

# Aftermath

*by cmwinters*

"Come to the right side, and we can hide you more completely than you can possibly imagine."

Explores a life in exile for of some of those who have been hidden.

(VERY slightly A/U, and even then, only if you take all interviews really literally.)

NOT DH compliant!

# There Goes the Neighbourhood

*Chapter 1 of 5*

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On a dark and dreary night in late December, a cloaked and hooded figure hauled the body of a slender young man through the cobbled streets of a deserted village. Utterly unconcerned about being watched (the village was otherwise deserted), the cloaked figure painstakingly made its way to a small house at the far end of the street. The door to the nondescript house was pushed aside, and the body dragged unceremoniously through it.

Inside the darkened house, the cloaked figure fumbled at the wall, apparently looking for something. A flick of the wrist, and the room was bathed in a greyish-yellow light. In normal circumstances, such a figure would lower his or her hood whilst glancing about to get bearings, but as these circumstances were anything but normal, the hood stayed up.

A decision was reached, and the slender figure lugged the limp man down a short hall to what appeared to be a bedroom. A thin coat of dust covered everything, and the cloaked figure suppressed a sneeze, trying to maintain silence and anonymity. The end of the ordeal was in sight, and the body was laid down on the bed and arranged precisely. Had there been an observer other than the cloaked figure in attendance, surely he or she would have noted that the attractive, black-haired young man now lying face-up on the bed was not only unconscious, but was not breathing.

As it was, there were no other witnesses, and the cloaked figure didn't appear to be bothered in the least by the utter lack of animation (although the boy on the bed could

not possibly have been over twenty years old) and merely reached inside the voluminous cloak, withdrawing a small, ornately carved bottle that sparkled in the moonlight. The thin, spidery fingers of the pale right hand deftly uncapped it as the left reached out to pry the full, ruby red lips apart. Having succeeded, the evilly glittering contents of the crystal phial were poured into the mouth of the youth, and with a swish of the cloak, the cloaked figure turned and tucked the bottle into a pocket as it swept off, extinguishing the light and closing the door before it disappeared.

\* \* \*

The boy woke some time later whether this time was several hours or several days he could not possibly have told you in utterly unfamiliar surroundings. He lay still for some time, feeling around under his pillow and beside him on the mattress for something for a few moments before finally giving up. He listened hard to the silence that greeted him, and assumed it was probably safe to move. He sat up and swung his long muscular legs over the edge of the bed and recoiled, whimpering, from a throbbing headache. He felt as if his head would split in two. Glancing around at the surfaces in the room showed no headache relief set out on an obvious surface in another room, perhaps, or maybe in a drawer.

He was in an impossible position. To get up and move would cause his head to throb worse, as would going back to sleep. Fate decided him, though, when his bladder also gave a dangerous twitch, and he realised if he didn't get to the lavatory soon, he was going to have a rather uncivilised mess to clean up.

There wasn't an en-suite lavatory in this room, judging by its lack of obvious facilities and the fact that it only had one door, which obviously led to a hall. He stood slowly, mindful of his pounding head, and crept carefully toward the door, casting anxious glances out the window, although if anyone knew where he was, he probably would not have survived long enough to be worrying about a full bladder.

A glance up and down the hall showed a promising looking room, so he headed that way and was rewarded with the proper facilities.

And no light.

He reached up to what was obviously the light and fiddled with it, trying to find the starter. Some small part of him the part that wasn't recoiling in pain from his overly full bladder and aching head noted that the lights couldn't possibly be lit thus because someone who wasn't blessed with his height would never have been able to reach it.

Blast, how to get the lights on?

He remembered, vaguely, that someone (in another life, he reminded himself) had told him once that some houses and this was likely one of them would have a starter switch of sorts on the wall, so he fumbled for it, but was unable to find it. He stepped carefully back out to the hall and flipped that switch, using the light from the hall to illuminate what looked like a pull-cord connected to a light in the loo, and pulled it, casting the room in a hideously unnatural light.

"Ugh," he winced, but at least now he could see.

The person who had told him about the lights, of course, was his sadistic cousin, in her mocking and sing-song voice. His sadistic first cousin who he suddenly realised he'd never see again. For all that his family had harped upon the importance of blood, he found himself not the least bit disturbed by this revelation.

Of course, he'd never see his brother again, and that DID bother him, even though they'd not spoken for several years. They'd been close growing up, but once school started, they'd drifted further apart than two brothers in the same boarding school had any right to. Even still, he knew that his brother wherever he was would approve of what he'd done.

And even if he didn't, it didn't matter. He'd made his choices and this was his life now. He'd have to live with this ridiculous and hideous lighting, in this unknown town, pretending to be someone he was not, in all probability for the rest of his life. Given his age, that was likely to be a considerable amount of time.

*Oh, well.*

He was alive, and that's a damned sight better than what he could have expected, under the circumstances.

After standing over the loo for what felt like five minutes, the young man now faced a new pain his bladder had been SO full that it now ached from being overly stretched. I can't win, he thought silently to himself, flushing the toilet and washing his hands before extinguishing the hideous light and padding down the hall to investigate the rest of the house.

At the end of the hall was a larger, open room, in which sat a battered couch flanked by two small end-tables, a coffee table, a wing-backed armchair and a bookcase which held no immediately familiar titles. Further away from the front door (which he immediately locked and then felt foolish for so doing surely anyone who wished him ill would have come when he was asleep?) and up against a wall sat a small table, upon which an envelope sat. He glanced at it momentarily before walking past it to view a small but otherwise functional kitchen. A cursory glance through all the cabinets revealed sufficient crockery and flatware to feed him from the well-stocked larder assuming he could figure out how to cook. He opened a strange looking stand-alone two-door larder, wondering what it was and was assaulted by a blast of cold air. Alarmed, he shut it quickly, wondering vaguely if he'd be able to figure out how to operate the cooker.

Temporarily persuaded that he was in no immediate danger, he headed back toward the small serving table and tore open the cream-coloured envelope that was addressed to a Reginald Browne in narrow, loopy writing. He snorted derisively and extricated the paper within.

