Storyid: 5777627
FanFiction.net
Name: HP Magic Eight Ball
Author: tigersilver
Chapter 1 to 26

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Chapter: 1

HP 'Magic Eight Ball'

The 20 standard answers on a Magic 8-Ball are:

? As I see it, yes

? It is certain

? It is decidedly so

? Most likely

? Outlook good

? Signs point to yes

? Without a doubt

? Yes

? Yes - definitely

? You may rely on it

? Reply hazy, try again

? Ask again later

? Better not tell you now

? Cannot predict now

? Concentrate and ask again

? Don't count on it

? My reply is no

? My sources say no

? Outlook not so good

? Very doubtful

10 of the possible answers are affirmative (?), 5 are negative (?), and 5 are maybe (?). Using the Coupon collector's problem in probability theory, it can be shown that it takes an average of 72 questions of the Magic Eight Ball for all 20 of its answers to appear at least once.

Fandom: HP
Pairing: H/D (or D/H, really. Whatever. Firewhiskey is intimately involved here.)
Rating: NC-17 (see Firewhiskey.)
Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center (see above); minor flangst.
Summary of Sorts: Hermione brings a Muggle Magic device to the usual round of post-workaday drinking and Malfoy is utterly fascinated. Harry, however, has his doubts as to the oracular ability of a glorified marble, especially when it comes to his personal life. This is a fickle, fateful fic, posted in drabbles, on a semi-daily basis.
Part 1/? *Till we get to the end, silly!*

They were drinking. They were always drinking, lately. Harry waited his turn to slug back another shot of the ubiquitous Firewhiskey and, with little real-or even pretend-interest, stuck his free hand out for the item Hermione was attempting to give over.

"Ish a Magick Eight Ball, Harry!" his friend squealed, red-faced and giggling. Hermione was a loud drunk and quite enthusiastic. Harry thought that was pretty amusing, though a little wearing after a while.

"Asshhk it whether you'll marry Ginny, do!"

As if *that* was a question, Harry thought grumpily, and might've said so, too, but Hermione paid him no heed and only forced the thing on him again.

"Aren't crystal balls usually…well, er, *crystal* clear, Granger?" Malfoy sneered from across the untidy circle gathered 'round Hermione and Ron's low-slung coffee table. "That one's blacker than Hades, if you haven't noticed. He'll have a hard time scrying anything in that."

"What's'it, Hermione?" Harry asked, still in the mood to be uncaring, overgrown billiard balls aside, and shook the hard shiny black thing only because it seemed like his gut said he should. The object looked remarkably like a huge marble—or maybe a shrunken bowling ball, *sans* finger holes. He'd seen those on the Dursley's telly, ages ago, and had thought them—and the people who played with them—remarkably daft.

"How'd'I?"

"Like thish, Harry," and his friend swiped the ball back and jiggled it till it sloshed. She stared at it meaningfully for a moment, obviously attempting to concentrate, given the way her brow was furrowed and her hair frizzling rapidly into uncontrollable corkscrews, and finally shook it once more, determined.

"Masheek Ei'Ball," she commanded it, slurring, "am I gonna marry Ronal'Weashelly?"

A tiny white triangular surface floated into a see-through aperture in the ball Harry hadn't noticed before then.

It is certain. Stated the ball, unequivocally.

"Shee? It *knowsh*, Harreee!" Hermione announced, quite excited.

"*Everyone* knows, Granger," Draco stuck his pointy nose in their conversation again, uninvited. Not that he wasn't alright, Harry thought blearily—fuckin' bloke asked some good questions now and then. Not too shabby all 'round, considering he was a fuckin' Malfoy.

"Fuckin' Malfoy," Harry said, and pointed a finger in a wavering fashion in Draco's general direction, drawing attention to Malfoy's more than reasonable reminder of something everyone present knew was a fact. "'S'good question, Herminnie."

Draco looked miffed for a second at his new moniker and then apparently got over it. He drew his legs out from under the Swedish-designed coffee table and sidled sideways 'round some intervening people playing a sodden and apparently unending game of Exploding Snap, evidently interested in garnering a closer look at this Muggle Magic gadget.

"Riiight—erm," Hermione seemed suddenly doubtful, her inquiring scientific mind beaten but not entirely blurred by the evening's steady alcoholic consumption. "'Kay, then. Magicky Ball!" She jounced the poor thing very hard this time, till Harry feared the weird white floaty thing would fly right out.

"Ish Harreee gonna marry Ginneee, then?"

My sources say no. Another solid response.

"Ooooh! Haaarrree!" Hermione was apparently shocked, delighted and appalled in turn, Harry decided, some very small part of his mind questioning the 'delighted' aspect. That was odd. But that was also immaterial, really, given the circumstances. And Malfoy—damned if the git wasn't right there all the sudden, sharp chin practically digging a hole into Harry's shoulder, grinning like a banshee.

"Of *course* I'm gonna marry Gi—" Harry began to protest, because he should, but Malfoy forestalled him, taking the black ball right out of Hermione's limp hands. He gave the device a short, sharp bob and examined it with all the stately command Hermione had completely failed to muster, off her head as she was with a good seven shots of Firewhiskey. Hermione was no lightweight but she was still a girl, Harry figured, and therefore had less tolerance than he did. *And* fuckin' Malfoy. And fuckin' *Ginny*, for that matter.

So thinking, he listed into Malfoy's lean ribcage and convenient shoulder, who then automatically stuck a bracing arm behind Harry's back, propping him up.

"Am *I* going to marry Potter, you stupid Muggle Ball?" Draco asked of it, ignoring Harry's slumping body entirely and glaring hard at its shiny obdurate surface. Harry sucked in a vaporous breath, choking a bit on its high alcoholic content, and revved up to protest *that* instead.
"What?" Malfoy asked, scowling, shooting Harry a sideways glance. "Someone's got to—you're a bloody mess when you're on your own, Potty."

Outlook good. The Eight Ball responded in the affirmative. Harry, upon further consideration, decided that this was an excellent cue to pass out.

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily.

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Chapter: 2

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 2

Harry woke in the morning as part of a pile. He was the bottom, with Malfoy's white-blond head lolling familiarly on his midsection and the Muggle Magic Ball firmly planted on Draco's navel. Both Wizard stomachs were rumbling and roiling, and Harry let out a low groan to announce his own level of distress.

"Drink this, Harry," Hermione's head popped up in his peripheral vision, cheery and stunningly fresh-faced and sober.

"'Kay," Harry answered obligingly, and downed the Potion without daring to sit up.

"Right, thanks," he said a minute later, and eased himself out from under Draco, dislodging Malfoy's annoyingly floppy head purely by accident. It hit the floor with a solid thump. "Oops! Sorry, old prat—wakee, wake, Auror Drakey. We're going to be late for work!"

"Argh-*ahhnnnn*," Draco's answering moan would've inspired a lovely Requiem, had a suitable Germanic composer been present. As it was, it caused Harry to look to Hermione inquiringly.

"Got another one of those lying about? He's going to need it," and he jabbed Malfoy in the ribs.

"'Effing murder you, Potter," Malfoy responded, or whispered rather, from where he'd rolled into a pathetic heap. He had his head gingerly pillowed between his folded arms as if it would explode at any given moment. His eyes were tightly clenched against the insidious morning light shining through the open blinds and he was a patently miserable Wizard. The Eight Ball had wobbled off aimlessly and then rolled back again. It was currently persistently poking itself against Malfoy's unhappy intestines with the determination of a partially paper-trained Crup.

"Come on, *partner*," Harry urged, prodding at Malfoy's messy hair and hunched shoulders and eyeing the active Eight Ball askance. He'd no idea Muggle toys could be sentient. Maybe it was long-term exposure to Hermione. "Drink up. I want a proper breakfast before we have to go chase baddies, you pickled prick."

"Gargh," Malfoy gurgled and feebly reached a hand out. The Potion was passed; he tossed it back, blinked three times in rapid succession, and then eased himself into a sitting position, apparently feeling at least somewhat refreshed.

"All better, Drakey darling?" Hermione cooed. "You were three sheets and then some last night, so I'm not at all surprised you're feeling residual damage."

"Shut it, Granger," Malfoy growled, and attempted to smooth his hair with shaky hands. "Pot, kettle."

"Ferret-faced flibbertigibbet," Hermione snapped, demonstrating her full grip on sobriety nicely, "at least *I* didn't try to snog Harry's girlfriend last night out of—*what* was it you said?—'revenge and the spirit of scientific inquiry'? You deserve everything you got, Malfoy!"

"Shut *up*!" Malfoy clutched his head with one pale hand and grabbed at his wand with the other, ready to hex Potter's friend into blissful silence. "*Please*. And it wasn't 'revenge', Granger—I just wanted to see what the attraction was, damn it!"

Draco's other hand found the Eight Ball instead and he hefted it, contemplating tossing it at Miss Bloody Know-It-All. His face still smarted, thank you, from where the ginger bint had slapped him. He was certain it was bruised and already discoloring.

"Gods! You both insult my intelligence!" Harry bit out, and snagged the potential weapon from Malfoy's tremulous paws. "Oh!" Harry's face lit up as a bright idea descended out of absolutely nowhere and he shook the thing, setting off imitative rumblings in Malfoy's gut.

"Stop, stop," Draco moaned, putting one hand out beseechingly. "Please don't do anything too quickly, Scarhead. Makes my head hurt."

"Magic Eight Ball!" Harry demanded, ignoring him. "Do we have still have time for a decent nosh?"

As I see it, yes. The Eight Ball obliged.

"Good-oh!" Harry exclaimed happily, spirits restored. He always recovered better than Malfoy did from their nightly excesses. "Upsy-daisy, you wanker. Rashers and eggs are calling!" He stuck a hand out to his Junior Auror partner and then waved it before Malfoy's still slightly greenish visage when there was no instant reaction on Malfoy's part.

"Salazar's Strumpets, Potter!" Draco whined, only huddling more deeply into misery. "Must you always be so loud and boisterous?"

"Oh, come *on*, Draco. You know you love it when Harry orders you about," Hermione sneered, and got up herself. "Right. Just let me rouse Ronnikins and we'll join you, 'kay, Harry?"

"'S'good," Harry nodded. "I'll save the big corner table at the back—oh! Where's Ginny? Where's everyone?"

"Gone off," Hermione replied succinctly, pausing by the flat's single bedroom door. "Ginny had an early morning scrum and Hannah had to study for her Mesmer test; Blaise had a.m. shift at St. Mungo's and the rest of the lot were sober enough to Floo home last night. Well," she added, thoughtfully considering the hour they'd all gotten to sleep. "This morning."

"Ahhh," Draco, unaided, eased himself off the floor with various creaks and painful little mutterings. With effort, he achieved his feet. "Urgh."

Pureblood Wizards didn't do terribly well when they mixed Muggle Mai Tais with Firewhiskey, especially in quantity. Last night was a blur and he remembered very little, actually. Some things, though, were remarkably clear.

"There, there," Harry patted him snidely on his fluffed out hair. "Runny egg yolks'll do wonders for your evil disposition, Malfoy—you'll see."

"Yes," Draco nodded firmly—and carefully—after a moment's hard thought. "I *will* murder you, git."

Looking a little less green and little more the non-color of his usual aristocratic pallor, he

snagged back the Eight Ball Harry was still holding and peered about him for his loafers and ever-present Gucci catch-all bag. The Ball teetered hopefully on the carpet when Draco carefully set it down, shyly bobbing back and forth. Harry meanwhile jittered and fussed at him, clearly more than ready to depart.

"Er—*move* it, Malfoy. We're already late enough as it is!"

"Cheerfully, Potter," Draco affirmed his plans for homicide. "In your sleep, even. Won't I, pet?" Malfoy inquired of the Ball, leaning down to caress it with still shaky fingers and sloshing it fondly from side-to side in a gentle motion that caused him feel vaguely seasick. He then subsided next to it in a graceful motion whilst Potter paced, having quickly discovered that standing about and moving his head gingerly in any direction but straight-on was giving him a sudden case of vertigo. Perhaps he should ask Granger if she yet another Potion, Draco thought—but no, the poor Weasel likely needed it more than he, if he recalled last night's denouement correctly.

Poor, unfortunate sot, Draco commiserated silently. He hadn't known freckles could assume that shade of pea-green.

Very doubtful. The Eight Ball informed him sagely, when Draco remembered to check.

"Well, alright—if you say so, Ball," he muttered disagreeably, and patted it again, taking it gently into his lap. He was rather fond of it now, given that it was responsible for shedding a faint gleam of hope on his currently doomed romantic prospects. And Merlin, but the sun was particularly bright this morning, Draco ruminated. Someone should register a complaint with the authorities.

"*Malfoy*," Potter urged, visibly at the bitter end of his patience. In the bedroom, Hermione was heard to be shrieking at Ron to 'Get *up*, you limpdick pain in my *arse*!' Both Junior Aurors winced at *that*, though Draco more from the sheer volume Granger was able to produce even through the barrier of a fairly solid bedroom door.

"Time to go-*o*, Drakey," Harry sing-songed, well aware Malfoy hated it when he did that. "Stop naffing with your stupid Ball and get your arse in gear already—I'm bloody *starving* here!"

"Sod it!" Malfoy carped and frowned 'round the cluttered floor after his missing things. "Can't find my stuff, Potter," he whined, and risked a mournful glance up at Harry, who seemed entirely too sober—almost criminally so.

Others had also left their possessions behind in their drunken rush out the Floo for work or for bed last night...or rather, early this morning—dirty socks, a windbreaker, one of Pansy's Brunomagli pumps, a well-used Burberry brelly and someone's beaten-down Uggs littered the thin carpet—making it hard for Draco to discern what was what, especially if one were prone to sudden stabbing migraines, as he *was*, no matter what Potter called them.

"Stupid idjiit," Harry smirked, utterly pitiless, "you're fucking *hopeless* in the morning, Malfoy," and hauled a hapless Draco to his feet, clearly done with loitering. "Right, now let's find you a latte, shall we?"

Without another word wasted, Potter manhandled his partner against his stellar abs for a Side-Along before Draco could muster the stamina required to say 'Boo!' to a goose, even a quite small and timid one. Fortunately, Harry had snagged Draco's expensive dragonhide half-boots from where they were skulking under the coffee table and had both their battered messenger bags tossed over one broad shoulder.

Draco sneered, his last defense against things that annoyed him—Potters, in particular. He opened his mouth to list his various complaints, but Potter forestalled him.

"See you there, Hermione!" Harry called out cheerfully to her carefully styled coif when she poked it nosily out of the flat's bedroom door, apparently checking to see why in Merlin's Name they were both still present. "Hold tight, *you*," he ordered Draco, abruptly losing that gawdsawful cheery note.

"—hate you," Draco was heard saying, as they Disapparated with an audible 'Pop!' "Potter. Really."

"*Suuure* you do, Drakey," Hermione grinned nastily at her finally *empty* parlor and opened her bedroom door fully, resulting in a resounding thunk to the opposing wall—and a dent, one of many. "Sodding pouf. *Ronald*!" she shrieked, glaring at the other occupant of the flat's tiny bedroom, and the fitfully snoring ginger-topped lump on their queen-sized futon jumped. "*Ronald Weasley, I'm talking to you*!"

"Nargh?" 'Feeble' was too robust a word for Junior Auror Weasley's reply.

"*Up*!"

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily.

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Chapter: 3

HP Magic Eight Ball

Part 3

"Gods! How I *do* hate you, Potty," Draco was saying, but then he'd been repeating that statement

at the rate of several times an hour. "Forcing me to actually consume greasy foods at such an unreasonable time in the morning! Do you *know* what that does to my complexion?" Harry shrugged, and returned to observing the rain-washed doorway of Borgin & Burke's.

