

Joining a militant anti-government group was a great summer project.

I mean, to be fair, we weren't really anti-government, not yet. We were pro-current government, but against the dark evil that was threatening to replace it. Preemptive guerilla politics, basically.

It was even more strange and interesting because it was the magical British government and I was an American exchange student.

No, my parents didn't know.

At any rate, it was good to be busy. While staying in the UK during summer break, my friends, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, had introduced me to the group. They called themselves the Order of the Phoenix. I had never been to Arizona, but didn't think it was related.

Hermione, Ron, and I were all on the summer break between our fourth and fifth years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I told my parents I was going to grad school. I was a little older than most of the other students. Hermione and Ron were sixteen.

We shacked up with Sirius Black at his place in London. His house was kind of creepy and old, and had the heads of old elf servants mounted on the wall, and there was a painting in the hallway that screamed at you for some reason, but it was a place, and it worked great as a secret headquarters.

Sirius was wanted for a murder he didn't commit and could turn into a dog at will. He was pretty cool.

The Order of the Phoenix had been founded by a guy named Dumbledore who was headmaster at Hogwarts. A lot of the members of the Order of the Phoenix were affiliated. The magical government I mentioned was at odds and kind of paralyzed, so we of the Order of the Phoenix were doing what they couldn't or wouldn't.

Order of the Phoenix is getting weird to say every time. We need a shorthand. OP sounds a little gay. OPho? Yeah, I like that.

So, when it came time to do OPho stuff, I heartily volunteered. It was something interesting, and I could just hop a portkey back to the United States if I didn't like it anymore.

But things were heating up. Voldemort, basically wizard Hitler, was the leader of the bad guys and he was good at getting spies. So we were taking all precautions. Part of that involved protecting a kid named Harry Potter, who was a classmate of mine and Voldemort's sworn enemy because he was the kind of guy to hold grudges like that.

One night in early August, it came time to go collect Harry. He apparently lived with some kind of extended muggle family. I'd never met them.

I volunteered for the job. With my skills flying a broom and growing up in a nonmagical household, I was a good choice to go down to Harry's aunt and uncle's house and pick him up.

The group of us that went flew as stealthily as possible. Remus Lupin was a former teacher at Hogwarts and also a werewolf. Dedalus Diggle was a short guy who liked purple. Alastor Moody was a freakshow and all-around badass who I'd gotten to know last year when a bad guy had pretended to be him. Sounds strange, I know, but the person playing him was a really good actor. Kingsley Shacklebolt was the big black guy.

Tonks was a Metamorphmagus, a shapeshifter. I, Steve Fitzsimmons, was just an Animagus, working hard for several years to learn to turn into a cow and back. Honestly though, I wish I'd found out about Metamorphmaguses sooner.

The group of us formed the Advance Guard. Cool name. I liked it. Tonks sent a letter to Harry's aunt and uncle to lure them out of the house and then the group of us rode down there to pick him up.

He was surprised to see us, but quickly agreed to go. We packed up his stuff, made him invisible, and got on our brooms.

I flew overwatch for the group that night. Not only did I have one of the faster brooms, but I had an advantage in on-the-move magic. My baseball bat-turned-wand wasn't the greatest for a lot of things, but its extra length gave me a longer sighting radius for better aim at long ranges.

I'd gotten a bewitched elastic strap that gained tension when I wasn't holding it. Effectively, whenever I let go of it, the bat would spring up to hang at my side. When I grabbed it again, the strap went slack and I could do whatever I needed to.

The flight was carefully planned, and with backups. Despite Harry being invisible, we kept a watch around him.

"There's some low cloud ahead we can lose ourselves in," called Moody.

"We're not going through clouds!" shouted Tonks angrily. "We'll get soaked!"

"Not to mention the possibility of running into airplanes," I added.

Despite the chances of a mid-air collision or the unthinkable event of getting rained on, we made it to OPho headquarters and led Harry in. I went upstairs with him to reunite with Hermione and Ron.

Cedric Diggory, another Hogwarts student, was there. The four of us had seen various levels and densities of shit together over the past few years.

Since I was just a student, no matter my advanced age, I hadn't proven myself worthy just yet of becoming a full OPho member. They were having a meeting downstairs and I wasn't allowed in.

Instead, we students caught up. Harry was distraught to learn about how his name was being dragged through the mud in the wizard newspapers. It was a troubling development. I wondered if it could even be a clever information campaign by Voldemort.

Ron and Hermione also hinted that there was tons of drama going around. They didn't know the full story because people weren't telling them.

After a few more minutes, I decided to leave. I didn't think I was going to learn anything else tonight and I'd kept my girlfriend waiting long enough.

Gemma Farley was a little younger than me but a little further ahead in her studies. Which is to say, she graduated last year. I headed to the apartment we shared.

Gemma had gotten a job and had the advantage of steady employment. I had been expressly forbidden to say anything to her about OPho. For one, she was a former Slytherin. I trusted her, but that didn't mean everyone did. Plus, while I wasn't necessarily at the top of Voldemort's hit list, I was at least on it. Gemma may not have been a spy, but if someone were to come interrogate, torture, or even simply turn her, she would be a source that could be used against us. OPho wasn't eager to recruit her for her talents, which was a damned shame in my opinion.

But shit, having a girlfriend who worked at an ice cream shop was reward enough. She was the newest hire at Florean Fortescue's shop in Diagon Alley, the wizard side of London.

The two of us hung out together that summer. I continued working with OPho until the end of August, when it was time to go back to school.