*Dear Mr. Browne,*

*I do hope you find your new accommodations agreeable. The pantry and refrigerator are well-stocked, and there is sufficient money stocked in a hidden drawer in the bedroom wardrobe to provide for your needs for the indeterminate future. Monthly and quarterly bills will be delivered to and paid by our solicitor, so you needn't worry on that account.*

*At the present time this street is uninhabited, other than you, although given that things are picking up, you likely will have some neighbours soon. There is a small shop a few streets away, at which you will be able to purchase food as you need it. That is as far as we can guarantee your safety.*

*Someone will come by occasionally with news and to ensure any other supply needs are met. I needn't remind you how precarious your position is, so trips to larger towns for clothing and the like could be dangerous not only to you, but anyone else who lives in the area.*

*Do take care, and I sincerely hope we shall be able to converse more properly sooner rather than later.*

There was no signature, but it didn't matter he knew who it was from. He would have known even if he hadn't recognised the writing.

He sighed and returned to the bedroom to continue searching for a headache remedy, now with the idea to check how much clothing he had and find the promised money. After that, he supposed it would be a good idea to get his bearings, and find the shop.

\* \* \*

A few very lonely months went by before Reginald saw another person on his street at the dawn of spring. A pretty woman with red hair and blue eyes appeared one day in the yard in front of one of the other houses. He was apprehensive, but thought it only polite to be neighbourly, and grabbed a bottle from the cabinet in his bathroom before he sauntered that way. Her expression brightened when she saw him, but then she winced.

"Headache?" he asked knowingly, his voice raspy from disuse.

She nodded, and he handed her a bottle.

"What is this?" she croaked.

He cleared his throat, trying to find his voice. "Excuse me, it's been a while since I've seen another human being slightly longer since I've spoken to one with any regularity. That's aspirin it's made from an extract of the bark of the white willow tree. My first day here, I had a throbbing headache and walked down to that shop a few streets away," he said, pointing in the general direction of the store, "and asked if they had anything for a headache. They offered me something called 'paracetamol' but I was wary, and so they gave me that. Not the best stuff I've ever had, but eh it worked."

She made a sceptical face at him, but opened the bottle. "How many?"

"One or two. No more than two," he offered. "Dissolve them in water. It's absolutely vile," he warned, "but then, the water isn't much better without it."

She glanced back up at him as if she didn't quite believe him and extracted two of the powdery white pills, but then looked up at him in obvious discomfort and flipped the bottle over and scrutinised the writing.

"If I wanted to poison you," said Reginald softly, "I could simply have put something else in the bottle, you know. Although, if I wanted to hurt you, I would probably not have chosen poison as my method of delivery."

She conceded the point and offered her hand. "You're Reginald Browne, right?"

"Mmm," he nodded slightly, taking her hand.

"Mary Anne Mackenzie," she offered. "Care to come in?"

"Sure," he shrugged, and so resigned was he to his fate that he never even analysed her name to try and figure out who she really was.

He followed her into the house, noting that it was similarly decorated to his, but much larger. "My whole family is with me," she whispered, "but they're all still asleep." He nodded and winked and followed her into the kitchen where he casually flipped the switch on the wall. She started at the sudden illumination and turned around to look at him, and he flipped it twice more. She smirked at him and filled up two water glasses, handing him one. He took it, but neglected to drink it, and laughed quietly when she made a face.

"I told you!" he said as she yanked his glass out of his hand and poured both of them down the drain with a shudder. Turning her back, she pried open the refrigerator door and analysed its contents.

"Where do we put the ice?!" she asked quietly in alarm.

"Er it's kind of like the lights, I think it's always on; you don't have to do anything.

"... I... see..." she said, her tone of voice indicating that she did nothing of the sort.

He snickered. "You'll get used to it," he said confidently.

"Haven't much choice, now do I?"

He shook his head, laughing quietly, then grinned at her. "Well I suppose you always have the choice..." Her scowl told him exactly what she thought of that, and he laughed again.

"I ah would invite you for a meal," he offered, "but I'm afraid I'm not much of a chef. The first couple of weeks, I subsisted entirely on sandwiches and packaged crisps because anything I tried to cook was a disaster. I've moved up to spaghetti and tinned soup now, though, so apparently there's hope for me after all," he said with a grin and a self-deprecating roll of his eyes. "Although if your family is up for overcooked spaghetti, then my door is always open!"

She laughed. "You can eat here any time you want!"

He looked aghast. "No, no I was not trying to impose my company on you. Just I know how it is the first couple of days especially, and I didn't want you to think I'm a complete arse for not inviting you."

"Nonsense. I have to cook for my whole family, and as it seems we're all going to be here a while, we may as well get to know each other. Say, seven? That should give everyone time to wake up and get adjusted."

He nodded. "Er you say 'everyone' and mentioned your 'whole family' earlier? Just how much of your family are we talking?"

"My husband, my kids, and me."

"... 'kids'...?" he said cautiously, knowing full well he was teetering precariously over the precipice of what was considered acceptable conversation for the terms of his exile. "... how many 'kids'... and how old are they?" he asked with increasing alarm. Acceptable conditions be damned, this was a threat to his own life.

"Three almost three, five and a half, and eight. Two girls and a boy."

He cleared his throat and put one foot over that precipice. "And um have ah 'arrangements' been made... for their education?"

"Yes," she said with a smile, understanding his reluctance. "They'll be going to the local private school until they're old enough to go to a more specialised boarding school. The, ah, boarding school... I highly doubt you've been there. It's um not close."

He nodded gravely, yet not completely assuaged. "And, uh... they won't... say anything?"

"No," she said with finality. "Taken care of."

"I beg your pardon but I did have to ask."

"I understand," she said, smiling to show she held no ill will.

"All right. Well, I will let you get acquainted with the area. If you have any questions please feel free to come and ask me. It's not like I have anywhere else to be," he said with a wink.

"Ok. We'll see you at seven, then, if not before?"

"Seven it is!" he said cheerfully, and with a longing glance to the games laid out on the coffee table (he'd been alone for several weeks, and a bookcase full of fiction and deck of cards could only entertain you so much by yourself, after all), went back to his new home.

Dinner that night was a rowdy affair and became a weekly occurrence. Unwilling to and by virtue of his extremely proper upper-class upbringing, completely incapable of impose his company upon the Mackenzie household more than once a week, he struggled to learn to cook better, finally asking Mary Anne if she'd teach him some things.