"Further, Potter, we're wasting time here, berk. He's not going to show, you know," Malfoy grumbled, shifting uncomfortably against the graffiti-laden wooden door at his back. "Too bloody obvious, this place. Rated as one of the 'Top Ten Hang-Outs for Evil-Minded Villains', at least according to the article I just perused in the *Quibbler*. You'd think Dawlish would realize these things, but for all that he's Senior Auror, he's still a—"

"Shut it, Malfoy," Harry interrupted.

"And to think we could've been in sunny Surrey right now, doing obbo on fixed Crup races, and camped out in a nice warm box and at least out of this dreadful weather—" Malfoy kept right on, notwithstanding. Harry often admired his assigned partner's limitless ability to whinge unchecked through most situations, but he admired more Malfoy's quick-thinking spell work and lightning-fast reflexes. 'Fucking Malfoy' was a most formidable Wizard, when all was said and done. Having the git at his back—or his side, or his front, as had happened last month with that stray Bonebreaker curse from one of the aggrieved Crabbe cousins—had been a very good thing for Harry, all around. But he wouldn't admit that, ever. Malfoy was still a gi-normous git.

"Right, Draco," Harry nodded, abruptly changing tactics. "Anything you say, old man." If one couldn't beat them, at least one could head them off with the devious guise of paying attention. Malfoy always brightened up when Harry pretended to listen to him.

"And *you*, Potter. You *never* listen, do you?" Malfoy sneered, obviously not falling for such obvious machinations this time. "I've told you and told you to use an Impervious Charm when it's dampish like this and you're still sopping wet and even *shivering*, you annoying fuckwit. And just look at your stupid specs—how can you even *see* through those? You're going to catch your death of, what's it—Muggle Poonumia, Potter."

"Yes, Draco," Harry nodded obligingly, "of course I am," and then stiffened—their erstwhile prey-of-the-day had furtively poked his balding head out of Borgin & Burke's doorway and was peering up and down the soggy confines of Knockturn Alley in a highly suspicious manner. "Psst! Malfoy—he's right there!"

"Ah—so he is," Draco observed offhandedly, not bothered, and stuck his Disallusioned hand in his cloak pocket, pulling out the shrunken Magic Eight Ball.

"Shite, Malfoy!" Harry hissed. "Stop fiddling with that damned thing—he's *leaving*!"

Draco regarded the tiny Eight Ball between his fingers with an air of solemn seriousness. He'd developed a liking for it over breakfast that morning and insisted on asking it any number of inane questions, mostly having to with Crups racing, professional Quidditch team odds and whether or not Ginny Weasley was thinking of her 'golden loverboy' at that moment. Also,

whether his twice-accursed Auror partner Potter had enough working brain cells left to stumble through the remainder of the day looming before them after mastering the better half of a bottle of Firewhiskey all by himself the previous evening. Harry had found this topic to be vaguely insulting, but he stalwartly refused to listen to Malfoy's prattle, concentrating on his comfortable chat with Ron about the relative merits of Hogwarts Magickal vs. Muggle-made sausages instead.

"Will we complete this mission successfully?" Draco queried of it now, looking nothing like the person responsible for the *other* half of that same Firewhisky bottle, and bobbed the little Muggle ball about in the rain till it gleamed with stray raindrops. The white floaty thing spun in confusion in its sea of unknown blue liquid.

"You prick!" Always a tad tetchy after the first flush of Hermione's Hangover Potions wore off, Harry was in fine fettle. "Right! I'll do it myself, arsewipe! We're *supposed* to be following him!" Harry muttered furiously and stepped out from under the dripping pent eave where they'd both been sheltering. With a startled gasp, the alleged evil Wizard *du jour* they were tracking whirled about to face him, ebony wand already leveled and a nasty snarl transfiguring his unimpressively boring features into something quite unpleasant.

"*Avada*—!" the man screamed, practically foaming. He advanced a step, threat in every line of his stocky middle-aged body.

"Protego! Petrificus Totalus! Expelliarmus!" yelled Harry, but the older Wizard was fast and faster and a sickly green light shot from his wand point in Harry's direction.

Reply hazy, try again. The Eight Ball calmly advised Malfoy.

"Balls! Protego *Maximus*! Plaguey frigging Muggley piece of shite!" Malfoy exclaimed heatedly, "I was *asking* for something a little more to the point!" and, without the slightest hesitation, he hurled the Ball unerringly in the direction of the still-cursing Wizard, using all the skills he'd honed from pick-up games of Muggle cricket with the other Junior Aurors.

"Well!" he huffed, having sent it on its way. "We'll just see about *that*, won't we, Harry?"

"Protego!" Harry yelped again as a wicked Sectumsempra was hurled at him, the AK having failed to do its grisly job, thanks to Malfoy's impressive use of wandless Magick, but Malfoy was already right there, in process of weaving yet another silent but very effective Shield Spell with deft tracings of his hawthorn, budging up tight against Harry's right side and knocking him back a bit, so that Harry stumbled and ducked. The spell settled over them both with an inaudible *whoosh!* and the Cutting Hex bounced off, harmlessly. So did every other curse, charm and hex the balding Wizard threw in blindingly rapid succession—at least, for the one-blink-only duration it took the Eight Ball to transverse the width of the narrow alleyway at a deadly velocity.

Whap! The Eight Ball slammed solidly into the attacking Wizard's temple on the start of Harry's

second blink and the abruptly silenced man went down in a grayish, scruffy heap on Borgin & Burke's stained doorstep, wand rolling out of his lax fingers, completely unconscious.

"All right, then," Malfoy pronounced calmly, as if they hadn't just successfully endured a completely unprovoked but very deadly attack, and sauntered toward the fallen foe as *he* hadn't just performed two damned near-impossible feats in a matter of split seconds, or less than the total time taken to ask Harry his last rhetorical question. "Let's see what that buggery Muggle toy has to say *now*, shall we?"

Harry harrumphed heartily at Malfoy's general gittishness and then shivered in horrified reaction, recalling just how close the AK and the Sectumsempra had gotten. Draco was very good partner indeed, truly, even if he *did* snark like there was no tomorrow.

"Really, I think it simply requires a solid shake," Malfoy remarked, glancing behind him. "For best results."

"G-good git," Harry praised, unwillingly, and whacked Malfoy on the shoulder in a semi-friendly manner, a half step behind the other Junior Auror as he followed him over to examine the current condition of their fallen mark. "Nice arm and—and, erm, *thanks*."

"So, Ball," Draco shrugged off Harry's compliment as if his timely intervention was of no consequence and paid attention instead to the retrieved Muggle Magic device, questioning it conversationally, as if the plastic children's plaything was actually capable of responding in some manner other than 'totally random'.

"Once again I ask of you, oh wondrous Muggley Ball 'O' Wisdom: will we complete this morning's inane mission successfully?"

Yes – definitely. The Eight Ball confirmed, and Malfoy smirked knowingly as he returned it to his pocket.

"See?" he asked Harry. "As if there was ever any doubt about *that*, Scarhead. Right, then. Let's get this rubbish back to HQ and then it's time for luncheon, isn't it? I fancy Thai, I do."

"Yeah, alright," Harry agreed, "prat," and muttered an Incarcerous at the still peacefully passed-out Wizard.

"Oh—wait!" Malfoy stopped stock still in the midst of his Levicorpus Mobilium. The Wizard bobbing mid-air by his ankles banged his already bruised and shiny scalp repeatedly on the slick cobblestones whilst Malfoy turned his attention back to his newest toy.

"Ball, old chap, does that mean I can claim a snog from my fair maiden in reward?" Draco gazed anxiously at the round dark object, jiggling it helpfully as the oracular triangle meandered through a whole maze of 'maybes', 'it's not certains' and the like.

Yes. The Magic Eight Ball finally replied, simply.

"Brilliant! Hold up a half sec, Potter!"

Malfoy grabbed Harry's elbow and spun him around before the shorter man could do a damned thing to stop him. Oh, how Harry hated it that Malfoy was taller than he was, even if that was no one's fault but the plaguey Dursley's, not feeding Harry properly all those years.

"Huh?" Harry said blankly, unprepared for a second unexpected assault. Smirking, Malfoy bent his immaculate white-blond head down a crucial inch or two, breathing coffee-with-way-too-much cream fumes into Harry's startled face and quite suddenly morphing into a very dangerous Wizard indeed, at least in Harry's learned opinion. Then he snogged Harry ruthlessly till Harry was entirely breathless, pink and gasping, and not just from forgetting to inhale.

"*Huh*?" Harry repeated at the end of it, knees knocking, gawping wide-eyed at Malfoy, who merely shrugged, apparently unaffected. "You *fucker*! You bloody *arsehole*! Where in *Hades* do you get the fuck off, *snogging* me?"

"What can I say, my dear little Pottyhead?" Malfoy grinned. He winked slowly, a definite air of lasciviousness hovering about his elegantly arching left eyebrow. "The Ball said I should. Must obey, you know. Muggle Magick rules and all that."

"*Hate you*!" Harry hissed, his green eyes venomous. "Hate you-hate you-*hate*—!" and Disapparated to HQ with a sibilant snarl, the unconscious and now profusely bleeding Death Eater in tow.

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Chapter: 4

HP 'Magic Eight Ball' Part 4

Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center (how many licks to get to the center? 272); minor flangst.

The 20 standard answers on a Magic 8-Ball are:

? As I see it, yes

? It is certain

? It is decidedly so

? Most likely

? Outlook good

? Signs point to yes

? Without a doubt

? Yes

? Yes - definitely

? You may rely on it

? Reply hazy, try again

? Ask again later

? Better not tell you now

? Cannot predict now

? Concentrate and ask again

? Don't count on it

? My reply is no

? My sources say no

? Outlook not so good

? Very doubtful

10 of the possible answers are affirmative (?), 5 are negative (?), and 5 are maybe (?). Using the Coupon collector's problem in probability theory, it can be shown that it takes an average of 72 questions of the Magic Eight Ball for all 20 of its answers to appear at least once.

They were drinking. Again. They did that a lot, Harry thought, and wondered if he should perhaps worry about the state of his liver.

Nah, he decided, and had another shot, idly watching Malfoy fumble with the bloody Eight Ball. The git hadn't let the stupid thing out his possession once in the past twenty-four hours and

delighted in constantly asking it questions, usually to do with Harry. Which was precisely what he was occupied with at present, which rather indicated in turn that Harry should continue to studiously avoid him, as he'd been doing successfully all the rest of that day and the majority of the evening.

Malfoy, however, was not one to be ignored. He'd established himself in Ginny's usual spot next to Harry quite early in the evening and consequently Harry's sometime 'girlfriend' and good old 'real' best friends Ron and Hermione were relegated to the other side of their own coffee table and consequently difficult to chat with, unless Harry wanted to shout. Or lean forward over sticky table, which led to sniping attacks from Pansy about his constant rude interruptions of the evening's slotted entertainment of timed arm-wrestling-cum-shot-battles.

Ginny seemed philosophical about the situation, even chatting up Neville, who was blushing like a First Year and sneaking guilty glances over at Harry. Ron glared and Hermione smirked, and everyone else, Harry included, drank.

"Alright, Potter, let's see if we can settle those pesky details of your romantic future that have yet to be addressed," Malfoy announced enthusiastically, and waved the hard plastic ball terribly close to Harry's flaring nostrils. "Though, before that, I just wish to make certain you know of one of the more salient facts my Muggle Magic Ball has revealed."

Swipe.

"Just so you're *aware*, Scarface."

Swipe.

"And can't ignore it."

Swipe. Shake. *Slosh*.

"Since you're exactly the type that tends to avoid these self-evident truths," Malfoy's tone goaded.

You may rely on it. The Ball promised, smugly, confident of its own prowess. Malfoy positively preened at the evidence of his superiority.

"Don' wanna. Go away, Malfoy" Harry growled grumpily and turned his head sharply away from his life-long irritant to chat with Susan Bones, instead. Out of the very farthest corner of his one eye, though, he did manage to catch that Malfoy appeared a bit miffed at his rebuff—hurt, even. Harry tried nobly to ignore that, too.

"Fine, be that way," Malfoy huffed, rubbing at his Muggle Ball, as if to warm it up for yet another rousing session of 'Potter Q & A'. "I'll do it by myself, then. You just *listen*, for once, Scarhead."

He shook the gleaming black sphere perhaps a little harder than strictly necessary.

"Right, then. Let's just reconfirm this for the benefit of all non-believers present," Malfoy continued, sending a Harry a meaningful half-glare and bumping him roughly with a hard shoulder. Harry shoved back, automatically. "Ball, is Potty here planning on wedding his Weasleyette?"

Signs point to yes.

Visibly nonplussed—nay, startled—Malfoy frowned harshly and shook the unfortunate Ball once more, clearly displeased with it.

"I could've sworn—" he remarked to no one in particular, his petulance petering off into puzzlement. "All the othertimes I asked it…"

Harry remained stoic and stony-faced, though he could barely prevent a malicious little smirk from lifting his lips. He drank again to disguise this and redoubled his attempts to concentrate solely on Bone's monologue concerning updates in Bulgarian bludger design.

"Wait, let's try it this way," Malfoy cleared his throat, no doubt in a vain effort to catch Harry's eye. "Ball, will Potter actually marry the Girl Weasel?"

No.

"Ah-hah!"

Malfoy's mood had flip-flopped in an instant; he was grinning maniacally now and subjecting the shiny black gadget to a disturbingly intense all-over rub-down. Harry shifted uncomfortably where he sat Indian-fashion and immediately returned to his self-assigned task of ignoring his annoying Auror partner for all he was worth. Susan Bones was perhaps not the greatest conversationalist ever, but anything had to be better than a cackling Malfoy. Even the suggested re-dimensioning of the new prototype 'Euro Bludger'. And, for Merlin's Sake, *he* was totally disgusted with himself for being so easily distractible—gods, he didn't even want to consider what Snape would've had to say about *that*—and cripes, he was supposedly an Auror!

"That's what I thought you said, Ball!" No question, Harry scowled; the git was once more gleeful at the prospect of Potter-baiting.

"Okay, right," Malfoy charged forward, determined. "How about this question? Oh, marvelous Muggley Magickal Item, will our Golden Git here be spending the future with the person he loves?"

Reply hazy, try again.

"…Oh," Malfoy muttered, softly. Now he seemed sad. Actually downcast, as though he were truly concerned about a topic Harry never would've thought would scamper through the wastes of Malfoy's entirely self-absorbed brain. With a distinct feeling of creeping unease, Harry wondered vaguely if Malfoy had always been this skittish and emotional about other people's 'feelings'. If so, perhaps he should be more concerned about *that*, as Malfoy was his partner. But then the blond sod brightened up.

"Yeah, right, okay. Let's see," he mumbled to himself, turning the Ball over and over between manicured fingers. "…Will Potter actually be happy with the person he marries?"

There was a note in the wankers's voice Harry had certainly never heard before and he noted Malfoy had his very fair head bent quite protectively over his shiny black toy. It was a strange sight—the bane of his school days focusing so very intently on Harry's prospective marital contentment—and it sent a curl of something odd through Harry's Firewhiskey-filled gut. He found himself waiting for Malfoy's next expression attentively, though he didn't turn his head away from Susan's chatter about the recent departmental improvements in the Magical Games division's memo format or overtly pay heed to Malfoy's mystical doings in any way.

Better not tell you now. The Ball was adamant. Harry's eyebrows quirked up in quick surprise. Usually the Ball was much more cooperative, at least with Malfoy. The arsehole must've done something to tick it off.