They needed me to help escort Harry to King's Cross Station in London, and so I arrived at Sirius' place. Tonks looked like an old lady today. It occurred to me that it might be difficult to know what her true form actually was, if she could so easily change it. Sirius also came, playing the part of a friendly dog.

We arrived at the station after an uneventful twenty minute walk. Gemma was there to meet me.

She gave me a last kiss on the platform. "Make sure to write."

“Now that I’ve got someone to send letters to, I might need to get an owl of my own.” I paused. “No, wait, I could totally go for, say, a red-tailed hawk. If Ron got away with a rat that was actually a man as a pet, why can’t I have a different kind of bird?”

“Are hawks that good for endurance or letter-carrying?” she asked.

I deflated. “No, probably not.”

We all boarded the train. Ron and Hermione had been made Prefects this year and sat in their own train car. I went with Harry and Ginny, Ron’s little sister, to find a seat. Along the way, we met up with Neville Longbottom, who I knew in passing as being a Gryffindor in the same year as Harry.

The only seats available were in the same compartment with a pale girl named Luna Lovegood. She was a Ravenclaw like me, but a year behind. She had stuck her wand behind her ear, wore a necklace of butterbeer caps, and was reading a magazine called *The Quibbler* upside down. Ginny introduced her to the compartment.

“Luna Lovegood,” I repeated, “I only just realized, that sounds a lot like a porn name.”

“Do you know how hard it’ll be to come up with a more-porn name if I do go into porn?” said Luna.

She was kind of weird.

Neville, on the other hand, was grossly incompetent. I doubt he meant to, but he was constantly getting into difficulties. Unfortunately, because we shared a compartment with him, all of us somehow managed to get covered in horrible-smelling chemicals shot from a potted plant he had brought along.

We arrived at the Hogwarts castle that evening and went in for the opening feast. The sorting hat used to decide which house the first year students went to sang a very politically-charged song. Bob Dylan up in this. If he sang about the government’s inability to act when faced with wizard Hitler.

Dinner was good, as always. I learned that the new Ravenclaw Prefects were Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil. After the meal, Dumbledore stood up with a couple of announcements. “Professor Grubbly-Plank will be taking Care of Magical Creatures lessons. We are also delighted to introduce Professor Umbridge, our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

He started to say something else, but Umbridge interrupted him. She talked for several minutes about little to nothing. I couldn’t bring myself to listen to it, but a couple of the key phrases

sounded important for some reason. I made a mental note to ask Hermione later, like I always did when I wanted to know something.

I met up with a few friends and acquaintances. Roger Davies was the captain of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team, plus Cho Chang, our seeker, and the others. I saw Mad Myrtle, the ghost of a student who was one of Voldemort's first victims. Surprising me, she was being allowed back to school.

"Of course I won't be able to do everything being that I'm unable to hold a wand due to my incorporeality, but Dumbledore said it would be okay if I finished up and received an honorary graduation."

That sounded like a good deal for her. Meanwhile, in my fifth year, I would have to deal with Ordinary Wizarding Levels exams. OWLs were kind of a big deal.

I saw Cedric between classes. He nodded and said hello. Cho was with him. Apparently they'd decided to continue their dating from the previous year.

When I caught up with Hermione, she told me that Professor Umbridge was working for the Ministry of Magic.

"Like some kind of dual role?" I said. "She works both places?"

"Seems that way," said Hermione. "I had her class earlier. She isn't teaching us anything. Her line is that there's nothing to be taught if there's no danger of dark wizards."

"So...the actual existence of dark wizards aside, she's not doing her job of teaching defense against the dark arts."

Hermione nodded. "Also, she's already given Harry detention."

I later found out from Harry that he was meeting Umbridge in her office for five consecutive nights.

"Take care that you don't get detention with her," he spat. He showed me his hand, which appeared to have scars in the shape of words. "She has a quill that etches you with what you write."

"Wait, like, it cuts you?"

He nodded.

"That's...a teacher shouldn't be able to order you to hurt yourself. That's fucked up."

"I'm not letting her get the better of me," he said.

"Doesn't mean it's not fucked up."

The next week passed slowly. It seemed like the professors were really taking OWLs to heart with homework. All the house Quidditch teams sent out for new recruits. In fact, Ron made the Gryffindor team, due at least partly to the strength of his new Cleansweep Eleven. Sturgis Podmore, of OPho, got arrested for apparently trying to break into the Ministry of Magic. I found that out while reading the newspaper, scanning the classifieds for a new pet.

There were the usual owls available, some cats, all with various attributes, some even magical. But then my eye fell upon a Hawaiian-themed ad that touted pets from the Pacific and far east.

My grandfather rarely talked about his service during World War Two. One of the few stories he told me was about cleaning up Wake Island after it had been occupied by the Japanese. Not the actual work - grandpa wouldn't say anything about that - but about the local creatures. The albatross, or gooney birds, as he called them, were some of his favorites.

There, on the page in black and white, was a listing for a Royal Albatross, twenty Galleons.

I immediately started scribbling an order form.

The next week, we learned that Umbridge had been appointed High Inquisitor by the Ministry, giving her oversight of the school and its teachers. This was immediately unpopular with the school and its teachers. Most notably Harry, who got another week of detention.

Since she wasn't doing her fucking job of teaching us Defense Against the Dark Arts, it was Hermione that suggested we learn it ourselves. Surprising all of us, though, she suggested that Harry should teach it. I suppose it made sense, he'd had stuff used on him, but I think we all considered Hermione to be the expert.