Once he could prepare something more palatable than sandwiches and overcooked pasta, he made it a point to invite them over once a week as well. A couple more weeks passed when two more men red haired, blue eyed twins named Geoff and Frank who had a disconcerting habit of completing each other's sentences (when they bothered to speak at all) arrived. Reginald greeted them with aspirin the same way he'd greeted Mary Anne and invited them to the weekly dinner that was taking place at his house that night. Later, after everything had been cleaned up and the two rambunctious men were out wrestling with the children, Reginald looked at the newcomers and remarked to Joe Mackenzie, "we're outnumbered," with a grin, referring to every other person on the street having red hair. Joe grinned back and gave Reginald another beer.

A couple of months passed, the weather growing gradually more oppressively hot and humid before their little housing area increased again with the arrival of a brunette woman none of them knew. She just showed up one night, knocking on Mary Anne's door, apparently drawn by the noise and asking for something for headache, and she was welcomed to the dinner table with open arms and the bottle of aspirin passed to her with nary a second glance.

On the night of the longest day of the year, they were all outside observing the stars when Reginald noticed movement out of the corner of his eye. Immediately on his guard, he slid behind a tree to observe, but recognised the gait of the approaching figure and realised it posed no threat. He immediately went back to the group, strode to a high point on the hill and drew their attention toward a particular constellation, turning back to answer questions. He took note of the house the figure left and watched almost wistfully as it walked off. He hadn't any real desire to return to his previous life, but that one had been a friend.

The figure turned about, and Reginald inclined his head slightly in greeting, knowing his old school-mate would recognise it for what it was.

He couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw a twitch of a hand in response.

The next morning, Reginald went to the house he'd seen the cloaked figure leaving and tapped lightly on the front door. A blonde woman with brown eyes opened the door, looking mutinous. He introduced himself quietly and told her he'd seen her arrive, told her the names of the other residents and their assigned housing, and offered her the bottle of aspirin, telling her she was welcome to dinner at 7, which that night was scheduled at Geoff and Frank's.

As the summer built to an unbearable climax, if any of them noticed that Reginald never wore short sleeves, even when he wore short pants, none of them mentioned it. Nor did they mention his unique peculiarity of occasionally flinching and hissing low through his teeth whilst he nearly doubled over, seemingly in some untreatable pain.

They knew he wouldn't explain if asked, anyway. They also seemingly ignored the fact that for his age he showed an unusual lack of interest in pursuing either male or female, although with his roguish good looks and easy charm, he probably would have had his pick of anyone present. Besides, just asking would violate the terms of their agreement. None of them were to know anything about each other, and most certainly nothing about anyone else's past or family. That Mary Anne's family was with her was purely an anomaly yet another thing that nobody remarked upon.

\* \* \*

By the time autumn exploded into a riot of multi-coloured leaves, their little community had grown by two other men and another woman who'd arrived unseen in the middle of the night, all separately from one another and all housed separately. Desperate for some semblance of normality, they'd bought pumpkins and Reginald spent a significant amount of time teaching the children how to carve and sculpt them, which he was able to accomplish even with the meagre kitchen flatware they had. Mary Anne had gathered up all the pumpkin innards and was baking a large pie.

On Hallowe'en, they decided to let the kids all stay up late. It was a Saturday night, after all, and nobody had any obligations the next day.

As the mythical "witching hour" approached, Reginald was hunched over a chess board against Curtis, one of the newcomers, engrossed in a very intense game when he suddenly let fly a blood-curdling shriek and fell to the ground, rolling about in the foetal position and howling, obviously in some significant pain.

Bertram, another of the newcomers, rushed to the door and windows, frantically gazing out and up into the sky as if he expected a threat to be there. Geoff and Frank rushed to the aid of their fallen comrade and tried to get him to lie flat, which he refused to do or perhaps was just incapable of doing it. He seemed to have no connection to his surroundings at all, almost as if he were in an altered state of consciousness. The only problem with that theory was that when they tried to get him to lie flat, he fought them.

Geoff and Frank looked at each other in some consternation, then they looked about the room. "No muckin' about does anyone know ANYTHING about this bloke?"

"No none of us know anything about anyone."

"It's against the rules surely you know that?"

"Be damned about the bloody rules something is WRONG with him and how are we going to get help?!"

"He's all right now, look."

And indeed, Reginald was laying more or less flat on his back, gasping helplessly, brow furrowed, fists clenched so tight his hands and wrists were white. Geoff, who was sitting at Reginald's left side, grabbed his hand and began to turn his arm over so that he could put pressure on the flexor tendon to get him to relax his hand, much as one would do with an infant. But the arm was rapidly yanked away and cradled to his abdomen. "Munnabesick," he mumbled and crawled to his feet. Frank offered to help him but was brushed off, and Reginald staggered down the hall, leaving a very confused, and very concerned, gathering in his wake. The lavatory door was shut, and vigorous vomiting could be heard from the other side of the door, followed by a short silence, followed again by running water, followed again by a short silence.

A sense of calm at this rational behaviour began to radiate over the assembled group, and Curtis bent down to right the upset chess board, when yet another blood-curdling screech could be heard, this time emerging from the bathroom. This screech was followed by the sound of shattering glass and a great deal of profane screaming.

"Fuck! SHIT! DAMN!! **FUCK!** It was for NOTHING! All of this for bloody NOTHING!" Reginald screamed like a man possessed, then slammed the door open so hard it bounced off its hinges a fact he was oblivious to, once more bellowing, "**F-U-C-K!**" as he stormed out the door in an insensate rage.

Nobody followed him.

\* \* \*

Three days passed before anyone saw him again. He didn't show up at dinners, and he didn't answer the door when anyone knocked. Bertram, Curtis, Geoff, Frank and Joe were huddled in the middle of the street, seriously discussing breaking into the house when Reginald looking only slightly the worse for wear emerged. He glanced at them with a sullen expression and then strode purposefully toward them. "I apologise for the other night."

"It's fine," they all said in unison.

He shook his head. "It's not fine, and I should not have behaved that way, especially in front of the children."

Joe sighed. "You know perfectly well they've seen worse than that," he said, dancing precariously around the issue they were all not allowed to discuss.

*Yeah. And by people just. like. me. Hell, probably by members of my family!* Reginald thought to himself scornfully.