"Oh, hold *on*, Ball! How—how hard is *that* to answer?"

Malfoy was stuttering, an unexpected quirk Harry had discovered the normally unflappable bastard was in the habit of only when he was extremely overexcited or anxious—or, at least, when he was in *Harry's* company. Harry'd certainly never noticed any sign of a speech irregularity when Malfoy interacted with the other Aurors, but then the two of them spent a fair amount of time in each other's company these days, what with being partners and all.

Harry shrugged. Perhaps it was simply that he'd been exposed to Malfoy in much more intense situations recently, like the cock-up with that foaming Death Eater just yesterday or that putrid run-in with Doholov. In any event, Harry was rather of the opinion the tiny flaw made the ex-Slytherin seem a ha'pence more like a regular human being; not that the gormless wonder *was* one, much.

"It's a simple question," Malfoy was admonishing his plaything sternly, "and you've not failed me yet, you ill-bred Muggle Magic object! *Tell me*—will Potter here be happy?"

Ask again later. The Ball replied sternly and no matter how many times Malfoy posed that same question—or variants thereof—over the course of the next interminable half-hour, it wouldn't cough up a single straight 'yes or no' answer.

Cannot predict now.

Harry set his shoulders, pressed his lips in a thin line, head and torso turned away from his unwanted partner with a vengeance, and proceeded to determinedly discuss the latest Auroring techniques with a receptive Bones, who was quite attractive, really, now that he thought about it. *Very* attractive. At least, her upper midsection was—a sweet bobbling effect there, especially when she arm-wrestled Blaise—though Harry had always traditionally been an arse man. And Bones was right here, plunked down directly to other side of him, Harry added, mentally jotting up a list of her sundry graces, and thus lots more readily available than say, Ginny, who was all the way on the other side of the coffee table and planning to Apparate off to training camp in the Hebrides with her sister Harpies in the morning. She'd be away another six to eight weeks, this time.

Harry sighed heavily, his ears awash with Bone's amazing photographic recall of Japanese Quidditch League statistics on his left and the discontented murmur of Malfoy on his right, and drank, having lost his arm wrestle with Seamus. It seemed the proper thing to do.

Eventually, the frustrated blonde git sulking next to him shut his rattling trap, got to his stocking feet with his usual feline grace and wandered off towards Ron and Hermione's tiny kitchenette, taking the annoying Eight Ball with him. Harry, idly doing the once-round Ron and Hermione's minuscule one-bedroom flatlet fifteen minutes later, was informed by Hermione that Malfoy had quietly departed right after the third round of Pansy's Perpetual Truth or Dare game, which had followed hard on the heels of the sad romp of arm-wrestling shots.

He hadn't noticed that at all, Harry assured himself, and took his own cranky person off not long after, on the patently flimsy excuse that he was still recovering from the previous evening's excesses, only to spend the wee hours tossing and turning in his quite empty bed, stone cold sober…for once.

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily.

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Chapter: 5

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 5

Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center ; minor flangst.

"You make a lousy Auror, Potter," a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Malfoy informed him the very next morning, over a continental breakfast shared across their desks. Harry cocked a wary eyebrow and didn't answer, perusing the file on one Bentley Curslap, a paparazzi Gryffindor-gone-bad and accused minor-league blackmailer, a la Colin Creavy style.

Curslap delighted in taking photos of high-ranking officials and publishing them in the gossip rags, to everyone's red-faced embarrassment. Dawlish had said he thought Curslap had some Dark Wizard sympathies, judging by his targets, and that Harry and Malfoy should investigate further. To make matters more interesting, Curslap had even caught an image of the two of them, he and Malfoy, heads poked entirely too close together over a café table as they peered over some item of no doubt circumstantial evidence. In the image, Malfoy's hand hovered just off Harry's back as if he were about to pat it fondly. That hand, as Harry swore vehemently to anyone who would listen, had never even touched him, no matter what the stupid Wizard photo made it seem like.

"Pah! Baby steps," Malfoy snorted this morning, obviously disgusted with yet another boring half-arsed assignment. "First Year stuff. Rank and file Death Eater wannabes, all." He'd tossed the offensive file back to Harry and had spent the remainder of the morning fiddling 'round with the Eight Ball.

"No, you *do*," Malfoy went on, when Harry stubbornly refused to respond. "You suck at shite cases like this one, where it's all piecing together nonexistent scraps of so-called 'clues', and you're half-hung-over most mornings, if not most *days*. *I* end up handling all the real work. It's as clear as the nose on my handsome face you don't give a flying fuckall. So, tell me, why'd you even bother with the Aurors, Saint Potter? Some misplaced idea you have to polish your halo?"

Harry scowled mightily, and reined in his temper with effort. Malfoy was a prick of the first order and didn't deserve an honest answer.

"If you were to ask *me*," Malfoy went on, unfazed by Harry's AK-level green glare, "*I* think you should quit this unrewarding position, Potty, while you're behind. Do all us working chaps a favor."

Malfoy patted the Eight Ball.

"Right, Ball? That's what *you* say, isn't it?"

Harry opened his mouth to advise Malfoy he was a crank, a nutcase *and* a nosy rotter; that *he*, at least, had always dreamt of being an Auror, unlike Malfoy, ever since he was but a boy, but ended up not bothering with that fruitless argument at all, instead taken up with a brand-new—and possibly bloody brilliant—train-of-thought; one that might just net him an ongoing, ardent wish of his very own.

Perhaps he could actually *use* this unhealthy obsession of Malfoy's with a simple Muggle child's plaything as incontrovertible evidence that the former Slytherin Ice Prince had finally flipped his lid. Maybe Malfoy's obvious emotional instability—who had ever even heard of relying on a Muggle 'made-in-Taiwan' device to accurately predict the future? Who would ever actually *believe* that fucking Malfoy gave a tinker's damn about Harry Potter's health and welfare?—was exactly the proof Harry needed so desperately in his ongoing campaign to be reassigned to a different partner—maybe even with Ron, the partner he'd always *wanted*, before Malfoy waltzed

in and stuck a spanner in the works.

Why exactlyDawlish had decided he and Mr. Puerile Personality Disorder would make such good teammates, Harry didn't know and didn't much care, but none of his previous heated objections to the pairing had made the slightest bit of difference to the outcome. Dawlish soundly rejected every single excuse Harry could think of, sober or not, and Malfoy delighted in sneering at his efforts, or laughing at him in that superior way of his, and totally refused to acknowledge any of the very broad hints Harry constantly threw at him to encourage *him* to request a different partner. Merlin, Harry thought, you'd think even Malfoy could manage to sort out the fact that Harry didn't want him around!

Yes. The Ball had no problem making up its nonexistent mind, and Malfoy's pointy face resolved itself into a pleased expression.

"See, Pottyhead? Even inanimate objects agree with me."

Vastly annoyed by Malfoy's insouciance in the face of flat-out rejection, Harry slapped the Curslap file onto his messy desktop, raising clouds of debris and knocking over an ancient, grotty Starbucks cup.

"Look, Malfoy," he sneered back, speaking through his teeth, "if *you* want a new partner, just ask for one. Go right ahead. *I'm* certainly not going to stop you."

Malfoy stared at him for a long moment, expressionless. The Ball sloshed between his manicured fingertips, the white triangle bobbing between **Don't count on it** and **My reply is no**. Harry valiantly tried not to notice that.

"…Did I say so, Potter?" the pain-in-Harry's-arse demanded finally, eyebrows reaching his hairline. "You're still the best this shoddy department has to offer, Potter. Why do think I pulled strings to be assigned with you?"

Both of Harry's own darker-than-soot eyebrows went up at that one. He was genuinely flabbergasted.

"You *did*?"

"'Course I did, Potter. Who would *you* choose if you were in my shoes—some wet-behind-the-ears know-nothing straight out of Auror School or a proven Saviour, whose quick-wittedness and cunning took down the most evil Wizard ever?"

"Hey—" Harry began, green eyes wide open for the first time that morning. "Tha—"

"Hah," Malfoy scoffed, overriding Harry's unwilling thanks, "this is *my* skin, Potter—you think I'd willingly endanger it at this point? Hardly! If I'm going to be stuck here in the Ministry playing the goody-goody act for the foreseeable future, it'll damned well be with someone who

can actually perform under pressure. Even if he *is* both a budding alcoholic *and* an arsewipe."

Harry closed his eyes, defeated. *Of course* that was why Malfoy had dug his heels in and refused to take all hints. Not because of any uneasy truce forged between them or any real respect for Harry Potter, the person, but because Harry was an undeniably powerful Wizard. 'Proven', as Malfoy just said.

"Berk," he muttered, giving up on useless resentment for the moment, and nudged the file towards Malfoy's desk—annoyingly clean, shiny and free of anything remotely resembling work. "Read this slop over again, will you? See if you see anything worth looking into, 'cause *I* bloody well don't."

Malfoy put the ever-present Eight Ball down carefully on the little circular metal stand he'd Transfigured one of Harry's favorite Biros into, expressly for the stated purpose of preventing his precious Muggle Magick device from rolling off his spotless desk. He looked stiff, and strangely irate, though it should be Harry who was rightfully the angry one, having just been roundly insulted by a supercilious prat.

"Fine," Malfoy snapped back, snatching up half the files in a flurry of dust and stray magical Magickal Post-It™ Stickums. "And then we'll be taking a long lunch at Balls Brothers, if you're quite, quite sure you're done with today's pack of predictable attempts at sloughing me off, Scarface. I'm fucking nigh unto death here, Potter, what with the abominable lack of decent nutrition, and *you* look like something a Kneazle dragged in. You could eat properly now and again, you know, and perhaps get some *real* sleep as opposed to simply passing out like some homeless sot every night on the Weaselbee's drawing room floor—"

Harry tuned him out, as per usual, and took up yet another file from the untidy pile he was reviewing, huffing gloomily. He despised this part of his job, sometimes. Paperwork was horrid; staff meetings were torture; and so were these piddling little nothing cases Dawlish kept right on assigning them, ever since what Harry'd come to think of drearily as the Doholov Disaster. Maybe fucking Malfoy was a little, itty-bitty, miniscule smidgeon *right* about Harry's current attitude, but Harry would die a painful death of Nargle nibbling before he ever admitted *that* aloud.

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily.

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Chapter: 6

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 6

NB: Since the last one was such a downer, I thought I'd give you all a little thrill…[snirk]

"I'm quite, quite serious, Potter," Malfoy stated, with the air of a man on a mission from Merlin himself. This evening he was stationed again at Harry's right side, Ginny's usual spot, or the same side that had taken the brunt of some lunk's full body mid-air tackle earlier that afternoon, and thus the same set of battered ribs and shattered arm bones that had required a lightning-fast visit to St. Mungo's for some Accelerated Skelegrow Potion. Harry shifted because his arm ached and Malfoy was making him uneasy. Plus, also, Malfoy had parked himself in a position that was entirely too close in proximity to Harry's personal space boundaries, something the prat did all the time, no matter how hard or how often Harry glared at him.

"You suck," Malfoy announced to Harry, and thus to all and sundry who might be overhearing their furious whispers. Harry winced; Malfoy had a point. "You should've dodged that easily—I know; *I've* seen you fly—but instead you just fucking fall out of the damned sky on me and then the perp nearly escapes in the melee and that requires even *more* sodding spellwork on *my* part—you're just too damned fortunate, Potter, that's all *I* have to—"

"Just. Shut. The. Fuck. Up, Malfoy," Harry ground out, gingerly climbing to his feet. He swayed, as even minimal Firewhiskey and professional strength pain potions didn't mix well, at least not in him. He was seriously antsy and at the same time utterly exhausted. His head swam. Every single solitary sound was too loud. It did nothing for his temper. "And leave me be, why don't you?" he snapped. "I'm not interested in your bloody opinions!"

Feeling grotty and greenish, he got three feet towards Ron and Hermione's itty-bitty bathroom before Malfoy had an arm wrapped around his stumbling form.

"Oh, just take him home, Malfoy," Hermione directed, and the rest of the gathering nodded and made agreeing noises, and Harry thus gave in without much protest, too tired, ill and achy to care that he was being managed yet again.

"Look, Potter," Malfoy told him in the privacy of Harry's own bedroom, as he ruthlessly stripped off Harry's wrinkled shirt. "I know *you* don't care about your life, but others do, you know. You've got to buck up or you'll do yourself some *real* damage one of these days and I may not be available to cover your stubborn arse—"

"You're leaving?" Harry's clouded eyes focused intently for a second. He frowned at that, and perhaps even pouted.

"No—no, of course not, Potter," Malfoy returned shortly, flicking his cheek with a hard forefinger. "But what if something happens? I'm not infallible, you know, and whilst there's no one else in the department I'd trust to keep an eye on you and your stupid reoccurring death wish—"

"I don't have a death wish, Malfoy!" Harry blustered. "I'm just—I'm just—"

"Not wanting to be here, Harry," Malfoy sighed. "I know, alright? *I know*. This isn't exactly what I wanted to do with my life either, but until you get this shite out of your system, here is where I'll be."

"What?" Harry asked, befuddled. "What?"

He didn't understand Malfoy at all these days. It was like the git was always half-through an entirely different conversation, whilst Harry was still stuck back on the one before last.

"You need a keeper, Potter," the measured voice went on relentlessly. Malfoy had his belt loosened and whipped free of pant loops as Harry blinked at him owlishly, "and the Weasley bint's not the one you need. She's got her own life now, you realize, and she's used to you not being in it, not anymore. I do wish the two of you would sort all that out sometime soon, before you up and kill yourself, being mindlessly noble."

Harry's loosened trousers fell to his ankles, exposing his garish 'Harry Potter: Super Seeker' imprinted Y-fronts that Ron had apparently believed constituted a frigging hilarious birthday gift last July, but he didn't even mind that. The odd light in his old rival's pale grey eyes was of far more importance. Malfoy shoved at him whilst he was still gawking, and Harry went down like a tonne of stone, fortunately onto his own mattress.

"'M not 'noble', Malfoy," Harry mumbled, refuting the git's latest allegations concerning Harry's incompetence, "an' 'M not mindless, either," and allowed his spinning head to drop onto his pillow gratefully, not wanting to even take up the difficult subject of Ginny.

Silent for the nonce, Malfoy eased Harry's shoes off and then his uniform trousers, his fingers nimble. His pale face had set, and was thus difficult to read, and Harry was quite suddenly too bone-deep exhausted to bother.

Come to think of it, Harry mused, his mind swimmy from the industrial strength St. Mungo's painkiller, fucking Malfoy looked like he was pretty sapped, too. Bad day all 'round, then.

"Yes, you are, Potter," the other Wizard informed him abruptly; breaking an extended silence had drawn tight with wordless tension, and tossed the soiled garments into the house elves' hamper with unerring aim. "Needlessly so."

"No…no," Harry reiterated, impatient, but Malfoy had Vanished, though he'd promised only a moment before that he'd be there.

Harry kept his watery eyes open wide simply by the act of forcibly willing them so, even though it upped the agony of his headache. For some reason he didn't want to close them just yet, at least not on an empty room, full of silence and flickering candlelight. Perhaps it was because he hurt all over and when Malfoy was there, chattering at him and pushing him about, he didn't think quite so hard about his various aches and pains.

Just need something to take my mind off it, Harry decided. *A distraction, that's all*.

But he still didn't close his eyes. If he did, he'd see the events of the afternoon all too clearly, and his whacked-out imagination would replay them in freeze-frame detail, with horrible alterations. It'd be the git hurtling downward instead, broomless, and Harry would be totally helpless to stop it, and then someone else he'd known all his short life would die needlessly.