The group of us met in Hogsmeade that weekend with a bunch of others who wanted to learn. It was almost thirty people, more than any of us were expecting.

Ernie Macmillan, of Hufflepuff, was a surprisingly strong supporter of Harry. Hmm. With all the bad luck Hufflepuff always had, maybe he was the guy to finally turn it around. Well, to be fair, winning a share of the Triwizard Tournament last year had been Cedric's doing, but Hufflepuff got the glory it could, not the glory it wanted.

The next week, Harry came to me with a worried look. He gestured for us to go to a quiet place and spoke to me. "I talked to Sirius secretly the other day. He's been appearing in the common

room fire sometimes. He said the Order of the Phoenix has got certain people under surveillance. I think he implied Gemma was one of them.”

“What? Why?” I demanded.

“I expect they’ve got everyone under surveillance,” he said. “Actually, it might be a good thing, someone to watch out for her.”

I frowned. Maybe. Maybe.

Another week or two passed, and a couple of good things happened. One, we discovered a place called the Room of Requirement to practice our Defense Against the Dark Arts. Two, I received my albatross.

It came with the mail one morning, landing on the table with a thump between the owls, who all seemed rather consternated and gave it a wide berth. It found me and presented a letter from the company. It was a brief welcome and list of care and feeding instructions, plus a receipt for my purchase.

The albatross was a very large, white bird with black wingtips. It took up not only the space in front of me, but place settings on either side and the other side of the table.

“Is that yours?” Terry Boot asked.

“Sure is.”

“Kind of...large,” Cho observed.

That was an understatement. As great as the idea had seemed, a twenty pound bird with a ten foot wingspan was a bit much for school. But boy, was an albatross going to be great for transatlantic mail. Plus, now that I had a carrier of my own, maybe that would help communications be a little more secure.

I frowned. Well, until someone noticed an albatross in the UK and wondered what the deal was with that.

“Have you decided on a name?” Cho asked.

“Uh...Al...Albert.”

Albert didn’t seem to mind. He scooped up an entire plate of kippers in his beak and flew off, presumably to the owlery.

Our little defense training group kept going. The Room of Requirement was a pretty neat place, plus we got down to business and accomplished a lot.

We voted on a name for the group. We decided on Dumbledore's Army. That seemed a little too on the nose and exactly what the Ministry was afraid we were doing, but it was a cool name. We even got membership badges, fake Galleons Hermione made that would display the date of the next meeting.

Some of us were a little better at spells initially than others, but I could see definite potential if this kind of thing were to happen a lot. We could all use the practice.

Speaking of practice, Quidditch season was fast approaching. For the first time in recent memory, nothing of note happened on Halloween and we went straight into November.

As usual, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff supported Gryffindor when they played Slytherin. Luna had gotten a hat the size of a real lion's head that roared.

Down on the field, Ron was...not good. I'd been led to believe he wasn't a half bad player. Still, Harry caught the snitch and Gryffindor won. Afterwards, though, there was a brawl that left Malfoy bloody, and Harry and the Weasley twins banned from playing ever again. Fred hadn't even done anything.

In talking to Hermione about it, because Harry was still too angry to speak, I found out that Umbridge hadn't even been going to let the Gryffindor team play this year until she had been overridden. It had taken an act of Dumbledore to override her, and now the Ministry had passed a new law that the High Inquisitor had the power to dole out punishment over the heads of teachers.

This shit was getting ridiculous. I'd seen a lot of outlandish things at Hogwarts, but never a villain that belonged in a comic book - who was there by government appointment.

At least Hagrid came back shortly thereafter. He looked like he'd had the tar beaten out of him, which was really saying something for a guy his size. I wasn't sure if he'd been off somewhere. If it was OPho business, I still wasn't someone that people told things to.

When it came time for the second Quidditch game of the season, we Ravenclaws defeated Hufflepuff. Nothing much to be said about it. I'd heard the Gryffindor team had replaced Harry with Ginny and gotten some guys to replace Fred and George.

Throughout this whole miserable semester, I'd kept writing to Gemma. She congratulated me on getting Albert, and sent me a gallon of ice cream with a chill charm. Albert was more than up to the task of carrying the weight and I quickly shared it with everyone at the Ravenclaw table.



In her attached letter, she mentioned that she had seen some people hanging around and wondered if I knew anything about it. I suspected it was the OPho surveillance Harry had told me about. Of course, sworn to secrecy, I couldn't say that.

We had one last trip into Hogsmeade that winter before Christmas break. To my great surprise, Tonks was there. Of course, I didn't realize it was her until she said something.

She took me for a walk outside the village, where it was quiet and we could talk privately. She delivered a very distressing piece of news. Apparently, the OPho surveillance of Gemma had turned up some worrying details. She was meeting with certain shadowy figures.

"Who?" I asked. "For what?"

"We don't know," she told me. "But you understand what the worst case could be."

"But Gemma couldn't be in alliance with Voldemort. She was there and helped us stop his past self a couple years ago."

"Maybe she's being controlled," said Tonks. She hesitated, as if she wanted to add that maybe Gemma was just being a turncoat on her own. "Either way, you need to know."

Well, I wasn't happy about it, but I did at least appreciate her letting me know. But now, I had to figure out how to handle it with Gemma. *So...meet any dark wizards lately?*

Gemma was there and helped us stop his past self a couple years ago. I frowned as I remembered it. In this context, I was suddenly concerned about her seemingly innocent remarks about her grandmother's stories regarding the Chamber of Secrets. She, er, was a blonde-haired blue-eyed Slytherin, after all.