"In any case, I will replace your mirror and I believe your door?"

"Don't worry about it. It's already been repaired," Curtis offered.

Reginald narrowed his eyes in confusion, fully aware that the small store in which they bought groceries did not sell any DIY materials. "As you wish," he conceded. "I'm not feeling particularly social right now, so I believe I will skip dinner," he said to the red-headed men who flanked him. They nodded in response, and he spun about to return to his house, when Bertram called after him. "Oh, and, um . . . Reginald? Do answer your door tonight I think you'll have a visitor."

Reginald's light blue eyes peered from behind a curtain of black hair, sizing the other man up for a moment before nodding curtly. "So noted," he replied and went back into his house.

# The Visitor

*Chapter 2 of 5*

"Come to the right side, and we can hide you more completely than you can possibly imagine."

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As the hour hand on the clock on the wall inched slowly towards midnight, Reginald sat on his battered couch, one of the books from the shelf open on his lap. Not only was he not reading, he was utterly clueless as to the title of the book. Behind the safety of closed doors and curtains, he was scowling at his forearm as if its mere existence had mortally offended him.

A slight knock came on the door, interrupting his reverie, and with stealth born of long practice, he inched silently to the door, staying clear of the windows. Slithering up the door with the stealth of a snake, he slid his eye up against the internally covered peephole and silently pried the cover away to investigate the late intruder.

He immediately recognised the newcomer and swiftly opened the door, beckoning the wizened old man inside. "Good evening, Grandfather," he said, arm swept toward the couch, before shutting the door.

"Ah yes Reginald, so nice to see you – and how are you faring?" the grandfather said, blue eyes twinkling with concern.

Reginald sighed. "You tell me . . ." he said, shaking his head as if frustrated by something. "Tea?"

"Certainly."

Reginald went to the kitchen and put a kettle on the cooker and fiddled a bit with the knobs, then took two cups and saucers from a cupboard and set them up. He prepared a sugar dish and a small milk jug and brought them to the small table, then took a seat in the chair.

He eyed his visitor appraisingly, and unsure how to phrase his question, chewed his thumbnail for a moment. "You've – um . . . you know it's not gone, right?"

The old man closed his eyes and nodded as if defeated. "I do."

"And so – now what?"

"We wait. We watch."

"How long?"

"I don't know. A week – a month? Maybe a hundred years. I just don't know."

Reginald sighed and covered his face as he shook his head in frustration. Sliding his large hand down his stubbled face to cover his mouth, his eyes flickered unseeingly about the room.

A few moments later, and he crossed his arms and gazed back at his guest. "And the others," he said, vaguely waving his hand in the general direction of the other occupants of his street, "do they know?"

The old man nodded.

At that moment, the kettle began to whistle, and the younger man got up to attend to domestic courtesies. He returned with the kettle and for a few moments, all that could be heard was the clinking of metal on porcelain.

When he was satisfied with his tea, Reginald sat back in his chair and crossed his arms again, thumping his fist to his lip as he went deep into thought. His grandfather seemed perfectly comfortable with letting him do this.

Finally, it seemed that Reginald settled on a question. "Are there going to be any changes to our . . . restrictions?"

The old man sighed. "I don't think that would be wise. There have been some arrests – your cousin and her husband, for example –"

"I do not consider myself related to her any longer, as you surely must know by my being here," the young man spat bitterly.

The old man looked at him askance for a moment, then continued as if he hadn't been interrupted at all, ". . . but others are still free and are claiming bewitchment."

Reginald snorted and rolled his eyes. "Let me guess. Malfoy?"

The old man nodded. "And others."

"I assure you, Malfoy was no more bewitched than I, my*dear* cousin, or Snape. And speaking of Snape . . . ?"

"He has sought safe haven at Hogwarts."

Reginald nodded while the old man gazed at him, blue eyes flitting back and forth across his features, obviously wanting to say something. Reginald waited – he'd known this man over half of his life and knew he'd say what was on his mind eventually.

True to form, he did.

"Have you – ah – spoken to anyone? Do you know what happened?"

"I do not. Well – at least not what I could conclude on my own. The first day I left my house was today, and that only long enough to apologise to Joe for my reprehensible behaviour in front of his children and beg off dinner. They told me to expect you. Why?"

The old man sighed, and his blue eyes looked weary. "I'm afraid I come bearing bad news."

"Yes, we've established that," Reginald gestured non-specifically with his left hand.

"No – worse than that. Your brother . . . has been arrested. And as he refused to speak in his own defence, imprisoned without a trial."

"**WHAT?**" Reginald gasped. "*Why?!*"

The old man explained the situation as Reginald sat in slack-jawed shock listening. When the story was finished, Reginald shook his head. "No. That's wrong. He would never – **NEVER!**"

The old man looked down and pressed his lips together. "There's more," he said quietly. "There's a corroborating witness."

"Corroborating witness'?" Reginald spat in disbelief. "Who?! Who of that lot is trustworthy?!" he demanded.

The old man told him, voice barely above a whisper, and Reginald went as white as a ghost, struck silent for a few moments.

"I don't believe it," he said softly. "Not even from him. Maybe . . ." and here he paused for a long moment and swallowed hard, as if what he were about to say were painful, or treasonous. " . . . maybe especially not from him."

"Reginald – he's the only one that COULD have. They told me themselves he was going to be the one."

"No. I don't believe it," he said with finality, shaking his head angrily. "Something's not right."

## The Union of the Snakes

### *Chapter 3 of 5*

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*"The union of the snake is on the climb..."*- Duran Duran, *Union of the Snake*

The next several years saw very little change in their day-to-day activities. The rag-tag bunch of outsiders were close, albeit at somewhat of a distance. They still rotated dinners at each other's houses, and they celebrated holidays together and exchanged gifts as appropriate. Going-away parties were held for Mary Anne and Joe's children the evenings before they departed for school – someone they didn't know came to collect them to buy supplies and returned the children home, just as someone else they didn't know collected them several days before school began to send them off in several legs of roundabout travel.