"Here—drink this," his partner ordered when he reappeared some hazy interval later, having nipped out and back whilst Harry's unblinking eyes were studiously examining the blankness of his room's cracked ceiling, amongst other things. Malfoy kindly dimmed the overbright swath of floating candles with a swoop of his wand hand without Harry even needing to ask. Harry blinked, finally, his headache receding the veriest bit.

"It'll make your morning a little more bearable, Harry." Malfoy's expression radiated stifled impatience; his tone, however, contradicted that. "It's an Alleviator Potion, Potter," he continued, when Harry peered up at him, deeply suspicious. "Won't harm you, you ungrateful wanker; just take the edge off enough to let you sleep."

The vial of electric blue Malfoy had shoved under his nose was waved again, fumes rising. Harry sniffed warily, and smelt lemon and licorice. And possibly a dash of cod-liver oil, though he sincerely hoped not.

"Are you—are you, er." Harry asked, coughing a bit 'round the clog in his throat, having swallowed obediently. "Leaving?"

He needed to get that point cleared up. Malfoy was confusing him: first going, then *not* going, really; handling his injured partner's awkward self paradoxically with hands both rough and gentle; his usually light, faintly supercilious tone both grittily brusque and oddly fond. Harry didn't understand any of it; no, not at all.

"No," Malfoy sighed wearily, whisking the empty vial away and Vanishing it. "No, Harry—I'm notleaving. Told you that already, idjiit. Here for the damned duration, I am," he went on conversationally, deftly ripped the quilt from under Harry's lolling feet, freeing it. "Must ensure you survive yet another day, do I not? This one's simply not over yet."

"Why?" Harry wanted to know, snuggling under the comforter Malfoy was fussily tucking about his boneless form. "Why bother with me at all, Malfoy? It's not as though you even like me."

"Why, indeed, Potter? Maybe you should ask the Muggle Eight Ball."

Malfoy smiled at Harry whimsically, his handsome face crinkling into his first real honest-to-Merlin grin of the evening, and then said "Nox."

Harry was out like a sodding light, Malfoy's unusually brilliant silvery gaze the last thing he remembered clearly.

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Chapter: 7

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 7

Harry, despite his usual hangover, was still sharp enough to snag the shrunken Ball from Malfoy's rumpled robe pocket in the morning without disturbing his unasked overnight guest, helping himself with careful fingers as the git snored his pretty head off in Harry's favorite telly-watching armchair.

For a while after he'd tossed the throw over Malfoy's uncomfortably cramped figure, Harry sat at his microscopic kitchenette counter-cum-table, examining the Muggle Ball in its restored, enlarged form and sipping his first cup of coffee slowly, the usual Hangover potion having already done its job. A medley of possible 'answers' to Life's Burning Questions rolled lazily under his thumb.

"Oi, Ball," he asked finally, keeping his voice low, so as not to disturb Malfoy, who was clearly visible in the cut-through to Harry's train compartment-sized living room. It was Saturday morning, finally, so they'd started the weekend at last, but it was still abysmally early and there was no need to wake the arse before times. Malfoy in the morning was not a pretty sight. "*Am* I going to marry Ginny?"

Concentrate and ask again. The Ball replied slyly, warming under his fingers.

Harry did as the Ball advised, closing his eyes tightly and thinking terribly hard about Ginny and his first kiss; Ginny and her new job; Ginny and the Weasleys; Ginny—who loved him dearly, but was never there.

"Ball," he whispered, and brought the gleaming surface closer to his face. "I don't even *have* to ask, do I?"

My reply is no. The Ball was smug, but definite.

When Harry looked up from his contemplation of his own wavering reflection in the black plastic of his sometime oracle, a pair of weary silver-grey eyes was watching him steadily from across the room, unblinking. Harry blushed.

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Chapter: 8

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 8

Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center (how many licks to get to the center? 272); minor flangst.

"M-Malfoy!"

Harry, being essentially Harry, fumbled the Ball from nerveless fingers. It dropped with a thump and rolled off the linoleum-topped surface, falling to the thin beige carpet with another, louder one, the momentum gathered sending it skating across the intervening floor in Malfoy's direction. The prodigious git meanwhile yawned noisily, stretching, never taking his pale-eyed gaze off Harry for a single solitary second, and leisurely collected the Ball from where it'd had fetched up: nudging frantically at the armchair's front leg in the manner of one of those very small dogs, the sort one trips over constantly.

Harry was terribly relieved when Malfoy turned his newly discovered X-ray vision in his toy's direction, as Malfoy's regard caused him to feel exposed, though he didn't feature admitting *that,* either.

"Want some coffee?" he asked instead, supposedly solely in the spirit of kindness, and motioned toward the pot. Malfoy preferred tea, naturally, and Harry had viciously delighted in not brewing any.

Malfoy paid no heed, in the midst of whispering confidentially to his Muggle device. He shook it gently and held it up to one ear for a second, as though earlobes had eyes (*ew!*), and then drew it far enough back from his sleep-creased face that he could examine the action in the aperture very carefully. Harry eyed him throughout the whole process, just as carefully, and concluded after some minutes of this that Malfoy was either as barking mad as a rabid dog in the noonday sun or quite seriously in need of his own dose of Hangover Potion.

That, too, made Harry's nasty, mostly submerged Slytherin streak purr and feel playful.

"Or maybe we should go out to Millie's, instead," Harry offered, a wicked gleam in his green eyes, knowing Malfoy abhorred speaking of such plebian things as diner grub before his first latte—or cuppa Earl Grey, if that were available—of the day. "Just think, partner," he taunted, "we could be noshing up on some nice poached goose eggs, with the whites all runny and the yolks gooey, just as you like them—"

Malfoy flinched. And quite possibly growled, the silly saphead. Harry grinned ferally, happy enough to twist his proverbial crumb-coated butter knife another half-turn. He wasn't quite certain why he was being such a monumental twat this bright and beautiful morning—must be

Malfoy's fault, that; everything else was—but he was enjoying it immensely, much as one enjoys playing with a sore tooth.

"*And* some Tesco white bread, cut thick, deep-fried in slatherings of bacon drippings," he chanted gleefully, getting into the spirit of all things rendered crisp in animal fat, "*and*, speaking of rashers, a whole slab side of them, pink and fatty, with pork-and-apple bangers and sauerkraut mash in gravy and maybe a side helping of kippers and some steamed black pudding, right, yeah; and we *can't* forego for a second the buttered crumpets with clotted cream, or the sautéed calf's kidneys, and some sliced potatoes done up with oil and red pepper and onion and lashings of ketchup, and—*and*."

Caught short after a surprisingly longish listing of the menu selections Malfoy loved to hate, Harry tried desperately to recall what other greasy, frittered, calorie-laden breakfast foods sent Malfoy into a tizzy. The highly overbred arse always consumed plain porridge or steel-cut Irish oatmeal, with one dollop precisely of table cream and maple syrup, or perhaps unsugared Greek yoghurt with sliced fresh peaches and granola when he could get it, and he and Hermione would spend the majority of their weekday morning pre-work repasts sipping at beverages containing insufficient caffeine levels and shaking their respective heads dolefully over his and Ron's terrible eating habits.

Malfoy regarded him with a steely gaze.

"You are utterly abominable, Potter," he intoned in a way that brooked no opposing argument, and extracted himself from the ratty old armchair with an accompanying glare that could've seared toast, had Harry any non-mouldy bread handily lying about in his cold box. He stalked off to Harry's bathroom, Ball in hand, and spared Harry not one more remark, slamming the door shut so forcefully the casements rattled.

After twenty minutes or so of the shower running non-stop full blast, during which Harry finished his coffee and had two more cups, Malfoy emerged, wearing naught but one of Harry's skimpy Marks & Spencer's bargain-sale bath towels and clutching his wand and the Eight Ball tightly in white-knuckled fists. He strode across the narrow hallway between the bedroom and the bathroom at a fast clip, glaring, entered Harry's private domain without bothering to request an invitation and slammed *that* door shut as well.

Harry, positive that there was no hot water left over for his own wash-up, nor would there be, *ever*, even if he Charmed it, and certain, too, that his meager casual wardrobe would soon be scattered all over his bedroom floor like so much rubbish, had yet another cup of healing java. He also made a pot of tea, using real leaves from Ceylon, as a peace offering of sorts.

Twenty minutes after his second, wordless, comment on Harry's foul disposition, Malfoy emerged, clad in Harry's favorite blue jumper and a pair of his white cargo pants, resized to be both longer and much, much tighter in overall fit and finish. The pullover was one of the five cashmere ones Harry laid claim to, in an assortment of jewel colours, all presented to him by a smirking Malfoy at the last Christmas party at Ron and Hermione's, complete with

accompanying snark concerning the paucity of his wardrobe. The unbelted cargo pants just barely perched on the smooth boney jut of Malfoy's narrow hips, an inch or more below the hem of the jersey and held up solely by inertia, from what Harry could see. A strip of smooth skin showed, exposing Malfoy's perfect indent of an innie, and expanding and contracting in a beguiling manner every time the git took a breath.

Worse than Malfoy's state of casually elegant undress, though, was the undeniable fact that Harry's partner was smiling, white teeth bared in a perfectly pleasant but predatory manner, and still with wand firmly at hand. Aghast at such a *tour de force* occupying his kitchenette, Harry offered up a watered-down version of his own after a moment.

"Tea?" he suggested faintly, concluding he was in for it deep after his childish litany of breakfast foods. Perhaps…just perhaps, he'd taken that a bit too far.

"No," Malfoy replied calmly, continuing serenely on with his overly-everything smile. "Thank you."

"Ah," Harry shivered and spread his caffeine-jittery hands out in a vague conciliatory motion, feeling rather helpless. A Malfoy in this precarious mood was usually much louder and vivacious with sullen, sparking energy; Harry didn't know quite what to do with an Arctic Slytherin Prince.

"Why don't *you* get dressed, Potter?" Malfoy suggested smoothly, stroking his wand in a way that should be labeled Unforgivable but sadly, was not, "and then we'll go out." He made a great show of strolling over and peering through the dusty blinds the house-elves-for-hire had forgotten to get 'round to the week previous. "It's a perfectly smashing day out there. We should enjoy it."

"Ah," Harry said yet again, in lieu of being speechless. "Yeah, maybe."

Malfoy hadn't stopped once with that weird, creepy grimace. He didn't now, either, though one eyebrow climbed up in an elegant questioning arch, as if to inquire what Harry might be faffing about for.

"Lovely," he acknowledged, with canines exposed. A slight gesture of his wand hand indicated the bedroom door.

"Er. Right," Harry gabbled, abandoning his coffee with alacrity and shoving back his three-legged stool so hard it rocked on tenuous underpinnings. "On it, Malfoy."

Harry scuttled off before he could blurt out anything even mildly self-incriminating, such as a stumbling apology for being an unmitigated prick, happy enough to do Malfoy's bidding and avert even more painful retaliations, having sorted any questions he might've had concerning the better parts of valor long before.

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily.

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Chapter: 9

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 9

"Where are we?" Harry wanted to know, not recognizing the rising edifice of marble and pale granite before him. Malfoy let him go from the Side-Along with a smooth, unhurried motion and stepped back, settling his borrowed trousers tight 'round his narrow hips.

"The Manor, of course."

"Er," Harry remarked uncomfortably, "Um," meaning '*Why* in Merlin's Name would you *ever* bring me *here*, of all places, you insensitive *prick*?'

"For Games Day, of course, my dearest darling Potty," Malfoy smiled winningly, a nice change from the feral and somewhat toothy look he'd been sporting thus far. "But first, we breakfast."

He gestured before him and the hugely and overbearingly ornate Malfoy back door swung open soundlessly. A house elf peeped out, wearing a frilly maid's cap and nothing else. Harry shuddered. He sensed Malfoy's tactics had changed, but to what end, Harry couldn't even begin to guess.

"After you," Malfoy intoned politely, prodding him with a firm forefinger, and, lacking a reasonable spur-of-the-moment excuse to go wash his hair or count his nail clippings, Harry went.

The meal was exquisite. Even Harry had to admit that the Malfoy's private breakfast room was charming, and the grub offered far better than the carb-and-protein laden cardiac time bombs he and the gang consumed daily at Millie's Muggle-Style Diner. After they'd dined, chatting of nothing more incendiary than pro Quidditch, Malfoy led him courteously out to the Malfoy's private pitch—because *of course* the Malfoys had their own Quidditch Pitch, Harry sneered internally—and challenged him to a round or five of 'Snag the Snitches'.

Harry was breathless from both effort and exhilaration after just the first two, which he caught, to his great delight. Malfoy aced the rest, but that was alright in Harry's book: they'd both flown hard and pushed themselves, and the aerial skirmishes had been fought fair and square. Too, the morning was lovely, filled with freshets and sunshine and the marvelous green of late spring.

Begrudging nothing, Harry was game for the next activity, even going so far as to thank his one-time arch-nemesis for the chance of some recreational flying. Such things didn't come often

in Harry's dull, work-a-day life.

"Not a problem, Potter," Malfoy returned, in his best snide 'virtue is its own reward' voice, "as I am thus able to bask in your unparalleled good spirits. The pleasure, believe me, is all *mine*."

Not quite certain how to sort that comment, if it could be sorted, but aware that for once he felt whole, hale and eager, Harry again attempted to goad Malfoy into explaining the reasoning behind 'Games Day'. He'd no idea the wanker might actually willingly choose to spend time with him outside of work other than at Ron and Hermione's; this unusual invitation into Malfoy's ancestral territory was ferreting up all sorts of awkward questions from the depths of Harry's Auror-trained brain.

"Mine own invention, Scarhead," the git smirked archly, as they traipsed through endless mansion corridors, on their way to somewhere as yet undisclosed. "Games Day, as applied on a weekly basis to jaded Aurors, elongates their life span and reduces ugly stress and tension…not that there aren't *other* ways of accomplishing that same goal, but this'll do nicely in the meantime, won't it? So, you up for a dip?"

"Er—what?" Harry asked, following that singularly erudite reply with a muttered "Tension? I have tension?" and all the while nervously trailing after Malfoy as he made his way to the depths of the multiple basements. He'd rather horrid recollections of the Malfoy dungeons, but nothing could've prepared him for the palatial bathing space that spread before him when Malfoy flung open two enormous iron-barred dungeonesque doors.

Mosaic tiles of blue-and-green glass depicting Dionysus and his scantily clad hamadryads decorated the walls; marble fountains of sculpted nymphs and perky fauns abounded, and a whole mess of trailing, flowering greenery reminding Harry strongly of Muggle documentaries on the Amazon confronted his dazzled eyes. The pool itself was all about white and silver scallops, with a ribbon of teal tile running round its smooth lipped edge. A huge hot tub and a separate cedarwood sauna were off to one side, in a smaller Charmed stained glass-vaulted atrium; on the other, a full wet bar in teak and nickel-plated metal accents was spread with a selection of tropical drinks and gourmand snacking tidbits and manned—or elved—by two of the Malfoy staff. Towels the size of tablecloths woven of fluffy billion-thread count white Egyptian cotton billowed from heated hampers and everywhere there were scattered intimate little tables for two in cream-painted wrought iron, hanging hammocks of hemp twine decorated with comfy striped cushions and chaise lounges of wicker and basswood weave. It was a tropical Paradise, or at least a sizeable chunk of real estate from that general vicinity, which apparently Galleons and potent Magick could be used to acquire. Harry marveled, spinning on one heel as he took it all in.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed, the fragrant, humid air assaulting him with the scents of vanilla bean and frangipani. "*Merlin*, Malfoy—I have to say, I do like what you've done to the place!"