However, any thoughts of my girlfriend being a lackey for Voldemort were put out of my head by Mr. Weasley being attacked by a giant snake the day before Christmas break. As soon as I was allowed to leave, I headed for London and found my way to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

A lot of OPho members were already there, but also the Weasley family and Harry. I'd never been to a wizard hospital before. Instead of doctors and nurses, they had healers, who wore lime green robes and sported a nifty patch that depicted a bone crossed with a wand. Mr. Weasley seemed surprisingly okay, aside from the fact that he kept bleeding.

Aside from an OPho comrade, I really felt for Mr. Weasley. Who else thought muggles were so cool? I took credit where I could get it.

I spent a lot of time over Christmas Break at Sirius' place with OPho. Hermione apparently begged off a skiing trip with her parents to join us. I never knew what the attraction to skiing was anyway. I'm from Iowa; we don't have hills.

Aside from OPho, I stayed with Gemma. It was so good to see her.

When I saw her, anyway. She had to work. I hung out with OPho. However, on Christmas Eve I decided to surprise her. I went down to Diagon Alley to meet her as she was getting off work.

However, when I walked in, Florean Fortescue told me that she'd been off for nearly an hour.

"That's the normal time she goes," he told me.

She'd been getting off work an hour earlier than she told me since, well apparently she told me. Why? Surely she wasn't regularly scheduling a designated dark wizard time?

There wasn't any time to pursue it or figure out where she had gone. I had an OPho meeting that evening.

We met to discuss the latest happenings. Everyone was in a festive mood, and I agreed to come by for Christmas brunch the next day. Harry was in kind of a funk, though his friends were pulling him out of it.

I stayed maybe a little longer than I intended. When I got back to Gemma's place, she was in bed and already asleep. Couldn't blame her, I wanted the holiday to come sooner, too.

But as I crawled into bed with her, my mind wasn't on the holiday. That isn't a sex euphemism, either. I couldn't help but remember the strange happenings I had heard about her. I really hoped I wasn't getting into bed with Eva Braun.

As it turned out, I was totally wrong, and it was awesome.

In the morning, Gemma greeted me with a kiss and *then* we had sex. After that, we unwrapped presents.

She'd gotten me a Browning Hi-Power nine millimeter semiautomatic pistol.

I was speechless.

She smiled. "It took quite a long time to find, even dealing with muggles who know this sort of thing. I understand Britain has quite a few laws about trading such items, particularly because it's military-issue."

So that was why she had been sneaking around. She wasn't a Death Eater, she was an arms dealer.

"I...I'm so sorry that my gift looks like shit in comparison," I said.

"We'll see about that." She unwrapped my present. I'd gotten her a custom set of silver ice cream scoops, fancily decorated and engraved with her initials. They were magically warmed and had anti-stick spells.

I'm pretty sure her pleased reaction was genuine, but I still felt bad that she'd clearly gone to more trouble and expense.

Still though, when I went out that day, I was strapped. How could I not be?

After brunch, the group of us went over to the hospital. Mr. Weasley was so pleased to be shown a real firearm that I had to remind him several times about the safety procedures, even though I had unloaded it before handing it over.

Too soon, break was over and it was back to Hogwarts. School started again, and news promptly came that ten Death Eaters had broken out of Azkaban, the maximum security wizard prison.

Harry, who had apparently developed a psychic connection to Voldemort, said it was the happiest old Voldy had been in fourteen years.

Just casually inside the mind of the greatest evil in the world. Harry Potter's life really was kind of fucked up like that.

At any rate, it was beginning to look like there was going to be another showdown at the end of the school year. Such a thing was almost becoming routine by now and our extracurricular Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons might just pay off.

Sure glad I packed my Hi-Power. There was nothing on the Hogwarts student prohibited items information list that said anything about firearms. Plus, this was the go-go 90's. Who ever heard of a school shooting?

At least now, with a Death Eater breakout, more people were beginning to believe us when we said Voldemort really was back. That bit of good news was tempered by Umbridge diving even deeper into supervillain territory with additional petty and illogical rules. It sounded like - forgive the pun - a witch hunt.

At least we kept breaking the new rules with regular meetings of Dumbledore's Army. I have to admit, I wasn't super great at magic, but a little practice went a long way. Notably improving, though, was Neville Longbottom. It seemed like a fire had been lit under him.

He confided in me one night on the way back to our common rooms. He said he was grateful for people like me, someone for other people to focus on and leave him out of it.

"I couldn't stand it," he said. "Everyone always looking at me and pointing and laughing. It's...it's getting better, and maybe now that I can see that, I can see myself actually being good at something."

"Practice makes perfect," I said noncommittally.

"Maybe, but it never helped before, never like this," he said. He took a deep breath. "For a while there, I wasn't sure if I wanted to keep living."

Fuck.

"I'm glad to see you're still around," I said. "You know, I was thinking. DA, if for some reason we actually do have to fight, might need a healer. I always see you with plants and herbs and stuff."

Neville paused. "I don't know."

"Well, think about it, at least."

I was serious. Harry was the platoon leader, for DA was just about that size. Hermione was a good lieutenant and training officer. I was, ah...something. I needed a title at least as much as we needed a medic.

Valentine's Day came and Gemma came to meet me in Hogsmeade. It was unfortunately going to have to be brief. Hermione asked Harry, Cedric, and I to come to the Three Broomsticks tavern at noon.