Geoff and Frank married two women from the neighbourhood, and Bertram married the dark-haired woman who had shown up right before Reginald's screaming fit. The others dated – each other and random neighbours – but Reginald never did, at least not that anyone noticed. They all privately wondered about it – he wasn't overly shy, but nobody said anything especially after he was approached by neighbours of either sex and simply smiled them off charmingly, saying he wasn't "in a good place for a relationship". He didn't even seem offended when he was simply offered a casual shag. The blonde got it in her head one night to wake him up and was greeted with a very angry man towering over her, saying he didn't appreciate uninvited visitors, but he didn't threaten her and never mentioned it again or acted any differently toward her afterwards.

Daylight hours found them engaged in varying activities which grew increasingly communal but Reginald never joined them, although he unfailingly showed up to dinner. He had learned some fantastic techniques over the years and always prepared the group a special meal which he was invariably quite proud of.

Although his manner couldn't be described as aloof or standoffish, he gave the impression of not wanting any more than exactly what he had with them, and eventually they stopped trying to force him to participate in their daily activities.

This suited him just fine, as he had some difficult personal projects he was working on.

One blisteringly hot day as he sat outside engrossed in a novel, he heard a raspy voice asking for water, and without thinking he glanced around, trying to figure out who was talking to him. His eyes narrowed in confusion when he saw no one near.

*Am I having auditory hallucinations?* he wondered – then his heart filled with dread when he realised whence the sound had come, and that he'd already reacted to it.

"Down here!" hissed the sibilant voice, and he couldn't stop himself from looking to the ground.

"Would you mind terribly turning the hosepipe on for a moment?" requested what was unmistakably an adder, sitting patiently at his feet.

Reginald leapt up, booted foot hovering threateningly over the viper, and spat, "How did you know I was here?! Who sent you?!"

"Oi, calm yourself. You've lived here since before I was born. You talk in your sleep, you know – we all know you can speak to us."

"We who??"

"All the snakes in the area. But you seemed to want to keep to yourself. It's just – I'm thirsty and your house is closer than the stream."

"Who sent you?" he repeated.

"Nobody sent me. I'm thirsty. Oi, forget it if you're going to be that way about it!"

But not for nothing had he survived to be in exile. He lowered his foot safely away from the snake and took a few steps back. "Begging your pardon. Of course I'll turn the water on for you."

The snake happily followed him to the side of the house, and he turned the water on to a trickle.

When the animal had had its fill, it flicked its tongue out at him by way of thank you.

"Does anyone else in the area talk to you?" he asked apprehensively.

"No – we haven't had a human to talk to in many generations."

"It's very important that nobody ever know that I can talk to any of you, do you understand?" he said, making it an imperative, not a request.

"Sure. Hey, you like dogs, right?"

"What? Where did that come from?" he asked in abject confusion.

"If you go that way," the snake pointed, using its head, "some little human girl has a big, black, shaggy dog with dog children they're giving away."

He closed his eyes as if the idea pained him then nodded.

"Thank you. Will you come back tomorrow?" he asked the snake.

"Sure. Want me to bring friends?"

"Why not?"

And so it came to pass that Reginald adopted a puppy, upon which he lavished an unusual amount of affection. One of the twins remarked it was as if Reginald was trying to make up for the lack of human companionship in his life by showering the animal with adoration.

Reginald merely shook his head and smiled.

\* \* \*

"But I don't understand WHY you want to do this!" the adder protested. "And moreover, I don't understand how. I've never seen a human become a snake!"

Reginald merely snorted and rolled his eyes. "Yeah – well . . . look. It's important, to me. I can go places as a snake that I couldn't go as a human."

"Where, the sewer?! You can go more places as a human, you know!"

"Yes, yes, I know. But really, I haven't all the equipment I'd need – or the people to consult, so I have to do this from memory, and this wasn't my best subject in school, you know."

"What happens if you don't succeed?"

"I don't know. I might die."

"Then don't!"

"Why? I'm already dead. Nobody will miss me."

\* \* \*

Two months later, and much the same conversation was taking place.

"I must be doing this wrong. Look – how do you feel?"

"Feel"? I feel like a snake! I'm hot when it's hot, I'm cold when it's cold, and when I'm going over rocky terrain it hurts!"

"What about when you move?"

The snake stared at him for a few seconds. "I just move!" it said, in an exasperated tone, wiggling back and forth for emphasis.

"And when you eat?"

"I'm full. For a week. And you're crazy!"

Reginald snickered in amusement, but tried to empty his mind of all thoughts except serpentine ones.

*You'd think that would be easy for me, but no . . .*

He slowly stood up and closed his eyes, willing himself to ground, while trying to remember everything he'd been taught about human transfiguration. He flattened his lips and flared his nose, arms tight to his side, envisioning all his bones collapsing into his spine, and a strange shiver came over him. He ignored it, but his eyes flashed open when it suddenly became difficult to breathe.

And everything looked very, very strange.

He opened his mouth to ask the adder what had happened and was taken aback at the enormous forked tongue that flickered in front of him – and the incredibly vivid taste and smell that accompanied it.

"What happened?" he rasped, not recognising his own voice, not even in Parseltongue.

But the adder had fled.

*That's odd*, he thought to himself, but decided to see explore his environment.

First things first, though, he had to get an idea of what he looked like.

He slithered (now that's an interesting sensation) to the back of the house and flattened himself just enough to be able to get under the door. (Also a strange sensation.) He made his way through his house, which looked totally different from his new vantage point, and into the lavatory.

He noted he could see, even in the relative darkness of the interior of the house. Now that could be useful.

He gazed at himself admiringly in the mirror and flexed the muscles in his head, rewarded by the flaring of a hood.

He'd become an Equatorial Spitting Cobra.

## Interim

*Chapter 4 of 5*

"Come to the right side, and we can hide you more completely than you can possibly imagine."

Explores a life in exile for of some of those who have been hidden.

(VERY slightly A/U, and even then, only if you take all interviews really literally.)

NOT DH compliant!

As the years passed, visitors with "news" were few and far between, and mostly to tell them nothing had changed anyway, except for personal notices of births, deaths and marriages of family that had been left behind. All of them had been briefed that their exile may be long possibly permanent before being sent to the neighbourhood, and so they fell into a livable routine.

One summer, almost eleven years since Reginald's singular screaming episode, the old man returned to find Reginald glowering at his arm as if it had personally offended him.

"And so it begins," he said when the old man cast a shadow over him.

"Indeed."

"It was worse a few days ago, you know."

"I know."