"Glad you approve, prat," Malfoy seemed genuinely pleased, judging by the faint laughter lines that bracketed his mobile mouth. He gestured towards a set of discreetly painted doors

immediately to the left of the arched entrance, drawing Harry's dazzled eyes away from his classically cut features and perfectly pink, moist lips. "Changing rooms and showers are there; help yourself to a suit as you find one. There's plenty."

"Oh?" Harry's brows went up quizzically. Guiltily, and not for the first time, he wondered what Malfoy got up to when he wasn't at work bothering Harry and he wasn't hanging out with ex-Gryffindors in flatlets awash with Firewhiskey. Did he entertain? Did he have a steady stream of lovely ladies or gentle Wizards gracing the various vistas of the Malfoy estate? Did Harry care to think further on those possibilities? No, thanks; he did *not*.

"Brill," Harry replied, instead of asking all sorts of nosy questions about his partner's private life. "Don't mind if I do."

Malfoy wasn't joking when he'd said 'plenty'. Harry was rather overwhelmed by the sheer amount of choice—every one of the various designer swim trunks and suits were clearly brand spanking new and terribly pricey—but eventually settled on a pair of lime and black-print board-length surfers from the Aussiebum™ collection that struck his fancy. When he emerged, clutching a white cotton towel the size of a bedsheet round his neck, Malfoy was already in the pool, bedecked in a miniscule scrap of stretchy black cloth that clung and moving nearly as fast as he had whilst astride his Italian racing broom.

Harry's partner was in the midst of swimming laps, cutting through the choppy waters butterfly-style, and Harry's first reaction was to gasp in envious awe at the toned shoulders and chest Malfoy's work robes always kept hidden from casual view. His adversary must have a pro gymnasium tucked somewhere away in the huge Malfoy dwelling.

His second reaction, which was far more primal and followed hard on the heels of Harry's registering that Malfoy's equally toned bum was essentially bared to the elements, as his swimsuit was apparently comprised of considerably less fabric than one of Ginny's Frenchified thongs, was to drop his luxury toweling abruptly from his nerveless fingertips.

His third reaction was not as easily describable, as it didn't consist of logical thought, nor even a 'normal' reaction to a mate unknowingly demonstrating his considerable physical prowess, as defined by Harry's Muggle middle-class, Dursley-skewed upbringing.

Gulping air as if it were, well, *oxygen*, Harry wasted no time diving into the welcome blue-and-silver refuge of the humongous pool, praying to Merlin at the very last minute that the deep end was regulation Muggle Olympian and that the water was sufficiently cool enough to damp down any weird urges he might develop whilst exposed to a nearly naked Malfoy. Further, he made the frantic decision to stay safely underwater for as long as Wizardly possible without benefit of gillyweed or Bubblehead spells, as it would be an absolutely brilliant plan to maintain some little distance between himself and his gracious host whilst he was readjusting his suit.

Which was, regrettably, significantly tighter and less comfortable *post*-nearly naked Malfoy than it had been *pre*.

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Chapter: 10

HP 'Magic Eight Ball' Part 10

NB: I'm terribly sorry, but I do have include some plot in this one. Try to bear it, will you? The Muggle Magic Eight Ball will return in a day or so.

Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center (how many licks to get to the center? 272); minor flangst.

"Well?" Malfoy asked, clinging to the side of the pool and still a bit breathless after Merlin-only-knew how many laps, "what d'you think, Potter? Nice change, all this, isn't it?" He waved a casual hand at their sybaritic surroundings.

"Oh…*yes*," Harry answered soulfully, "Yes, yes, I do," he repeated, far more immediately appreciative of both his acre-sized beach towel and the long, tall, iced citrus drink one of the house elves had handed him, currently poised at a precise vector over his damp cotton-swathed pelvis and resting strategically atop his terribly alert privates. He shifted in his chaise lounge nonetheless, vaguely uneasy, for Malfoy's head cocked at him inquiringly from the edge of the pool recalled nothing so much as the git's eleven year old self: superior, terribly full of himself and with his white-blond locks slicked back into a glossy helmet and striped dark with saturated pool water.

It was an odd juxtaposition mentally, a reality Harry really never would've thought he'd be confronted with, much less consider: 'Malfoy the perniciously-foul-and-nosy arsewipe partner from Aurors' and 'Malfoy the boy-he'd-hated-quite fiercely from his Hogwarts days'. Neither image quite settled comfortably into the latest version of Malfoy Harry was rapidly developing.

"Do you do a lot of swimming?" he asked, making vapid conversation in a deliberate effort to focus his nearly naked partner's attention back on himself. Such diversionary ploys had always worked previously; Malfoy loved to brag. "You look as though you know what you're doing out there."

"Oh—yes, I suppose," Malfoy was off-handed as he hauled himself out of the pool, the effort causing his abs and shoulders to ripple in a most intriguing way, not to mention the accompanying tightening of a midsection so righteously sculpted Harry's urge to touch was almost visceral.

"It's relaxing, you see," he shrugged, unconsciously setting off a subtle chain reaction of

skin-to-muscle motion and abruptly heightening the buzzing in Harry's zinging nerve endings. "I find I need a chance to cool down after a hard day Auroring. What about you, Harry?" Malfoy asked in all innocence, rubbing his hair into a blond frizz that defined the term 'post-shag' nicely with one of those had-to-be-stolen from the Ritz towels. It looked highly…*touchable*, Malfoy's hair, Harry decided, and tightened his fingers hastily 'round his Collins glass.

He would *not* do so, not under *any* provocation, Harry swore internally, invoking Dumbledore, Merlin and Morgana (the Magickal 'Big Three') to support him in this endeavour.

"Er, not much, really," he replied, after a pause in which he contemplated shoving Malfoy roughly back into the pool—anything to rid himself of the disturbing vision rearing up its 'Bow Down to the Slytherin Sex God' talons and flexing them before him. Oops! 'Flexing' was a bad word, right up there on the list with 'touchable'.

"Oh, that's too bad, Harry," Malfoy answered softly, as if he truly gave a fuck. "We'll have to do something about that, won't we?"

Mentally, Harry slapped himself sharply for drooling buckets over Malfoy of all people and forcibly wrenched himself back on track, as the git was still yapping at him.

"…so I thought a quick game of billiards next and then we could break for a late lunch in the summer house, Scarhead—what do *you* think?"

"Where's your Muggle Eight Ball?" Harry wanted to know, abruptly aware of the lack. "Thought you were fixated on that thing, Malfoy—what've you done with it?"

Malfoy's eyebrows rose as he evinced somewhat studied surprise. Harry examined the hamadryads as though they were *the* sacred phallic images of Pompeii's 'secret cabinet', revealed in all their Priapusian glory.

"Oh, that old thing?" the prat answered all too casually. He slung himself into a fluffy sky-blue robe that only enhanced all that defined musculature. "It bothered you, Potty, so I've not been consulting it today. Didn't think you had much patience for it."

"Right—I mean, *no*, not at all!" Harry scrambled to protest. "I—It's *yours,* Malfoy. You do as you like with it—don't worry about me."

"But of course I worry about you, Potter," Malfoy smiled sweetly, all gilded light and angelic sparkles. "You've enough on your miniscule excuse for a brain without me inducing yet another irritant into your already unstable emotional environment."

"What—what the bloody fuck does *that* mean, Malfoy?" Harry demanded fiercely. He would've been even more fussed had Malfoy not been quite so…quite so *distracting*. Sky-blue did criminal justice to things of white-gold and silver-grey and cream-pale. Malfoy was a veritable walking, snarking palette of Harry's favorite colours.

Malfoy merely grinned at him yet again, an alarming repeat of the morning's earlier 'I'm going to eat you' version. "Just exactly what I said, Harry. Learn to listen, will you? Now, let's have lunch first. I do believe your blood sugar is visibly dropping."

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Chapter: 11

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 11

NB: Two today, as I'm feeling generous. Also, I'm busy tomorrow, so…that'd be the 'fickle' part, perhaps?

Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center;NC-17; smidgeons of spare flangst.

Harry, as he'd stated plainly to his heretofore-despised Auror partner, was neither noble nor mindless. Further, he wasn't strictly heterosexual, despite the even more despicable Dursleys and their sodding middle-class stodgy suburb where 'alternative' was defined as doing one's shopping somewhere other than the High Street. A combination of Cho, Ginny, Luna, Theodore, Seamus and a nice Muggle boy named Bryan had demonstrated this to him with more than reasonable clarity. Let it be noted, however, that Harry was not one given to introspection, either—he found it depressing these days—and he was not particularly adventurous, romantically. He preferred comfort and sameness and so on, especially after fighting for his bloody life during the vast majority of it, living out of a tent with two highly excitable teenagers for the best part of a miserable senior school term and then compounding his entirely too exciting and dangerous formative years with a profession that gave top billing to the words 'excitement' and 'danger'.

Even more than boredom, though, Harry craved that nebulous place where he could be 'himself', whatever and wherever *that* was. The Weasley family had provided a reassuring taste of its existence, though not quite enough to satisfy. Sirius had been a contender, as well, with his fatherly caring and his sense of deep connection to Harry's past. But the concept of 'family' was not quite all Harry desired.

Trouble was, he didn't know quite what *it* was he was missing, or if he'd even recognize *it* if he stumbled over it.

He did know, however, that Malfoy was fit. That was one of those immutable laws of nature. He knew as well that Malfoy could be relied upon to be a git, whilst still being fit, and that no matter how matey they managed to be after four years or more of enforced cooperation, he and Malfoy would never actually graduate to being such. Not in the sense or on the level of Ron and

Hermione, at least.

Not 'friends', then, as Harry defined the term, and not 'family', as Harry's admittedly small experience described. So…what precisely was this nagging, bone-deep obsession with Draco Malfoy? Why had it gone on for so long, undeterred even by Harry's attempts to stuff its pesky self back into his emotional baggage and keep it firmly under wraps? How could he explain *it*—and thus explain *it* away?

The Muggle Ball was looking to be more and more attractive an option, every sodding moment. A series of simple 'yes' or 'no' answers would be damned helpful at this ill-defined point in Harry's continuum and Harry was all for simple answers. He'd enough of confusion, grey areas and waffling for a fucking lifetime and he was only twenty-four, sadly. Though he often felt himself to be much older.

Harry wondered if Malfoy felt that way, too, as he sent another striped ball into a side pocket neatly, and Malfoy chalked up.

"Happy, Potty?"

"What d'you mean by 'happy', precisely?" Harry shot back defensively, concentrating on winning. He felt oddly required to make at least some show of competing with Malfoy's many lurking talents, if only to prove he wasn't the worthless half-blood a younger nemesis had always made him out to be. That this was a most childish behaviour on his part seemed to make not the slightest difference. Malfoy was a git, a prat and a wanker, and that, too, was a law, rendering obsolete the incontrovertible fact that these flaws were packaged all too nicely.

With a horrible vomiting noise, the felt-topped table flexed and coughed Harry's blue-and-white ball right back up again, sending it skittering off into three others. Harry frowned. The game had interrupted his required bout of brooding.

"As in, suitably relaxed and perhaps even enjoying some of what life has to offer, Potter," the wanker/git/prat grinned as Harry smartly re-pocketed his chosen billiard. "I know it's difficult for *you,* especially, given your determination to suffer perpetual martyrdom, Saint Potty, but there is actually pleasure to be had in this vale of tears we call Life."

"Arsewipe," Harry replied, without much heat, sending two more stripy balls off to perdition. The table hacked again and gurgled, as if it were a Kneazle struggling with a hairball, and swallowed, finally accepting its treats with poor grace. Malfoy stepped forward, sizing up the lay of the turf.

"Tell me more, then," Harry demanded fretfully. "What do *you* do to offset the trials of daily life?"

In truth, Harry *was* terribly curious. This was a whole new guise for the same-old, same-old Malfoy he knew and disliked so heartily, and he wanted to poke at it repeatedly with a sharpened

stick, see if the illusion of good-nature was in any way based in reality. Certainly, he'd never expected to discover his partner had a finely honed sense of humour or a boyish grin that could warm the cockles of even the most jaded of hearts.

Malfoy charm, he told himself firmly. *They're bred for it; it's how they get ahead. Can't be a bossy dickweed* all *the time, even with scads of Galleons*.

"Well, lessee," Malfoy answered equably, sinking a solid red orb in a rather disturbingly professional manner. "I volunteer, naturally," he began.

"*You* do?" Harry was aghast.

"Of course I do, Potter," Malfoy was now practically spreadeagle across the felt, his bum poking up for Harry's visual delectation as he took careful aim at a green one. "I'm required to make a show of it, aren't I? Reps aren't rebuilt in a day, you realize."

The strip of exposed skin was now considerably larger and Malfoy's elegant arsecrack was showing above his borrowed trousers. Harry pressed his aching groin into the rolled edge of the billiards table and stifled a pained groan. God, but he despised inconvenient hard-ons, particularly those caused by Malfoy, of course, ruddy blighter that he was. He could not be more embarrassed by this one…well, he could, but he didn't wish to dwell.

"Why?" Harry wanted to know, determined to keep his mind off Malfoy's dubious charms, as well as the question of why the bastard was still wearing Harry's clothes when he had access to his immense wardrobe right upstairs. Or somewhere in that vicinity; the Manor defined the word 'immense'. "Why bother with that shite? It's not like *you* give jackall about the public's opinion, Malfoy. Even *I* realize that."

Malfoy completed his shots, having sunk four solid balls in rapid succession, the table cooperating without a single ripple of disobedience. Harry found this to be highly irregular and not according to Hoyle; he was accustomed to Muggle billiards, where the balls remained tidily in their cups and the green was lifeless.

"But there you're mistaken, Saint," the blond menace smirked at him again, all teeth and smoldering power, reminding Harry alarmingly of certain Mugglish Bond films, especially the ones with Sean Connery. "I've other people's public personas to be careful of, now. Wouldn't want to be a Dark stain on certain someone's golden existence, would I?"

"What?" Harry said, puzzled. Did Malfoy refer to his parents, who were currently well out of it and basking in the sunny climes of southern France? Or his mates, Slytherins all, and every one of them committed to some sort of altruistic profession purely for the sake of appearances? Well, excepting Parkinson, of course, and she was just out to marry yet more money.

Musing on the oxymoron of Malfoy altruism, and indeed *Slytherin* altruism, Harry determinedly went after the last of his billiards, attempting a trick shot off two banks and a diamond in the far

right corner. The reassuring crunching noises as the table accepted its meal covered his disbelieving mumbles about Malfoy's typical two-faced agenda. 'Once a spy', in Harry's opinion, 'always a liar'.

"Hmm, Harry?" Malfoy was contemplating the floating score board, a meditative finger to his pointy chin. "I do believe it's a draw, yes." He set his No. 20 back into the rack. "Fortunate, that. Wouldn't want to brangle over a friendly game of balls-and-sticks like two errant schoolboys, would we?"

"Nargh," Harry gulped, as the echoing refrain of 'balls-and-sticks' summoned vivid images he could do without, and was all at once heartily sick of innuendo, Charms and opaque motivations.

"You know what, Malfoy? I want that blasted Eight Ball of yours, right this minute—give it here!"

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily.

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Chapter: 12

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 12

Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center (how many licks to get to the center? 272); minor flangst.

"Really?" and Malfoy did his mind-boggling mini-Apparation trick, appearing right at Harry's elbow between blinks. "Do you, Potty? Well, learn to *want*, why don't you? It's not up for your immediate consumption."