I guess Hermione hadn't said I couldn't bring her, though, so after some hanging out, we went.

Rita Skeeter was there, and looking kind of shabby. I guess things weren't working out so well now that Hermione had Rita under her thumb. Luna was also there.

Hermione revealed her plan. I thought it was nuts. She was going to get Rita to write down everything that happened in the graveyard with Voldemort last year and have Luna's father's magazine *The Quibbler* print it.

A skeevey reporter printing a story in a tabloid in direct contrast to the official line the government was putting out didn't seem like a good idea to me, even if in this case it was actually true and told by yours truly.

Then again, it wasn't like we could make things much worse, so I agreed to talk. So did Harry. So did Cedric, who arrived, bringing Cho with him. Based on her expression, she apparently hadn't heard the story before, or at least not all of it.

Fortunately, the story was pretty easy to tell. Harry and I remembered it exactly the same, and left out the part about me being an Animagus. One, the public didn't need to know, even though the Death Eaters did, and two, it would be kind of hypocritical to talk about that in front of Rita Skeeter, who was in this mess for being an unregistered Animagus.

Cedric, who had been facedown and stunned for most of the confrontation with Voldemort, contributed what he had heard. Fortunately, that jived with the story Harry and I told.

It took a while for the article to actually be published, though the only thing to note in that time was that the reconstituted Gryffindor Quidditch team lost to Hufflepuff. Wow, it was really turning out to be a Hufflepuff year. Despite the game, Ginny, as seeker, was quite a standout player.

*The Quibbler* finally published the article and I was suddenly getting mail. Some of it fan mail. Some of it hate mail. Huh, so this was what it was like being a celebrity. I did like getting mail.

They'd used a picture of Harry, Cedric, and I for the front cover, the picture taken when we'd collectively won the Triwizard Tournament. It looked good. Inside was the story exactly as we'd told it. That looked good. I mean, it was in a tabloid, but surely some people believe everything they read.

The best part was, it totally got Umbridge. I'd never seen her actually angry about something.

The downside, as there is always a downside when you fuck with a tyrant, was fifty points from each of our houses, detention, and *The Quibbler* banned from school.

Everybody still read it anyway, and people kept asking me questions. I couldn't figure out why. I mean, it was all right there in the book.

Speaking of Voldemort, though, Harry kept having dreams about him. He was bursting to tell OPho what he had seen, but there was no secure way to communicate. His fireside chats with Sirius had apparently been locked down.

"If only we had a Milstar terminal," I said.

Everyone looked at me. Ron said, "Steve, you really need to explain when you say muggle stuff like that. Just assume we don't know."

"Milstar is a system of muggle-made electronic satellites that orbit the Earth and transmit signals," I said. "They've just been launched. If we had a way to send them a signal, they could transmit it to people who need to know securely."

"Aside from the fact that muggle technology doesn't work around here," said Hermione.

"Then what about muggle stuff like the Knight bus, or the Weasley car?" I said.

"I think a vehicle, especially an old one, is rather more simple than a military satellite relay," she said.

"Well, if you know so much about military satellite relays, build us one," I said.

"I have rather more pressing things to do than figure that out," she said, notably not saying that she couldn't.

"Well, surely there's a way," I said. "If we need simple, a telegraph could work."

"And who would run the wires?"

"Wireless, then. Even wizards have radio."

"But how would you make it secure?" she said. "You'd have to have a way to encode the messages, and you can't agree on a code using open communication where anyone can listen in."

It was a problem, all right.

Fortunately, interesting things were happening again. A professor, not one of mine, had a public breakdown and Umbridge fired her. Dumbledore did get the opportunity to bitch-slap Umbridge on a technicality, though, and suddenly we had a centaur as a Divination teacher. I don't know how that happened. I didn't have that class.

I wasn't sure if Dumbledore knew about Dumbledore's Army. At any rate, DA kept practicing. We'd moved on to Patronuses. I was hoping for a cool one. Instead, I got a woodpecker. Of all the multitude of animals it could have been, of the albatross that was sentimental to me or the cow that was the morph of me, it was a woodpecker.

I dunno, at least it wasn't a snail or something.

As we were finishing up a day of training, Harry's friend the house elf ran in and managed to construe that Umbridge had found out and was coming. We all scattered, but apparently not fast enough.

In the rush, I heard someone shout a jinx and Harry went down behind me. I spun and saw Malfoy there with his wand out. He was looking the other way, and I whopped him over the head with my bat, getting a little blood on it.

I turned to help Harry, who was lying on the floor, but he shouted, "Go!" Whoever was after the rest of us was coming, and I had to make the tough decision to leave him there, as he wanted.

Well, I'm kind of sorry I did. After hearing what I missed, I would have gladly been caught. Apparently, Umbridge took Harry up to Dumbledore's office, where some Ministry folks were waiting. Dumbledore took credit for Dumbledore's Army, beat four Ministry wizards and Umbridge in a duel, and disappeared. Badass.

But just like anything, bad comes with good. Umbridge was appointed headmistress and formed an Inquisitorial Squad that reported directly to her.

The situation was getting positively Soviet. We weren't quite to Third Reich just yet, but I could see it coming.

At least Umbridge was getting desperate. After being thoroughly embarrassed by Dumbledore and finding she was unable to use his office for herself, she was almost laughably incompetent at trying to get Harry to drink a truth serum, as he told me later.