*Ah, so he still has his informant. Good. He will make use of him soon.*

Reginald looked up to see the old man mostly unchanged, if a bit older. *Well, we're all a bit older now . . .*

"And the others do they know?"

"No. There's nothing to tell them . . . not yet."

"But you can tell me."

"I can," the old man conceded and he did.

\* \* \*

As it turned out, it was two years before they got another visitor. A much-anticipated international sports event was taking place, and arrangements were made for the children to attend disguised and under heavy guard, of course. The adults could not attend, but clandestine arrangements were made for them to be able to observe from afar, using an experimental combination of an Omnicular and the Wizarding Wireless Network. The success of it, and the subsequent viewing of the event, caused a great deal of giddy excitement to the otherwise exiled spectators.

However, the rest of the year and the first half of the next one found Reginald becoming increasingly irritable and withdrawn, to the point where he'd ensure dinner was prepared for the group the days he was scheduled to prepare it but nobody caught even a glimpse of him otherwise. The group began to get alarmed, as any time they went to his house other than for scheduled visits, the house appeared to be deserted, and he never answered the door.

A few weeks before Mary Anne and Joe's two youngest were due to come home from school (the eldest had taken a position in Romania under an assumed name and a specially prepared disguise), the adults were having a subdued dinner at Reginald's. Geoff had long since given up trying to entice Reginald to a game of chess, and everyone was conversing quietly amongst themselves as Reginald went to prepare drinks. He'd just loaded the tray with the glasses and was walking back toward his guests when he hissed loudly and collapsed onto the floor in a ball, sending various liquids flying every which way.

"Damn, damn, damn!" he could be heard muttering under his breath.



Geoff and Frank shared a knowing look and rose to clean the mess. "We're going to have company again soon, aren't we?" Frank asked Reginald quietly enough so that the others, who were looking on with alarm, couldn't hear.

" . . . Yeah . . . " Reginald gasped in reply.

"Your, ah, 'grandfather'?"

"Probably."

The twins sighed and helped him up.

\* \* \*

Sure enough, about three weeks later, the old man showed up again. But when he went to Reginald's house, the man was not there. The old man had a moment of terror, wondering if his grandson had run off to reunite himself with old friends when he noticed a black snake, clearly out of place for these parts, basking in the sun.

On a chair.

"Ah, I should have known you'd have done something with your time, Reginald. I'm quite impressed." His blue eyes twinkled with approval.

The snake tilted its head at the old man and, in a moment, was replaced with the lanky form of Reginald Browne. "It's not safe for me," he said by way of explanation. "Although I'm not entirely sure I could hold him off that way, either he's a Parselmouth, you know."

"I know. So, you know, then."

"I am not stupid. It's a pretty unique call, you know," he said. The weary and defeated tone of his voice belied the scorn inherent in the message.

"Severus returned although he was in hospital for several days."

Reginald winced in sympathetic horror, but turned his attention to things in his immediate sphere of influence. "I think Frank and Geoff know. About me."

"They suspect strongly. But you needn't worry on that account. They have a great deal of respect for you and understand that you were under some undue pressure. Oh. By the way you were correct about your brother."

Reginald's eyes flickered to the old man at this. "He's back at home, now, trying to get the place habitable. It's fallen into some disrepair."

"Hm. I'm sure he's *thrilled* about that," Reginald said with a roll of his eyes. "Too bad you can't tell him I never lost faith."

"Indeed it is. Of course, his name hasn't been cleared our illustrious government officials are also categorically denying what you yourself know."

"They're idiots," he said, and then with no real rancor added quietly, "you know . . . that was part of the original motivation."

"Some things never change."

Reginald shook his head sadly and then paused for a long moment while the old man waited expectantly as if he knew the younger man wanted to speak.

"Should we . . . get wands?"

"Wandless only, and only that which is not detectable by the Ministry."

"That doesn't give us much means to defend ourselves!" he snapped. "Ministry be damned, if we're traced here, what the government is going to think is the least of my concerns!"

"I don't believe you will be traced here. Only two of us know you are here, and neither one of us is about to say anything. In any case, I believe your old ah, mentor has other things on his mind and doesn't appear to have any interest in chasing down those he believes to be dead."

In reply, Reginald disappeared, to be replaced with a hissing black snake.

\* \* \*

A year later, the old man showed up again, but briefly, to tell them collectively that the government had undergone some "restructuring", and that what they'd known for the last year was finally accepted. During this meeting, Reginald flinched and hissed, then apologised to all assembled, but he knew better than to ask someone to cast the counter for the affliction he suffered. Such a thing could be useful, after all, in the event anyone important showed up missing. Besides, they'd all grown used to it.

At the end of the meeting, the old man took Reginald aside privately to deliver some bad personal news.

A mere six months passed before the old man came back in the dark of night.

"What the hell happened to you!?" Reginald squeaked when he saw his grandfather's injury.

"Ah, yes, that. A long story, and actually what I came to talk to you about."

The rest of the night passed in quiet conversation before the old man rose to leave.

"Oh. Ah one more thing," he said, looking troubled. "There's been a . . . complication."

Reginald blanched.

"No, no not that kind of complication. Neither you or yours are in danger. It's just that you . . . um . . . are not likely to see me again."

"What? Why?"

"There's been a price put on my head."

"There's always been a price on your head!" Reginald said dismissively, waving it off.

"This is different. Things well things got quite bad and, well promises had to be made." He held a hand up to forestall the coming protest. "I am at peace with this, and it is a sacrifice I am willing to make. But please, know and understand this nothing is done without my consent. I have lived a long time, my dear boy. Life is a grand adventure, and death is yet another adventure unto itself. My familiar has been instructed to deliver messages to you when the time comes."

Reginald gaped at the old man as he left, humming happily to himself with a twinkle in his eyes.

\* \* \*

A few months later, in the early pre-dawn light, an unusual bird with crimson and gold plumage flew down the street with a cylinder of some sort clasped in its feet. Making its way to the house at the end of the street, it found an entrance which hadn't previously existed and flew through it.

It dropped the cylinder, which promptly unrolled into a special edition of a newspaper, on a bed upon which a black-haired man slept. Startled by the rustling noise, the man woke up and glanced about.

His eyes flew open in alarm when he saw the bird, and when his gaze alighted on the paper, he grabbed it only long enough to see the front cover.