Harry backed away, the only safe thing to do in the circumstances, and thus bumped into the cue rack, fortunately. He slotted his No. 19 into position as if he'd meant to do that all along.

"And why not?" he asked, "Are you…afraid, Malfoy?"

"Oh, no, certainly not, Scarhead," grinned the blot on Harry's calm existence. "Merely restless. What say you to a stroll, instead? Work off some of that not-so-buried aggression of yours. Must be wearing, being always wound up like that."

Malfoy took Harry's elbow, which brought his long, lean body right through Harry's eighteen-inch very stodgy 'personal space' boundary, and tugged at him.

"Right this way, Harry," he continued, sliding a familiar arm about Harry's flinching waist. "My gardens await your pleasure."

"Neep!" Harry replied, or rather gasped, and was swept away into yet another Side-Along.

"There *has* to be an easier way of getting about this Merlin-forsaken theme park you call home, dickweed. I feel sick, now," Harry whined, neatly disengaging himself from Malfoy's long, pale fingers. "Get a bloody golf cart or something," he suggested.

"Hmm, there's an idea, Potter. How 'bout a go-cart instead?" Malfoy seemed entirely too pleased with himself, waving toward an immense garage that housed several horseless carriages—a Maserati, a Ferrari, and weirdly enough, a Yugo—along with regular Wizarding vehicles and dog carts, snowmobiles, vintage motorcycles and other petrol-and-Magick-driven miscellany.

Harry eyes lit up. "You have those, Malfoy?"

"Well, yes," and oh, there was that wicked smirk again. "And by 'stroll', I meant 'race', of course, Potter. Haven't you learnt I always communicate obliquely?"

"What're we waiting for, then?" Harry grinned right back at his partner, emerald eyes sparkling, exerting a wee bit 'o charm of his own.

Malfoy's tiny appreciative gasp was lost in translation as he whipped about abruptly and led the way into the guts of the building. "Spare helmets here, and gloves—must protect those artist's hands of yours, Potter—and the course is out back. We won't need to refuel; the elves always keep them ready."

"Oh, *yeah*!" Harry returned gleefully, and felt twelve again, or maybe even thirteen. Certainly some innocent age before the onslaught of hormones and other complications. "Bugger all, bring it *on*, you fucker!"

Naturally, the ex-Slytherin had a favored green-and-silver chariot; Harry chose red-and-gold, simply to be a git. The course was immaculate, a full mile, and banked perfectly. And the petrol-driven stripped-down mechanical carts were speedy enough to steal his breath away, along with most of his inhibitions. Harry whooped and cavorted, driving recklessly and with abandon, and Malfoy egged him on with Charmed greyhounds and rabbits to race along beside them and a huge checkerboard flag at the finish that waved "All-Time Winner!"

After best-out-of-five, that was Harry, and oh, but he did rub it in, forgetting even the Muggle Eight Ball and Malfoy's irritating claim on his apparel.

"Who's the fastest now, you dork?" he taunted, knocking back the butterbeer the elves stocked in the handy gazebo. "Can't even be arsed to take me on your home turf, can you?"

"Sure about that, Scarhead?" Malfoy sneered, but his cool grey eyes were laughing. "We'll just

have to continue our friendly competition, yes?"

"Oh, absolutely," Harry snorted, "What's next, then? Fencing? Hexing? Skeeball?"

"Actually…" Malfoy tapped his chin with one forefinger in contemplation. It seemed to be a habit of his; Harry cursed himself for finding it 'charming'. "I do believe it's time for some company."

"Er—what?" Why was Malfoy so bloody mercurial? Harry wondered. He'd a terrible time keeping up when he was off-guard, such as now, when he was stroking his 'Winner!' flag with a feeling of great satisfaction.

"Ah—*why* 'company', exactly? Bored with my presence already, arsehole? Want me to toddle off?"

"Not at all, Potter," Malfoy toasted him with his own butterbeer, which he'd poured into a chilled mug, the ponce. "I think we simply need a rest before we cross swords again, and also, I've been dying to ask your Gryffindorks over for a Barbie in the backyard. When the Weaselly-Granger duo officially mates, we'll all be in need of new stomping grounds."

"…Point," Harry conceded. "Sounds like fun. Need some help with it?" He eased himself from his newly beloved go-cart and tried to flatten his flyaway mop with leather gloved hands. An elf appeared to fold up his lovely flag and store it away for his departure.

"Maybe…perhaps the entertainment aspect, Potter," Malfoy thought aloud, ignoring the elf and obviously abstracted. "We can't have Pans take on all the planning at this juncture. She's got her sights firmly set on Zabini now, so she's preoccupied."

"Funny, isn't it?" Harry remarked, his mouth quirking into a rueful grin. He sipped his brew again, all his many cares a mile behind him.

"What?'

"How people are pairing up. Never thought it would happen for Ron and Hermione and now they've gone and caused a bleeding avalanche."

"…Yes. So they have." But Malfoy didn't seem want to pursue the subject of mates bonding, turning Harry's attention to party planning instead.

"Elves'll do all the food and whatnot; we just need to say how we want things set up. I've badminton and croquet and the like—all the usual—"

"'Usual'?" Harry snorted. "Malfoy, *really*? This isn't *Alice*, you know."

Malfoy raised his aquiline nose in the balmy air. "Purebloods play croquet, Potty. Get used to it."

"Bite me," Harry replied. "What else? How 'bout drinks? Music?"

"All that's covered, really. I'll need to choose the vintages for supper, but that won't take long, and I've one of those Muggley 'I-see-de-sea' players. You want to wash up, Potter?"

"I suppose," Harry returned doubtfully, plucking at his perspiration-laden T-shirt. "Why, do I smell?"

Malfoy leaned in very close indeed, his handsome face but millimeters from Harry's, his long hands stuffed familiarly into Harry's favorite cargo pants pockets, the ones he mutely *insisted* on wearing, and took a good long whiff at Harry's nape, rather like an amorous Dementor.

"Indeed," the git murmured, voice seductively husky, lips terribly close to Harry's skin, "you do, and very nice, too," and every atom of the not-ever-to-be-forgotten tension that always lay between them snapped to, front and center, vibrating madly, and Harry absolutely *hated* Malfoy at that moment.

"Here," Malfoy breathed, right into Harry's ear, just as though invading Harry's space on a regular basis was perfectly acceptable. As if poncing about like sex-on-a-stick and inflicting himself on unwilling accomplices was also perfectly par for the course, Harry fumed. "Take this and use it to decide the evening's activities, Potter. It'll keep you nicely occupied whilst *I* bathe."

The Muggle Eight Ball appeared abruptly in Harry's one hand, the one that wasn't already poised over the butt end of his ever-present wand.

"Mind you ask it only simple questions now, Potty," Malfoy warned, a dangerous glint in his eyes. He drew back, taking the warmth of his glorious body with him. "Keep them on your own level, do."

Harry growled, head down and lower lip thrust out, right along with his obstinate chin. He sounded silly doing so, far worse than Malfoy ever had, but *he* didn't care. He *needed* to fucking growl, or make some sort of primordial-type protest.

Malfoy slipped an arm round Harry's waist, uncaring of, or perhaps simply accustomed to, Harry's little tempers.

"Just one more; hang tight," Malfoy reassured him, and they materialized in the Manor itself, right before a set of gilded, cream-coloured double doors, Harry stumbling in place despite the firm arm wrapped 'round him. Malfoy gripped him fiercely at that moment, and that was enough to send Harry's already elevated heartbeat into double overtime.

"Careful there! Here—use this suite, Harry, for your bath. I'm right down the hall," he nodded in the direction of several more arching doorways receding in the distance. "There's everything you need, so take your time and Apparate to the Morning Room when you're ready—and mind you

don't lead the witness!" Malfoy chuckled.

On that cheery reminder, he Disapparated abruptly, playing Cheshire, the bright, white smile lingering cheekily, and Harry's low ominous growl morphed into an unmistakable snarl. The Eight Ball cowered in his hand, quivering, its white triangle spinning wildly amidst a sea of uncertain waters.

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily.

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Chapter: 13

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 13

The 20 standard answers on a Magic 8-Ball are:

? As I see it, yes

? It is certain

? It is decidedly so

? Most likely

? Outlook good

? Signs point to yes

? Without a doubt

? Yes

? Yes - definitely

? You may rely on it

? Reply hazy, try again

? Ask again later

? Better not tell you now

? Cannot predict now

? Concentrate and ask again

? Don't count on it

? My reply is no

? My sources say no

? Outlook not so good

? Very doubtful

10 of the possible answers are affirmative (?), 5 are negative (?), and 5 are maybe (?). Using the Coupon collector's problem in probability theory, it can be shown that it takes an average of 72 questions of the Magic Eight Ball for all 20 of its answers to appear at least once.

"Bloody fucking fuck, Ball. Is that twat *teasing* me?"

It is decidedly so.

"*Why*?" Harry demanded, pacing in short sweeps just inside the doors. He didn't even bother with the splendor of the suite all around him. "Why in all that's sacred would he want screw this up? We just started getting along! I wasn't even hating him today!"

Don't count on it.

"What d'you mean, 'don't count on it'? That I hate him? Or that we were actually managing to hold a decent conversation with one another for more than two minutes at a time?" Harry huffed at the very idea. Ridiculous! "You know what, Ball? He's bloody despicable, he is—he's a fucking criminally flirtatious bastard, a real tosser if there ever was one—a slag that'll shag anything that breathes—that's what he is and *all* he is and you're damned well telling me not to 'count on it'? Don't you think I don't *know* that, you idjiit Ball? I'm not a total moron, you know! I'm *not* queuing up to get slammed!"

My sources say no.

"'Your sources say no' *what*, Ball? Jeezus fucking Godric on a lolly, you asinine Muggle Ball, what *are* you going on about? Damn it all to Hades, why the fuck didn't Hermione pull a frigging Ouiji board out of her arse instead of *you*, you useless piece of shite?"

Very doubtful.

Harry paused, mid-rant, and stared hard and narrow-eyed at Malfoy's favored toy. It twinkled at him—bleeding *twinkled*.

"What—she doesn't have one?"

No.

Harry swallowed, Adam's apple sticking a bit. Who knew Muggle toys possessed themselves of dry wit? And why should *he* even care? There were certainly odder things in existence, especially *his* existence, populated as it was by gits that were smooth and sparkled and played entirely too nice with others when they chose to. *If* they chose to.

"Oh. Right. Well, what *can* you do, then? Yes or no stuff only, that it?"

Yes – definitely.

"Alright…hold up a sec. Let me have a think, since I may as well make use of you."

Harry cogitated, and returned to striding in truncated swathes through the elegant space of the suite Malfoy had bestowed upon for temporary use, his temper ebbing quickly, as it generally did around Malfoy and Malfoy's minions. He supposed the Ball counted as a 'minion', much the way Crabbe and Goyle had, just more in a hard, round, plasticky kind of way. Not that Crabbe and Goyle hadn't been rather hard and plasticky as well, like linoleum—er, right.

In any event, the slimy bastard got under his skin—definitely; he freely admitted that—but unlike a lot of other people, Malfoy rarely left any lasting damage, at least not at this point in their respective lives. Harry was too practiced at paying him no mind after nearly four years of constant exposure and Malfoy had always been pants at actually harming him. Sure, his taunts stung a little, but it was more Harry's indecent, highly irregular interest in Malfoy's, um, charms that addled him. Ticked Harry off, it did, and then he tended to let fly and not exercise the iron control that'd kept him focused on things like defeating evil Wizards and maintaining his hide in the preferred unscathed state. Witness the recent Doholov Disaster.

Speaking of which, Malfoy still had faint scars from Harry's long-ago Sectumsempra; he'd noticed that during his very short bathe in the obscenely huge pool. They were rather…intriguing; rakish, even, in a piratical way, and Harry had never been one to value such things as scars highly. But now he found he rather wanted to…well, to touch them, and perhaps allow that he was sorry.

Right—*sorry*.

Gods, Harry swore, disgusted. He *was* 'sorry'—a sorry twat caught up in memories of bared skin and well-fitting breeches. His own, even, which had never looked so good on him! Further, he was totally off the beaten track now and Malfoy would be expecting him to be finished with his shower shortly. They'd a do of sorts to throw together, after all.

"Right, right, what, okay—no, not that; too easy," mumbling under his breath, Harry bobbled back and forth like a Muggle yo-yo, pondering possible queries, for surely Malfoy would make him give the Muggle Ball back as soon as opportunity presented. The git adored the thing; it was hardly ever out of those manicured hands of his—*ah*!

Harry grinned; he was on the right track at last. Good old Auror training; he knew it was worth it all along, no matter what the git said.

"Malfoy asks you lots of questions, doesn't he, Ball?"

Yes. The Ball seemed positive of *that*, at least.

"Often?"

It is decidedly so.

"About me?"

Without a doubt. Watching the white triangle suspiciously, Harry joggled it. Time to take a little gamble on a hunch he had.

"And about what I—what *I* want, right? He wants to know?"

As I see it, yes.

"And you think he follows your advice? As in, more often than not? He trusts you?"

Yes – definitely.

"Well, alright, then. Um. Does he still hate me?"

My reply is no.

"Does he…does he *like* me? *Really*?"

Signs point to yes.

"And he wants me to be 'happy', right, whatever he thinks that is? 'Cause I heard him ask that before, you know. About me marrying Ginny."

Without a doubt.

"Do you know why?"

Yes.

"Well, brill. If I ask you the right questions, can you tell me?"

Better not tell you now.

"Er—why not, Ball? Wait—if he wants me to be happy and all, then he must be on the level, surely?"

Reply hazy, try again.

"Merlin! I wish you had more answers on your little white bobber, Ball. This 'yes or no or maybe so' shite is driving me 'round the bloody frigging bend. Alright—alright, I guess I should narrow this down some. Does the prat want me to be, um, 'happy', er, *with* someone? Er—*him*, maybe?"

Better not tell you now.

"Why the fuck not, eh? Where's the harm in *that*, Ball? Is Malfoy hiding something I should know about? He's not telling me the whole truth, is he? I fucking well knew it! Buggering arsehole!"

Reply hazy, try again. Harry snorted at it inelegantly, and went back to basics.

"But he's definitely *not* out to harm me, is he? You can swear to that, right?"

No. **Yes**.

"But you can't give me any more details, can you?"

Outlook not so good.

Spin, shake, spin.

Cannot predict now.

"You certain?"

Cannot predict now.

"Fine, fine. I get it," Harry nodded, his curiosity only barely whetted. But he was already well behind time and his toplofty partner was nothing if not a stickler for punctuality. The git'd Apparate right into the midst of Harry's bathroom to berate him soundly if he thought Harry was dawdling—he'd done it before, blast him.

"Right, I suppose that's *something*, at least. Good to know, yeah."

Harry eyed his odd Muggle confidante. Somehow it seemed rather wibbly about the edges, the little triangle jiggling disconsolately in its blue stuff, as though it was a very young Crup puppy who'd just spectacularly screwed up paper-training for the umpteenth time. Harry felt terribly guilty, asking so much of it on such short notice.

"Yeah, s'okay, I didn't really expect much, you know? So, er, thanks anyway, Ball; I guess you did your best."

Harry patted it awkwardly but kindly, mindful of Malfoy's inordinate fondness for his Muggle item, and happened to catch sight of the hands on his watch. "Bugger all! I'm *so* frigging running late now! He's going to fucking tear me to pieces!"

Tossing the Eight Ball casually onto the nearby four-poster, Harry dashed for the lav, as if the very Hounds of Hades itself were upon him.