And we had plenty of entertainment. Fred and George, planning a major event, started with a huge crate of enchanted fireworks that spread all over the school all afternoon and kept going all evening. Even the teachers, all quietly united against Umbridge, seemed to enjoy them.

Even Hermione was captivated. To my great astonishment, she described the show as "bloody amazing." Hardcore swearing, for her.

Montague, the Slytherin Quidditch captain, disappeared for a couple weeks, apparently due to Fred and George. With him out, plus Cho honing her seeker skills with help from Cedric, Ravenclaw beat Slytherin. Hey, this wasn't bad. We were two for two so far this year and had only the gimp Gryffindor team left to play.

When it came time for phase two of Fred and George's plan, they mentioned to Harry that it would buy him some time, if he wanted to do something without Umbridge looking. Apparently, her office had the only fireplace in the castle that wasn't being monitored.

It was a ballsy plan, sneaking into Umbridge's office, but I was optimistic that we could do it. Much as I wanted to see what Fred and George had planned, I volunteered to go with Harry.

When the party started, we heard all kinds of noise. Everyone ran to see what was up, but Harry and I went the opposite direction.

I set up a guard outside Umbridge's office, wearing Harry's invisibility cloak. He went in and I heard him talking, apparently using the fire like he wanted.

As I stood there, in the middle of pulling off a secret, highly dangerous, but highly satisfying operation, I realized exactly who I was in the DA.

*Motherfuckin' Dumbledore's Army Special Forces.*

I was dreaming about wearing an SF tab on my robes when suddenly Filch appeared down the hall. I tapped the door gently as a warning.

To my great surprise, Filch went into the office. I came up behind him, intending to hit him over the head if he found Harry. Filch seemed to like me more than most students, but he was in league with Umbridge, and my goodwill could only go so far.

I didn't see Harry, so apparently he'd hidden at my warning. Filch went over to Umbridge's desk and rifled through one of the drawers, happily pulling out a piece of paper that was apparently an approval for whipping. After that, he left.

Harry came out from under the desk, having hidden only inches from Filch. The two of us booked it, arriving downstairs to where the commotion was still going on.

Down at the front entrance, Fred and George were surrounded by most of the school.

"So, you think it amusing to turn a school corridor into a swamp, do you?" said Umbridge.

"Pretty amusing, yeah," said one of the twins.

Filch held up the whipping form. "I've got the form, Headmistress. I've got the whips waiting. Let me do it now!"

"Very good, Argus," she said. She turned back to Fred and George. "You two are about to learn what happens to wrongdoers in my school."

Wait, seriously? Whipping schoolkids? I looked around. Seriously? Was nobody going to say anything?



Fortunately, Fred and George had an out. Since Harry and I had unlocked the Umbridge's office door, it was easy for them to summon their brooms from the lockup inside.

Then, they each gave Umbridge double middle fingers in front of the whole student body, and rode off into the sunset.

So proud that I had taught them that gesture.

Now, with the Weasley twins' departure, a kind of open revolution was underway. We were still going to classes, but only for an opportunity to act out.

Whenever I saw a member of the Inquisitorial Squad and had an opportunity, I would crack them in the back of the head. Not enough to kill, just to maim. I kid, I only used enough force to knock them out. Still, my bat began to accumulate little spots of blood up and down the length.

Through all of this, it was kind of entertaining to watch the house points go up and down. Hufflepuff's score changed the least because of course they were less inclined to cause trouble than the rest.

As the spring progressed, Slytherin's Quidditch team kept failing, probably because most of their players were busy trying to serve Umbridge and getting the tar kicked out of them in the attempt.

To my great surprise, Ravenclaw found itself in the lead. The last game of the season, we were facing Gryffindor.

The game was hard-fought. Despite the lack of Harry, Fred, and George, Ron had improved quite a bit and Ginny was giving Cho a run for her money.

I feel like Ron probably put a little too much emphasis on me during his defense of the goals. He knew what my banzai broom was capable of, but against me *and* two other chasers, we were occasionally able to overwhelm him.

Gryffindor was actually leading, but Cho battled Ginny all the way to the snitch and got there by inches, no doubt her training with Cedric paying off.

As the Ravenclaw crowd erupted with cheers, it took me a second to realize that we'd gone undefeated this season. It took me another to realize that it meant we'd also won the Quidditch cup.

As amazing as it was, I kind of knew in the back of my mind that it was only because Gryffindor and Slytherin had lost a lot of valuable players this year, but winning's winning.

And then we had OWLs. It sucked. The written part was the worst, though. I was reasonably confident in the practical part, especially Defense Against the Dark Arts. Plus, I did pretty well in Muggle Studies - I was still the teacher's assistant.

And then came the Astronomy exam, which turned out to be way more interesting than the subject implied. We happened to be at the top of the Astronomy Tower as half a dozen people, Umbridge included, went to arrest Hagrid, and had front row seats to watch as he took half of them down without even using magic and escaped. Professor McGonagall got caught in the crossfire without even a warning. She was taken to St. Mungo's.

Also, Harry fell asleep during his last exam and saw a vision of Voldemort torturing Sirius. If it hadn't been for Hermione, he probably would have done something stupid.

Ha, just kidding. They went and did something stupid, and got caught in Umbridge's office.

From what I heard of it later, Umbridge revealed that she had sent dementors after Harry during the summer, and was planning to use the Cruciatus Curse on him to torture out some information.