"**Noooooooooo!!!!**" Every house on the street was woken by the anguished wail. It was the last time they heard from him for weeks.

They knew why when a Muggle newspaper was delivered, reporting that the principal of a magnet school in Scotland had been pushed off the top of the school during an argument with one of his department heads. An incredibly unflattering description of the fugitive was included, with a strong warning that he was known to be armed and extremely dangerous.

"Oh, dear," said Bertram.

"Indeed," Curtis replied.

## Revelations

*Chapter 5 of 5*

"Come to the right side, and we can hide you more completely than you can possibly imagine."

Explores a life in exile for of some of those who have been hidden.

(VERY slightly A/U, and even then, only if you take all interviews really literally.)

NOT DH compliant!

Over the next several long months, Reginald became increasingly withdrawn. The twins noted that he'd flinch with increasing frequency and alternately hiss and curl into the fetal position, or cross his arms tightly across his chest and whimper. He also frequently forgot to eat and was looking so peaky that the others discussed breaking the rules to get him appropriate treatment. He'd taken to missing community meals again, and so frequently that the others had started bringing meals to him.

"Reg?" Geoff said, edging through the front door with some food one evening. His twin was close behind him but pulled up short, whispering harshly under his breath.

"Reg? REG! Oh, jeez, I think I know what that sta. . ."

"Leave it!" hissed Geoff.

"But he's Mum's . . ."

"LEAVE IT!"

"But Gi . . ."

"I SAID LEAVE IT!"

\* \* \*

One morning, everyone save Reginald was outside kicking a black and white spotted ball around when a strange-looking bird with red and yellow plumage and something tied to its feet soared to the end of the street.

"Was that . . ." asked Joe.

"It was!" Mary Anne replied, and they both looked at the others with raised eyebrows.

At dinner time, a solemn looking Reginald with a heavily bandaged arm slipped through the door, holding a newspaper which he tossed on the table. Although they hadn't seen the paper in nearly twenty years, they immediately recognised the layout of the *Daily Prophet*.

### ***Over Four Decades of War Finally Over***

*Harry Potter, known to the Wizarding World since he was a year old as "The Boy Who Lived," confirmed last night that he had finally and incontrovertibly defeated the man masquerading himself as Lord Voldemort. Although Potter declined to give specifics, he did say that the return to power that occurred in 1994 was not going to occur again and offered a serpentine-looking body with red slitted eyes as proof. He, along with other members of the vigilante group known as the Order of the Phoenix, said that some very powerful Dark Magic was used to provide immortality for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but that this method had been both discovered and dealt with.*

*Meanwhile, some of the Death Eaters, the former supporters of The Dark Lord who comprised a terrorist group, are still at large. Most notable is Severus Snape, known to have murdered the Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. Rumours have placed him as Headmaster at Durmstrang Institute, a position Snape was purportedly granted as a reward for his fealty. However, as Durmstrang Institute remains Unplottable and protected by a Fidelius Charm, it is unlikely that we will receive cooperation for international extradition.*

*In addition to the ten thousand Galleon reward offered by the Ministry, Harry Potter himself has offered an additional fifty thousand Galleon reward for*

*anyone who is able to deliver Snape for trial.*

"It's over," he said quietly, upending a hollow cylinder the paper had been wrapped around. Several thin sticks of varying lengths were poured out, which he set on the table. Everyone reached for a specific one, and as he took his, he remembered the voice of the man who'd given it to him. *"Black Walnut and dragon heartstring, fifteen and a half inches, stiff ... my, my, you worry me, young sir."*

Reginald sighed and walked desolately back to his house.

"What's eating him?" asked Joe.

The red-headed twins exchanged a look. "Um, I think it's because we can't go back."

"But why can't we? Why can't he?"

Bertram sighed. "Things aren't safe yet. They may never be."

"Then why do we have THESE?"

"I don't know. We'll find things out slowly. We always do."

Several more months passed, and suddenly one day Reginald burst through the door, frantically waving a newspaper.

"Did Snape bring you here?" he gasped to all in attendance. When he was met with shocked silence, he flung the paper at them angrily.

The headline nearly leapt off the paper.

## ***DUMBLEDORE'S MURDERER CAUGHT!***

*Severus Snape, long time supporter of You-Know-Who and reported murderer of the beloved Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, has been captured. He was scheduled for an immediate Dementor's Kiss, but the public demand for an open trial has encouraged the Ministry of Magic to relocate the trial to the Quidditch World Cup stadium.*

*The trial is scheduled for noon tomorrow. Attendance is limited to citizens under the rule of the British Ministry. Anyone who wishes to attend is advised that there will be a Dementor in attendance, as sentencing is expected to be carried out immediately.*

They all read it before staring at him in obvious alarm.

"I KNOW Snape!" Reginald insisted. "He brought me here because I had defied the Dark Lord," he said, tearing back his sleeve to reveal his left forearm, which he thrust at them.

A few recoiled in shock at the scar there, but the twins shrugged. "Oi, whattaya think he was always flinchin' and hiss'n' about, eh?"

"If he brought you here, then you owe him *a life debt*," Reginald continued, nearly frantic, and thrust two other papers at him. "Before . . . before it happened, Dumbledore told me Snape had made an Unbreakable Vow. To who, I don't know, and I don't care because it doesn't matter. He said that he was going to die, and that it was going to happen with his consent."

"Easy, mate, we're going with you," the twins said in unison.

"So are we," Mary Anne replied as Joe nodded.

"I think we all are," Curtis mused.

\* \* \*

They were all a little unaccustomed to travelling, and thus it took them a little bit longer to arrive at the stadium than they'd intended. They could hear the charges being read out over the roar of the jeering crowd.

"Shit!" Reginald said and bolted toward the stadium door ... which was locked.

The twins, in fast pursuit, nearly slammed into him. "Shit!" they said, waving the wands that had been returned to them in vain.

"Hang on," Reginald said, then disappeared into a black snake which flattened itself and slid under the door. Seconds later, the door opened.

"Wow, when'd you learn that?"

"Later. C'mon!"

By now the others had caught up with them, and they all raced down the hall, just as the prosecutor was asking Snape if he had a statement to make in his own defence.

Silence greeted them and they burst through to the pitch.