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Chapter: 14

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 14

Fandom: HP
Pairing: H/D (or D/H, really. Whatever. Firewhiskey is intimately involved here.)
Rating: NC-17 (see Firewhiskey.)
Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center (see above); minor flangst.
Summary of Sorts: Hermione brings a Muggle Magic device to the usual round of post-workaday drinking and Malfoy is utterly fascinated. Harry, however, has his doubts as to the oracular ability of a glorified marble, especially when it comes to his personal life. This is a fickle, fateful fic, posted in drabbles, on a semi-daily basis.
Part 14/? *Till we get to the end, silly!*

"Did you find the clean clothes I left you, Potty?"

Harry had and then had nearly refused to wear them as a rather inarticulate statement against toffee-nosed types in general, but his sweaty jeans and T-shirt had been disgusting after his shower, so…

Yeah. He was wearing something 'designer'—read 'ridiculously dear'; a gift from Mr. Aristo himself, and it galled him. It galled him more when Malfoy spun about, having finished his consultation with the house elf, and eyed him up and down as though Harry were an aged side of superior beef on display in a hoity-toity butcher's shop window.

"Nice," Malfoy said simply, knowingly, and handed him a glass of wine. The tips of their fingers touched for a heart-stopping moment as he passed it over. Harry manfully resisted blushing and failed miserably.

"Look, we need to set stuff up, Malfoy, for this party of yours."

Harry's gaze swerved around Malfoy's piercing grey eyes and examined his wine glass instead, avoiding the possibly supercilious compliment and rigidly sticking to the task before him. Certainly not Marks & Spencer, this long-stemmed beauty he was clutching. About a billion Galleons more costly, he'd warrant. The wine was pretty good, though—yeah.

"It's good," he remarked, feeling such a comment was safe enough, considering.

"Our very own Malfoy vintage, Harry," Malfoy purred, edging ever closer in that sinuously elegant way he had. "As am I. So glad you're savouring tastes."

The prat even had the nerve to wink at Harry, thus ably demonstrating the whole 'powerful, sexy, testosterone-charged Wizard masquerading as 007-type playboy' alternative persona once more. Harry shook his still-damp and shaggy head slightly, as if to knock the irritating upper-class fuckwit and his too shaggable miasma right out of its midst.

Merlin, but Malfoy was such a confusing swot sometimes. Harry didn't know quite what to do with him when he was like this. He much preferred the snippy prat he shared an office with.

"Stay on task, berk, " he ordered tersely, a veritable modern-day Centurion, all defenses firmly raised and at the ready."So—where do you want me to start? How many? When?" Harry fired off questions in the style of his usual Auror-speak verbal shorthand, as he was certain Malfoy understood that at least, very well. They'd no problems communicating clearly whilst at work, he and the twat. If only he could squash Malfoy's damnable innuendo, life would be grand.

Malfoy did tacitly agree to focus, or certainly seemed to have gotten a bit of a clue from Harry's attitude of barely stifled belligerent impatience. Straightening up from his sultry slouch with a much put-upon air, the git snorted in a rather resigned fashion.

"Fine," he snapped, reassuringly snotty once again. "*Don't* flirt with me, Scarhead. See if I care."

"Fine, I won't!" Harry fired back, and gave up on deciphering subtext altogether. "Erm—right."

Without further ado, the scion of the Malfoys waved Harry to follow him and ushered him politely out through an open French door. This led to a long, wide marble terrace, with steps leading down to a series of themed gardens: knot, water, herb, butterfly and many more too numerous and specialized to list. Harry glimpsed the clipped yews of a labyrinth off in the distance and at least two more gingerbread gazebos. In the far distance glimmered yet another swimming pool, equipped with both a dizzying high dive and a twisty slide. Located within an

easy walk there were immaculate tennis courts and closely mown bowling greens, and a horde of bustling elves in the act of setting up various lawn games.

"Bocce ball? Whoever plays bocce ball these days, Malfoy?" Harry asked, curious, his wandering gaze alighting on that activity among the many in process.

"Shacklebolt," the prat answered laconically, and waved a hand at the flurry occurring farther down the length of the terrace. A veritable swarm of big-eared, frill-bedecked, vertically challenged magical beings were setting up dining tables, ranging in seating from an intimate two to a generous twelve, and chinaware and cutlery sparkled diamond-bright in the golden light of a lovely afternoon. Harry could hear the musical clinking of elegant place settings that no doubt included such rarities in his life as fish knives and savoury forks, demitasse spoons and sauceboats.

He'd have to hustle to manage a seat next to Hermione when the time came; she, of all people, would be able to properly navigate dinner.

"Now, to answer your questions, Potty; one: you're designated to be the Games Go-To chap, so your job is ensure everyone's happily athletic after they arrive. I want to see mingling, nay, outright camaraderie going on here. Two: about a hundred persons attending, more or less."

Harry gasped, appalled. Malfoy bobbed his gilt head, acknowledging the palpable hit to Harry's broadside.

"Aurors, academia, your friends, my friends, Ministry peeps and those I need to impress. Oh, and the people *you* need to impress, as well. Don't worry about it, Potty; it'll all work out," he forged on, not giving Harry time enough to shy off and Apparate the hell back to his flatlet, where he could remain safe from overgrown social productions.

"Now, three, Harry—breathe, please, Potter; one, two, in, out; that's it—approximately a half hour from now they'll begin arriving, so do relax and enjoy your wine. It's shaping up to be a long evening. Cheese and biscuit with that?"

"Gah—Malfoy!" Harry was indignant, highly so. "I thought this was just supposed to be some casual little get-together! You know—Slyths and Griffs and whatnot! Where d'you get off turning it into Piccadilly Circus?"

"Mmm, I know, Harry," Malfoy's tone was the epitome of 'soothing', as was the arm he slipped casually 'round Harry's slumped shoulders. "Very bad of me, I admit. But why not take advantage of this glorious weather? And the occasion, of course," he toasted Harry with his own wine glass, another one of those loathsome Riviera playboy smiles lurking 'round the corners of his intriguing mouth.

Charming, Harry sneered inwardly, *of course the git's being bloody charming*. *Malfoy stock-in-trade, and all that.* He noticed Malfoy was still wearing *his* clothes, freshly bathed or

not. And then he truly processed all the words that oh, so interesting mouth had just uttered instead of reflecting vacuously on Malfoy's cream-cultured voice.

"Er—what occasion?"

"I do believe this is the first time you've ventured to Malfoy Manor willingly, Harry," Malfoy grinned, utterly without malice. "Is that not a momentous event?"

"Moron!" Harry burst out. "You're bloody impossible, you wanker! As if anyone cared about rubbish like that!"

He was sorely tempted to biff Malfoy a sharp one, but restrained himself, afraid of dropping his wine glass in the scuffle.

"Oh, but *I* do, Potty," Malfoy leered winningly and popped a crisp with a sliver of aged *Brie de Nangis* into Harry's open mouth. "Here, try this one. Our own Malfoy Normandes."

"Mghmph!"

"Yes, Harry. Do chew before you swallow."

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily.

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Chapter: 15

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 15

Fandom: HP
Pairing: H/D (or D/H, really. Whatever. Firewhiskey is *intimately* involved here.)
Rating: NC-17 (see Firewhiskey, 85 proof; known effects on Wizarding nervous system and inhibitions.)
Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center (reference above); minor flangst. WIP.
Summary of Sorts: Hermione brings a Muggle Magic device to the usual round of post-workaday drinking and Malfoy is utterly fascinated. Harry, however, has his doubts as to the oracular ability of a glorified marble, especially when it comes to his personal life. This is a fickle, fateful fic, posted in drabbles, on a semi-daily basis.
Part 15/? *Till we get to the end, dearie!*

The evening was series of brilliantly lit blips in Harry's memory. Ron and Hermione first off,

nodding approval over the copious food (Ron) and the elevated company (Hermione).

"'Bout frigging time, mate. Needed a good excuse to oust all you lot out of our parlor, we did," Ron remarked, making Harry aware yet again that these two were actually getting married and might even have a use for some privacy. "Inhibits spontaneous shagging, being social," he grinned quickly to show he was kidding. "Bloody annoying."

"Grub's just dandy, too," the ginger-haired fellow Junior Auror continued in a contented fashion, having grazed the various buffet tables with a single-minded determination bred of fighting his elder brothers for seconds for years upon years, "and *free* alcohol, yeah? Almost makes up for it being the Ferret's den."

Harry's best friend winked companionably and nudged him hard with a broad shoulder, his mouth full of imported *foie gras* spread thick on Carr's crackers. The *foie gras*, Harry thought, was probably from Malfoy's own French geese. Correction: toffee-beaked, terribly Pureblood Parisian geese, not mere ordinary British-farmhouse white ones. Hermione, apparently having had enough of Ron's attempts at jocularity, jabbed him with a strategically sharp elbow in the solar plexus, causing her fiancé to sputter crumbs.

"Yes, indeed, Harry—I've been hoping Draco would follow through on this idea," she said in all seriousness. "There's so much more room to mingle here at the Manor and it's a really brilliant step forward for the Cause."

Harry was startled. "The 'Cause'? 'Follow though'? Explain, Hermione."

"Well, you know how he's involved with St. Mungo's, right?" Hermione eyed him speculatively for an uncomfortable moment and then settled into her padded dining chair, more than happy to provide details, as always. Harry tuned her drone out without even realizing he was doing it, in customary self-defense.

Harry nodded, 'Hmm'd' and 'Really'd?' at all the appropriate pauses, attempting to construct the impression of being at least somewhat in the know, which of course he wasn't. Hermione likely knew it, too. Why he needed to do this now, Harry wasn't certain, as it implied an intimacy he and the git simply didn't possess. Merlin—they only shared the same office space, he and the berk…and drank together, sometimes, after work. In company—never alone, naturally. Except when they had lunch out, of course. Or supper, now and then, if an arrest ran over regular hours. Or today—but today was an anomaly, right?

But he did. Er—acted as though he were fully cognizant of all the git's extracurricular activities. Um…not going to think about that one too deeply, Harry decided, drawing up short mentally and digging his heels in. He was thinking of something else, also involving Malfoy, when he surfaced to hear Hermione's voice, still going on and on about the sanctimonious git, but he couldn't have told Hermione or Ron precisely what his thoughts entailed, really, had they enquired. Not even under the threat of Hermione's wicked Tickle Charm.

"It needs more donors, of course—what non-profit doesn't these days?" his closest female friend was saying, making Harry aware he'd perhaps missed something crucial by indulging in silly daydreaming. Ron's expression was entirely glazed over by this point, so Harry gathered he missed a fair amount of gen.

"But as it's all Draco's idea, people've been a little hesitant to step forward. This type of social event helps immensely, you know. Makes them feel good if Draco's rubbing shoulders with the Minister and Wizamgot toffs and whatnot. Good PR and so totally PC on his part—he's so Slytherin sometimes, it slays me. But it makes him all that much more palatable to the masses, what?"

"What?" Harry echoed, and then shook his head, remembering he was now supposed to know all about this—this whatever it was they were discussing. "Er—yes, of course. Very worthy of him."

"Yes, it *is*, and that's the difficulty in a nutshell, Harry," Hermione leant towards him, placing a small hand over his where it lay limply on the tablecloth, and squeezed. "People don't accept that, given his history, and thus they simply ignore what's he's been proposing. Poor Draco's been fretting over it for Merlin knows how long, thinking on ways to direct people's attention to the need without putting them off simply by being a Malfoy. I'm so glad you've finally decided to do your part."

"Yeah," Harry agreed blankly. "Of course I am—will—*are*. No worries there, right?" Huh?

"I'm certain the Galleons will positively roll right into the charity's coffers once word's gotten out about *this*—I *do* hope you make it a bi-weekly thing, as Draco wishes," Hermione went on, earnestly. "We can't just forget about unity now that we're out in the world, can we?" she pleaded.

"Uh-huh," Harry nodded. "Uh, no. No, of course we can't." Bi-weekly? He had to spend every other Saturday playing games with Malfoy from here on out? For a 'Cause'? Oh, gods, but what was the world coming to? He was doomed, that's what. *Doomed*.

"And you two seem like you've got it all down to a science—look at him right now, chatting up the Flints and the Murgatroyds. They'll be eating right out of his hand any moment—lots of lovely lolly coming, I'm sure." Hermione was nearly cackling with vicarious glee.

"Yeah," Harry nodded, not knowing what else to say. "That's great, Hermione." He'd better corner Zabini and see if he could winkle out more on this 'Cause' and Harry's unknowing contributions to it. Or maybe the Sex God himself, but Harry was actively avoiding the tosser, as he had ever since the 'feed Harry tempting morsels whilst being evilly seductive' scene earlier.

"Good on you, mate," Ron clapped him on the shoulder, having neatly disposed of a whole tray of passing *hors d'ouvres* by himself. "Being socially proactive like that. Well, time for us all to mingle a bit." He stood up, happily patting his belly. "Play a game of croquet with us later? Work this lot off?"

"Yeah," Harry returned, feebly. "I suppose." Croquet, huh? What about something more manly, like racquetball or Spin the Bottle? When had his best bud Ron Weasley become so fucking domesticated? Gah!

Harry circulated, feeling rather posh in his new clothes, and fended off gushing compliments from the older folk like a pro, diverting all of them in Malfoy's direction. Molly hugged him and breathed a confusing 'I'm so pleased for you both!' in his ear; Professor McGonagall turned an approving gaze in his direction, to Harry's dismay. Even Dudders, attending with Millicent Bulstrode of all people—why did no one ever clue him into these things?—stuck a comradely hand out and radiated a grudging sort of cousinly 'Never liked you, pissant, but I guess you're alright for your sort' air. When the staff writer from the *Quibbler* tracked him down—Luna, of course—Harry made sure to mention Malfoy's charity-thingie five times in as many minutes, referring to it as exactly that, and all the while cursing the fact he hadn't listened more carefully to Hermione when he'd the chance. T'would help if he knew the name of Malfoy's reputation-mending scheme at least, or even the purpose—orphans, war veterans, what?—but Luna seemed to know exactly to what he referred. But she had her mind on other things, as she so often did.

"Oh, but Harry, I'm ecstatic," she said, twirling both her hair and her drink simultaneously—to ill effect on her floaty, diaphanous hot pink robes. "Truly. My Ouija Board messaged me just yesterday about you two. Do tell; is Draco as good in the sack as it said he'd be?"

"Ah…" Harry flushed. "Erm, actually—"

"Well, no need to relate *all* the carnal details, Harry—I can just ask Esme to channel again. Such a turn of phrase, she has! 'Throbbing', 'engorged' and 'pummel' are the least of it! And apparently, Draco's not at all skimpy in the tackle end, either! Besides, it's fun, reading all about the two of you—quite gets me off!" Luna trilled, and knocked back her Firewhiskey in a practiced manner.

"Like a Muggle romance novel—I do so love those, don't you? So graphic." Harry swallowed down his own, primarily for the purpose of easing the weird tightness in his throat.

"Erm—"

"Alright, Scarhead?" The press of people 'round the bustling bar had them shoved back to back. Harry ignored the welcome warmth—still Spring yet, and this was Wiltshire, not Brighton—and sipped his drink, having switched back to wine after the second Firewhiskey. That way lay certain ruin, he was sure.

"Alright, I think," he replied, finding it was true with some degree of surprise. "You?"

"Couldn't be better," Malfoy murmured, and then, louder: "Oh, Ambassador Golightly! I've been meaning to find you, ma'am. We need to discuss the Outreach programme—perhaps a dinner appointment, later this coming week?" and Malfoy was off on the prowl again, deeply absorbed

in Slytherin rep rebuilding and brown-nosement. Harry spared a second to missing the reassuring weight of his arch-nemesis and dove back in to the amiable fray, chatting up the current 'Miss Witch Weekly' winner.