Fortunately, when Harry was captured, they found and took his wand but not the backup - Lockhart's old wand he'd been carrying for a couple of years. When he got a moment, he cursed his way out of there, rescuing the others - Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Neville, who were there for some reason.

I just happened to be walking by in the corridor outside and heard the commotion. I walked in just as the flurry of spells were dying off. Harry explained shortly. They needed to get to the Ministry of Magic as fast as possible and rescue Sirius from Voldemort.

"My Firebolt's been moved down to the dungeons," he said. "And it's locked up. Ron's got his broom, but-"

"Why don't we just ride the thestrals?" said Luna. "They could get us there in a flash. They're really smart and fast."

"Or," I pointed out, "We could just use this convenient fireplace."

They all looked at me. "I mean, if you *wanted* to be all badass and mount up and go that way, that would be pretty cool too. I can just picture myself holding my bat in the air and shouting 'Tonight...we ride!' But we're kind of time-limited here, aren't we?"

Yeah, we were. We took the Floo Powder.

Harry remembered that there was a fireplace network at the Ministry, so we went there. Coming out of the fireplaces, we found ourselves in a large hall. Late as it was, the place was abandoned.

A small kiosk was at the end of the hall. It looked mechanical. As we approached, a patient, somehow robotic somehow not, female voice said, "Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name."

Harry quickly said, "Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Ginny Weasley, Steve Fitzsimmons, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood."

The voice said, "Please state your business."

Harry and Hermione both started to say something. My voice was louder. "Badass special ops shit."

The kiosk spit out seven badges. They all listed our names and our business, which was apparently Badass Ops.

This badge was going to be one heck of a souvenir.

The door opened and we were let into the main atrium. Even at night, I would have expected someone there, somebody working late or security or something. It was totally deserted.

We took the elevator downstairs, following what Harry had apparently seen in his dream. We entered a round chamber with a bunch of different doors that started spinning. I saw the ruse immediately. It's a trap.

Fortunately, we had Hermione with us and she had the presence of mind to mark each door as we explored them.

We eventually found the place where Harry wanted to go, a large chamber filled with nothing but shelves of glass balls that seemed to have a little bit of glowing stuff inside.

We didn't find Sirius, but to our great surprise, we found a glass ball with Harry's name on it. It was just about when he picked it up that Death Eaters materialized in the room. We were outnumbered by maybe two to one.

They faced us, we faced them. I would call it a Mexican standoff, except there were two dozen Brits and me. Anglo standoff?

One of them said, "Hand that over, Potter."

“Hermione, Harry, Ron,” I said. “John Moses Browning was not a wizard, but I’m going to make him proud.”

Hermione got it. “Don’t be too hasty.”

“What, are we going to just wait around for Voldemort to get here?”

“Shut your mouth!” a witch screeched. Bellatrix Lestrange, one of the Death Eaters that had recently escaped Azkaban, maybe? Hard to tell under all their hoods, but the newspaper said she was crazy and this one sure sounded like it. “You dare speak his name with your unworthy lips, you dare besmirch it with your mudblood tongue, you dare —”

She raised her wand. I pulled my Hi-Power and shot her center mass.

Well, that was like putting fire to a powder keg, to say the least. Bellatrix, if that’s who it was, shrieked and fell, her wand going wild and smashing a whole shelf full of the glass balls. I was already moving, pointing my wand and shouting spells as soon as they came to me, barely able to hear myself over the ringing in my ears. The others did the same, pressing our brief advantage of surprise.

Glass was breaking, people were screaming, things were falling all around. Dust filled the air, making it more difficult to see through the already dim chamber. I got hit a couple of times, not sure by what. I stayed on my feet. I dodged a couple of spells and blocked quite a few others with my bat. It was damn hard to tell what was going on in the dark and I couldn’t risk a shot without knowing who I was aiming at.

I stumbled into a room that was slightly better lit. Hermione was out cold, being tended to by Neville despite his heavily bleeding nose. Harry was there. A couple Death Eaters were down for the count.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” said Harry. “We have to find the others!”

Seemed like a plan. Neville’s wand appeared to be broken, so he picked up Hermione’s. I hoisted her onto my shoulders, letting go of my bat. It sprang up to hang on its strap. I wasn’t going to be able to use it as effectively with only one free hand. Harry, I noticed, was dual-wielding. Sounded like a good idea at the moment.

We found our way back to the spinning room with all the doors. Ron, Ginny, and Luna met up with us there. Ginny’s ankle was broken, Ron was bleeding and giggling.

Suddenly, another door burst open and two Death Eaters appeared. My gun was already in my hand and I double-tapped them both. Unfortunately, the noise alerted the rest. We just barely made it into another room.

It was one we had seen earlier, with swimming brains in a tank. Super creepy. Ron, still giggling, decided to play with them. This was a bad idea.

Neville was closest and helped pull off the brain that tried to strangle him. That was twice tonight he'd come to the rescue. I was totally going to make him Team Medic.

Suddenly, the door burst open and there was Umbridge. I don't think she'd expected to find all of us there, though and drew up short. Harry was quickest and stunned her.

"Did she really follow us all the way here?" he said.

"Well, at least she'll believe us about Voldemort now," I commented.

Another door burst open. A single Death Eater charged in and was cut down.

"We need to get out of here!" Harry implored.

"We can't move all these people," I pointed out. Hermione was out, Ron and Ginny were questionably mobile. Umbridge, much as I hated to say it, probably needed saving too.

"I'll see if I can find a way out or some help," said Harry. Neville went with him, departing through the door from which the Death Eater had just arrived.

