so,” he promises. “Have I expressed my admiration for the tail of your gown?”

“You have not. My poor dressmaker will be heartbroken.”

“Then I shall make my reparations to her. Perhaps we should order ten new gowns.”

“That would be excessive,” I respond, straightening my mask. “Now, let us go inside. I wish to dance with you.”

“I thought it was improper for married couples to dance together?”

“On every other occasion, that is true, but tonight is different. It is the Shifter Yuletide Ball and there are no rules to abide by.”

“I do not think that is the case.”

“Perhaps not. But a dance will not be a problem.” Though in reality, we are still able to dance together when we are at royal functions, which is a relief. I do not think I would have been able to sustain myself on the mere two dances we managed during our accidental courtship.

“I look forward to it,” he responds.

“But we must also make sure to make as many introductions as we can tonight,” I instruct him. “If we are going to make a difference once I am the Shifter Queen, then we need to make sure people know us.”

Otto nods patiently, which I appreciate. It can not be easy for him to know that he has to spend his life one step behind me, but I appreciate that he is willing to, and I know we're going to make a big difference once we are in power, and I look forward to seeing what we can achieve.

But first, I wish to spend the evening enjoying my husband's company at a ball I've always wanted to attend.

* * *

Thank you for reading *The Heir and the Tiger*, I hope you enjoyed it. If you want more from the shifters of *The Shifter Season* series, you can start with *The Fox and the Viscount*:

<https://books2read.com/thefoxandtheviscount>



AUTHOR NOTE

Thank you for reading *The Heir and the Tiger*, I hope you enjoyed it.

The Heir and the Tiger is a little bit of a break from the other books in *The Shifter Season* series as it includes shifters that are not native British animals. This is mostly because the Shifter Monarchy system was already in place in the world that *The Shifter Season* is set in, and I didn't want to go away from that. I also love tigers - sometimes there really is no more of an explanation than that.

In terms of *The Obscure World* as a whole, Josephine is the Shifter Queen who brings shifters out of hiding and into the rest of the world. If you want to know more about the Shifter Monarch system, then you can find it in the *Sabre Woods Academy* series, which follows the Shifter Heir in the 21st Century, Kayra, as she tries to balance the modern world with the monarchy and its role there.

Some of the characters Josephine points out to Otto already have books of their own - Mrs Peabury and Lady Renarton are the main characters from *The Peacock and the Wallflower* and *The Fox and the Viscount* respectively. Several

of the others mentioned are intended to be future characters in *The Shifter Season* series too.

If you want to keep up to date with new releases and other news, you can join my [Facebook Reader Group](#) or [mailing list](#).

Stay safe & happy reading!

- Laura

ALSO BY LAURA GREENWOOD

You can find out more about each of my series on my [website](#).

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ABOUT LAURA GREENWOOD

Laura is a USA Today Bestselling Author of paranormal romance, urban fantasy, and fantasy romance. When she's not writing, she drinks a lot of tea, tries to resist French macarons, and works towards a diploma in Egyptology. She lives in the UK, where most of her books are set. Laura specialises in quick reads, with healthy relationships and consent positive moments regardless of if she's writing light-hearted romance, mythology-heavy urban fantasy, or anything in between.

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