"And now, *propriety* dictates that I ask if anyone will speak in this . . . *man's* . . . defence," he said with a glower to a shady-looking old man with a long white beard.

"I will!" declared a gasping Reginald, who immediately turned his attention to Snape, who appeared to have been pelted with rotten vegetation, among other things. "Sah ess eeee heth ee hash!" Reginald gasped at Snape.

Snape shook his head, his exasperation visible even from the rear. "Sesh sheth e sash," he replied with such sarcasm even the non-Parselmouths in the audience, which, of course, was everyone except Harry, could detect it.

"Who the hell are you?!" barked a young man (*about the same age I was when I went into exile* Reginald thought to himself) with messy black hair and haz . . . *no wait, those are green* . . . eyes.

"I am Regulus Arcturus Black. I don't believe I've made your acquaintance."

By now, the attention of the audience had turned to the rag-tag bunch of refugees, and an astonished growl rang out from the audience. "CARADOC?!"

"Yes, Minerva ... and I also speak in Snape's defence."

"As do I," said the woman they'd come to know as Mary Anne.

"And you are?" said the flustered looking prosecutor, obviously wondering how they'd gotten onto the pitch.

"Marlene McKinnon."

Just then, the twins emerged from the hallway, and a woman screeched. The entire audience turned to see a red-haired Molly Weasley plummeting down the steps as she shrieked, "GIDEON! FABIAN!!"

"Er, right, Moll ... nice to see you too," Geoff, aka Gideon, said.

"Snape got us away from five Death Eaters during an attack, you know," Fabian, aka Frank, said, glowering at the prosecutor.

"And Benjy Fenwick," said Bertram, who'd gone unnoticed.

"Now wait just a minute!" growled Alastor Moody. "We found parts of you spewed all over your house!"

"It wasn't me. Snape Polyjuiced a chicken and then cast a *Reducto* on that."

"Well, I, uh, I," sputtered the prosecutor.

"I believe my brother left a statement as well," said the bearded old man as he descended regally from the stands. "Miss Granger, if you would be so kind . . ." he said, which tore Hermione Granger's attention away from Harry Potter just as she was hissing at him. "'R.A.B.' Harry . . . it's Regulus Black, Sirius' brother!"

"Shesh e sa seth eee sass?" Regulus hissed at Snape, confusion evident on his face.

"Senesh sneth hasash ess ee se sanash se ee sess."

Harry looked back and forth between them in shock. "You KNEW about the Horcruxes?!"

Snape simply rolled his eyes.

"Of course I knew about the Horcrux, you idiot boy . . . HORCRUXES?!?!"

"Mmm. Six of them," Snape drawled quietly.

Regulus whimpered and swooned and was caught by the twins. "What's a Horcrux?"

"Don't ask," Hermione said under her breath, fiddling with something as the old man poured a vial of a silvery substance into a small stone basin in front of it.

"What are you DOING, Hermione?" Harry demanded.

"Harry," she said hesitantly, "do you remember what happened when you confronted Voldemort?"

"Of course!"

"You remember the very last spell that was verbally cast?"

Harry scowled in fury. "He was only out for himself! He still killed Dumbledore! I don't care if he's the one that cast a Killing Curse at Voldemort!"

"Harry . . ." Hermione said, "this is Professor Snape we're talking about. When did he ever cast a spell verbally if he didn't want you to know what he was saying?"

"HE KILLED DUMBLEDORE!"

". . . Harry . . ." Hermione whispered, swallowing hard. "Those notes from Fawkes ... they weren't from Dumbledore."

"OF COURSE THEY WERE!" Harry thundered.

Hermione chewed her lip and shrank back. ". . . No . . . Harry . . . Viktor . . . he saw Fawkes . . . at Durmstrang . . ."

Harry blanched and sat down hard. He didn't notice the encroaching darkness as the old man waved his wand.

"And now, if you'll all direct your attention to this projection?"

The entire stadium gasped as an image of Albus Dumbledore faded into view.

\* \* \*

#### Author's Notes:

This was supposed to be a one-shot. \*facedesk\*

A good picture of an Equatorial Spitting Cobra with a flared hood can be found here: [http://www.ecologyasia.com/images-a-j/black\\_spitting\\_cobra\\_0028.jpg](http://www.ecologyasia.com/images-a-j/black_spitting_cobra_0028.jpg)

I didn't have any particular reason to call chapter 3 "Union of the Snake", other than there were two snakes working in tandem in that chapter. I wasn't even listening to the song at the time, but it seemed quite fitting, all things considered.

Snapdragon on SugarQuill came up with an EXCELLENT theory that Regulus Black was himself actually an heir of Slytherin.

The Parseltongue conversation isn't particularly important, but goes something vaguely like this. "Why didn't you tell me you were on trial you idiot?", "Parseltongue is ineffective for covert conversation when the one you're trying to hide it from is a Parselmouth, you know", "What's he saying about my brother?", "Your brother was his godfather, and he found the locket, and was on a quest to destroy the horcruxes".

I think it was Accioslash who turned me on to the idea that Snape was a Parselmouth.

Alwayssthequiet1 came up with the "Snape as Durmstrang's new Headmaster" theory.

I came up with the four decades of war thing because Tom Riddle met with Dumbledore, asking for the position of Defence Teacher, 10 years after Tom met with Hephzibah Smith, a position he took right out of Hogwarts. He was born end of December 1926 according to the Lexicon's best guesses, which would mean he turned 11 in December 1937, and so started school in September 1938, which would have put his graduation around June 1945, which would have put that meeting with Dumbledore in the mid-1950's. The Lexicon is probably not off by more than 5 years in either direction, particularly given that Jo has said that Tom ran off to fight with Grindelwald, and that the war with Grindelwald roughly coincided with WWII. Now, with the Pensieve memories, he was working at Borgin & Burkes right after he graduated, so it might be that he was a little bit older. But Dumbledore refers to the early followers of Voldemort as "Death Eaters", and make indirect reference to their crimes, so it seems like they were already terrorising some people.

Many thanks to Bekithewitch, Kymster, MaskedOne, Kask, Sly Severus, AzureLunatic, MaryJ59, ButterflyKisses and BridgeTester for helping me out with the plot (chapter 5 was a real bear for me!), and Bekithewitch and RobisonRocket for betaing!

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