Umbridge stirred. Apparently she'd shaken off the stunning much quicker than expected. Maybe that was how she was here, having gotten up from her office so quickly.

"I always knew she was part troll," said Luna. "Not a lot, of course, but some."

Umbridge sat up, staring around the room. I'd reholstered my pistol - she didn't need to know - and pointed my bat at her.

"Viva la revolution," I said.

She gave kind of a jump.

"So you probably noticed the dead Death Eaters on the way in," I said.

"What? That's preposterous!" she said.

I rolled my eyes. "Get up." I pulled her out of the room, where the two guys I'd shot were dead in a pool of blood. Luna appeared at the door.

"Just who do you think they are?" I said, letting go of her. "Voldemort's back."

Down the hall, I heard the sounds of fighting. I hoped Harry and Neville were all right.

"I know," Umbridge said. She turned to face me.

"Oh, so you're actually working for Voldemort?" I said. "That explains so much, really. Hell, I'm kind of relieved. That makes it so much easier to explain."

That was apparently not what she expected me to say, but she forged on. "Of course, I'm not a Death Eater!"

"Are you trying to get out of this?"

"No," she said, looking at me fiercely. "The Dark Lord turned me down! I had to make my own way. I helped from sidelines, as an auxiliary, hoping someday for the recognition I deserved!"

I held up my hand. "Wait, I think the Japanese have an expression for this. Something like...you hoped senpai would notice you."

Umbridge didn't get it. I barely got it myself. Those wacky Japanese.

I went back to the previous subject. "So you're a wannabe Death Eater. Even if that weren't true, you're still a bitch." I paused. "No, you know, *bitch* doesn't really cover it. I'll have to come up with a new word for what you are. You made people's lives living hell because it amused you."

I crossed my arms. "You liked being in power. Are you disappointed ol' Voldy wouldn't let you be an official member of the club? Were you trying to win some points with him, when he came back? Or are you just that fucking rotten?"

Actually, I was about halfway through my last word when she moved. Way faster than I would have thought possible, she spun around and grabbed a wand from one of the dead Death Eaters. She turned her head back, arm raising -

And got a faceful of thirty three inches of maple.

I hit her so hard I knocked her across the floor, towards Luna, who started kicking her.

Umbridge screamed, burbling through broken teeth. Her hand still clung to the wand, and she raised it again. I smashed her across the face again. Luna then aimed a kick at her ear while I went to work on her abdomen.

It was maybe thirty seconds before it occurred to me that maybe we were killing her, and by that point we already had.

I felt queasy at the thought that I'd murdered an older woman while she lay on the ground, but then I remembered who it was and felt better.

Luna was smiling, a genuine, pleased smile that actually looked like a human emotion, unlike her usual dreamy, out-of-it expressions.

Then she said, "That was fun. I hope she burns in Hell."

Luna was...special. And not in the Dumbledore's Army Special Forces kind of way.

Distracted, I didn't see another Death Eater come through the door. His wand was already up as I turned, knowing I was too slow. He started to shout-

And then, motherfuckin' Danger Granger appeared and stunned him into oblivion. Shortly after casting the spell, though, she collapsed again. Fortunately, just then, Sirius, Moody, Lupin, Tonks, and Kingsley arrived. I did a quick mental count. I'd shot at least three Death Eaters. I'd seen at least two more down for the count, and there were likely more from my friends' spells. Hey, now the numbers advantage belonged to us.

The group of them went to fight, coming back in a few minutes. Tonks and Moody had taken some hits. Apparently one lucky Death Eater had escaped with the glass ball Harry had been holding. Dumbledore said it wasn't important, only stuff we already knew.

Oh, and Dumbledore. He arrived just after the others, having apparently fought a battle with Voldemort upstairs. That must have been incredibly awesome and epic to watch. I'm sorry to have missed it.

At least the Minister of Magic had been there, along with most of the Aurors - wizard cops - in his employ, so now we had proof Voldemort was back.

Several Death Eaters had been captured in the basement. I learned the witch I'd shot had actually survived, though apparently Sirius had taken pity on his cousin Bellatrix and spirited her away to be interrogated by OPho instead of incarcerated by the Ministry.

We all told the authorities that Umbridge had been with the Death Eaters. It was better than painting her as a Ministry hero who had died in the line of duty, while ironically making her out to be the Death Eater she always wanted. Fortunately, wizards didn't have anything like muggle CSI, so nobody noticed that she'd been killed with blunt force trauma matching a baseball bat.

We talked some more and learned that Sirius' house elf had gone rogue, and that was why Harry had been lured to the Ministry by Voldemort pushing dreams to him. The house elf had gone to the Malfoys, who were apparently tangentially related to Sirius. Fortunately, Mr. Malfoy himself was now in Azkaban. However, it was anyone's guess how long he and the others would stay there, what with the dementors now allied with Voldemort.

After it was all sorted out, or at least as sorted as it was going to get, those of us who were still supposed to be in school went back.

Hermione and Ron required some hospital time, but recovered. Because we who were in fifth year had OWLs, we didn't have other exams and had a couple days off.

At the closing feast, the points were tallied between houses. Under Cedric's leadership, Hufflepuff had kept their noses clean all year and walked away with the house cup. I applauded as much as anyone. With this big of a good luck streak, Hufflepuff was probably going to suffer for the next hundred years in return.

All in all, it was kind of a strange year. I thought about it while I looted Umbridge's office. Not like she was going to need it.