"Smashing do, Potter," Zabini grinned in the wavering Wizarding torchlights, his teeth a charming white slash across the dusky planes of his uber-handsome features. "Nice to see us Slytherin-types coming up in the world."

"Oh, stuff it, Zabini. The war's old news," Harry grumped. "Look—I've been meaning to ask you—"

"And how *are* you getting along with our poster boy do-gooder, Potter? All well in Aurorville?"

"S'fine. He's fine. Zabini, you work at St. Mungo's, right? So, what's with this char—"

"Uh-oh!" Zabini gulped down his existing drink suddenly and prepared for a rapid departure, grabbing two more Cosmopolitans off the tray a meandering house elf offered. "Looks like Pans has caught sight of us—oh, and Draco, too," he chuckled. "Better rustle up your Teflon body armour, Potter—he's looking a tad bit fashed, he is. Must be jealous."

"What? Jealous?" Harry's puzzlement knew no bounds. What the fuck did Malfoy mean, being 'jealous'? Over whom? For that matter, Zabini had always enjoyed stirring up trouble—look at Sixth Year, and all that to-do over the two of the fittest male Slyths dating. It had quite thrown a younger, more naïve Harry totally off his charted course, determined as he'd been to discover *why* exactly the annoying git was always sneaking about, all pale and Gothickly interesting.

Stupid gossip, Harry thought. Always in the way of real information-gathering. Least he was an Auror now and people cooperated when he told them to. 'Course it helped to be the one who'd offed old Voldie, but still.

But it was true, Harry decided when he glanced in the direction Zabini was eyeing covertly as he edged discreetly away from the lights. Both Parkinson and his partner were giving him—*not* Zabini—the evil eye with a bloody vengeance. Harry began to feel quite guilty and he didn't even know what for. He was only passing the time politely with Zabini here; he did the same all the time, at Ron and Hermione's—oh, *Parkinson*! Hadn't Malfoy mentioned some gossip about Pans and Blaise before? Right, right.

"Uh, yeah," Harry said obligingly, stepping back. He wasn't quite sure how Zabini had ended up so close to him again—indeed, the acknowledged Tramp 'O the Slytherins was currently draped all over Harry and how exactly had *that* happened?—but he certainly didn't feature being caught in the midst of a Parkinson-Zabini encounter. Pans was bloody frightening as fuckall when she was ticked. And Malfoy looked equally ready to spit coals; the git was striding purposely through the crowd on his way over to the tent pole he and Blaise were sharing.

Harry grimaced, not even caring to dwell further on outcomes, and ducked out from under

Blaise's clinging arm with alacrity.

"You're so right, Zabini," Harry agreed, again from a safe distance. "Mustn't fan the flames, yeah?"

"Harry," Malfoy purred, and Harry found himself wrapped in a very different arm, quite securely. "Are you enjoying your evening thus far?"

"Oh—yeah," Harry gasped at the sudden squeeze to his ribcage, knowing enough not to admit to any lingering disquiet. "Great party, Malfoy. Erm—can't say I've been to better in quite a while—sure beats the trou' off those boring Ministry bashes."

"Do excuse us, Blaise," Malfoy sent a meaningful look in Zabini's direction, but Harry didn't catch the meaning, though it looked acidic from his oblique angle. "We've things to discuss, Harry and I—privately."

"But of course, darlings," Pansy Parkinson chimed in, having completed her high-heeled stalk of a rapidly paling Zabini. Long scarlet fingernails pinned her prey in a decided fashion and Zabini visibly quaked. "Do take dear Potter far away with you, Draco—I'll keep Blaise here entertained."

Parkinson and Malfoy smiled at each other, a mutual baring of the canines, and Harry shivered suddenly, too. A stray Malfoy goose had strolled across his grave, maybe, and was gavotting.

"Excellent, Harry," Shacklebolt boomed. His diminutive wife nodded. "And bloody brilliant of you to lay on bocce—you know, I hardly ever get a chance to play it, these days. My favorite pastime, what?"

"Ah—yes, sir," Harry nodded, aghast. "M-My pleasure; think nothing of it." Wasn't Malfoy supposed to take credit for such thoughtfulness? For his bloody 'Cause'? Where *was* the arse, for that matter? Oh—over there, with Greengrass slavering all over him, as usual. They should get a room or something.

"Well, we members of the Wizamgot will be sure to remember your thoughtfulness when it's your turn to run for the post of Minister, Harry," Shacklebolt clapped Harry on the back, winking. "The Saviour *and* the Soul of Charity, isn't it? Can't beat that kind of positive PR with a sharp stick. Must say young Malfoy's good for your image, the tricksy blighter."

"Er—yes, Minister," Harry agreed, tentatively. Malfoy cared about his image? *His* image?

"There you are, Harry!" Speaking of, here was the git, swooping down out of bleeding nowhere with elegant robes aflutter, like some sort of higher class raptor. "Minister Shacklebolt," he nodded pleasantly, "Ma'am. Good to see you here this evening, sir. I wasn't sure you'd attend."

"Oh, no, dear boy. It's our pleasure, believe me." The wife nodded again. Harry wondered if she

ever actually spoke of her own volition or if Shacklebolt's larger-than-life presence handled all that for her. He felt much the same, actually—rather overwhelmed. Malfoy was a force of nature, bugger it.

"No, no, sir. This was Harry's idea, of course. Golden Boy and all that," Malfoy protested, lying through his perfect white teeth. Shocked, Harry jerked a bit against the hand resting familiarly at the small of his back. Wait—what?

"*No*—" he started, but his partner was talking over his faint denial.

"Harry here's a Saint, naturally," Draco was saying in an amicable manner, "as we all know, and I've always said. He's more than happy to further relations between our Old Families and the Muggleborns—and of course, there's the St. Mungo's aspect. Thinking of others is practically cellular for him; he's just all about good causes of any sort, our Harry—even taking up with known ex-Death Eaters." Draco cast his eyes down at the immaculate lawn after delivering that load of codswallop, managing to appear suitably humble.

"Hardly *that*, Malfoy," the Minister chuckled. "Surely everyone's aware by now *you* were on our side, Mal—erm, *Draco*," and the wife practically snapped her neck, nodding. She smiled shyly and the git twitched his lips right back at her, his sardonic features oddly gentle in the flickering fairylights. Harry found his innards melting, for absolutely no good reason.

"Oh…I don't know about that, sir," Malfoy grinned ruefully. "Sometimes it's just so much more effective to demonstrate. People are…so very graphic, these days. All about what they think they see, not what people *do*."

"That they are, Malfoy," Shacklebolt agreed. "Must play it to your advantage, eh? Make sure to keep our Harry in the public eye, will you? We'll be in need of him in a few short years, I'm certain—I'm not about to spend *all* my years run ragged by you wastrels. I've a life of my own to lead and our Harry here'll be indispensible once he's seasoned."

"Ah—" Harry started, ready to protest that incendiary statement. He didn't care to be 'needed', thanks, or 'indispensible'. Hadn't saving the bloody world once been enough for these people?

"Of course, Minister," Malfoy agreed demurely, "as Harry wishes, naturally. We can only ask so much of a Hero, can we?"

"Oh, but I'm certain *you've* the powers of persuasion, er—Draco?" and Shacklebolt winked knowingly, murmuring something along the lines of getting himself used to addressing Malfoy that way, what with the 'circumstances', and his slip of a wife tipped her head in happy amity, giggling; Malfoy smirked, and Harry gave it all up as a Very Bad Thing. He'd have a few harsh words with his so-called 'partner' later, in private.

"Spin the Bottle!" Pan cried out, her husky voice raspier yet with Firewhiskey. "Truth or Dare! Boot! It's your turn now, you buggering bastard."

Harry had bussed five people, Frenched two, shed his robes and the Brooks Brothers shirt Malfoy had given him after Pans threw 'Truth or Dare' into the mix, declaring that 'Spin the Bottle' was boring by itself, and was now huddled near the bonfire in just his borrowed pants and singlet, feeling chilly. Malfoy was lounging next to him, rather more clothed, firmly established in his now 'usual' spot. The ghost of Ginny didn't even bother to appear and attempt to make Harry feel guilty for allowing this abomination to continue. His on-again, off-again girlfriend was situated very far away from rural Wiltshire—bashing bludgers in the Hebrides, in fact—and likely not worrying about him at all.

No one, it seemed, was concerned about Harry—certainly not Ron and Hermione, currently yukking it up with Zabini and Parkinson over some private joke; not Shacklebolt, nor even Proudfoot, his boss. Not Dean and Seamus, sitting across from them 'round the circle, and exchanging heated glances when no one was paying attention. Not Neville, either, chatting up Susan Bones like a pro Romeo and once again stealing guilty looks over at Harry, as if *he* gave a bloody hoot whom the boring bint spoke to. No one cared that he was at the mercy of a Slytherin schemer and a known seducer of good men—*and* Witches, too, the bleeding player—a hated Malfoy, in fact.

"Warm enough, Potty?" The voice in his ear did nothing for Harry's nerves. He shivered, and drew back. That dangerous arm—the one that had been sneaking 'round him all evening—was hovering off starboard again.

"Arse. Prat. Scumsucker," he replied, matter-of-factly. "Wanker," he tacked on, for good measure.

"Mmhmm," Malfoy murmured. "As you say, Scarhead. Ready to scamper off home? It's been a long day and I know you're knackered."

"…Yeah. Yeah, I am." Harry heaved a put-upon sigh. He wasn't used to this much titivation all at once, being rather a dull boy. But Malfoy seemed to excel at it, as he did with so many things, the arse. Harry huffed again, shrugging his shoulders in a rather melancholy way over his own social ineptitude. Perhaps he should consider Charm school, but he couldn't be arsed.

"Right," Malfoy said, rising to his feet and taking Harry with him. "Come along then; I'll see you there."

For once, the Side-Along didn't make him nauseous. Harry stuck his ever-so-slightly wobbly head on Malfoy's convenient shoulder and hung on for dear life.

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily.

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Chapter: 16

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 16

Pairing: H/D (or D/H, really. Whatever. Firewhiskey is *intimately* involved here.)
Rating: NC-17 (see Firewhiskey, 85 proof; known effects on Wizarding nervous system and inhibitions.)
Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center (reference above); minor flangst. WIP.
"Not too shabby, was it, Scarhead?" his partner asked from behind him. Harry aimed his wand at the locks and wards and tried hard to remember the new one from WWW's Spring *Evil Emporium* Catalogue he'd just added. If he wasn't careful, he'd end up as a violet-hued gerbil, chittering madly at Malfoy's elegantly shod feet.

"Wha' wasshn't?" Harry wanted to know. There was a whole parchment-length of items that had been shabby—'bad', even—which one did Malfoy refer to? The clothes-swapping issue? The onslaught of innuendo? The fact he'd left his prized 'All-Time Winner!' flag behind in his hurry?

"My company, Harry," the git's voice was right in Harry's ear; Harry could swear he felt a suspicious dampness on his unprotected earlobe. "You seemed not to mind it quite so much today—am I wrong?"

Harry whirled about, disconcerted, and was further discombobulated instantly. Malfoy was *right there*, having barreled through Harry's space barriers as if they were so much candyfloss, and practically had his naturally rosy lips nearly pressed to Harry's by default.

"Gah!" Harry exclaimed, attempted to lunge backwards, which led to his spine meeting the door rather solidly. "What in'na the bloody fuck ar'ya *doin'*, fuckwit?"

His partner placed one long hand on the door panel quite deliberately, and then another, spread flat against the wood an inch or so on either side of Harry's head. Calmly, and leaning in at an excruciatingly leisurely pace, he laid both his forearms along the faux wood grain and got all that much more into Harry's startled face. Harry found himself on eye-level with Malfoy's ever so slightly smiling mouth, more or less. The very same orifice that had been active in verbally seducing him all evening; the same firm, well-cut, nicely-shaped—

Malfoy kissed him…well, sort of. He nudged Harry's chin up with his beaky aristocratic snoot in an odd, charming little gesture and brought them fully into contact skin-wise, jaw to jaw and nose to nose. He rubbed his pursed lips across Harry's slightly parted ones ever so gently, so feather-lightly that the contact nearly—but not quite—tickled. Then he did it again when Harry's eyes grew wide as green saucers, reflecting Malfoy's intent features in the dimmed light of the corridor.

"What, Potty?" Malfoy murmured, never lifting his mouth for a second, "Am I disturbing you?"

The feel of skin against skin was exquisite. Electric, even. Rather like plugging directly into a high-voltage transformer. Harry's heart rate went ballistic and his remaining scraps of good sense nearly went the way of the dodo.

Harry forgot about his tricky new locking system altogether and nearly dropped his wand.

Now, Harry could've sworn under Veritaserum that he'd never once fantasized about kissing Malfoy and been quite correct. To be perfectly honest, it hadn't dawned on him that the Slytherin git *was* potentially snoggable by those of the Gryffindor persuasion—Malfoy was of the opinion Harry was a pestilential blot on society, right? Well, same went in spades for the rest of Harry's old House. Harry could've sworn on a stack of the *Historys of Hogwarts* as well that the prat would never go so far as to slum it with a Gryff or a Huffle, even if he were a slag. Malfoy was a *Slytherin* slag, before ought else, and very loyal. Plus, as a decisive factor, there was Blaise Zabini in the offing, a hard act to follow if there ever was one.

Then the war happened and things were busy and Harry didn't dare think much of snogging at all. If he did, it was with guilt over poor Ginny, who'd apparently expected a bit more than Harry was willing to spare. Then there was Theodore, when they returned to Hogwarts, and that was purely experimental, and the fact that Theo vaguely resembled one of his fellow Slytherins wasn't a consideration, really. Bryan had been Harry's real revelation as to what harmless snogging of attractive males could lead to, actually, and after that Harry decided romance was for the birds, literally, having been burnt all to flinders by his Muggle boyfriend's waffling take on 'happily ever afters'. Bryan had been wonderful, but not in a life-long sense. Harry cursed the fact he was still mates with all his exes, but wasn't that par for the course?

Harry had fled back to Ginny, who was thankfully older, wiser and much less soppily enamoured, and they'd worked out a sort of non-verbal, non-agreement to watch out for one another, and shag sometimes. It worked well; kept Harry off the streets and out of trouble, and provided benefits, since Gin was nothing if not inventive, and in exchange it gave Ginny a good excuse to shag whomever she wanted, whenever she wanted, without Mrs. Weasley ever up her nose to settle down and reproduce.

Er—right. *Was* he being disturbed? That was the question, wasn't it?

Harry thought, as much as he was able, what with his Auror partner's lips distracting him. He considered, unconsciously opening his own a little wider at some aspects of the term 'disturbance' his newly inspired imagination trotted past his enthralled mind's eye for review. He debated, never blinking, never tearing his gaze from Malfoy's, and pondered seriously the Muggle Magic Ball and its various pronouncements.

"Y-Yes," he replied, at length."But in a good way. C-Continue, alright?"

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily.

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Chapter: 17

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 17

*NB: The author is not, repeat **not**, a sadist, per se. The author merely believes that foreplay is important, that's all.*

He was not breathing, not as such. Malfoy was, his wine-tinted exhalations so hot as to burn, and Harry didn't bother about it overmuch. He could just steal oxygen from the git when he ran out—that's what partners were for, what?

The snog—if you could call it that—was a bloody torment. Too soft, too slow, too enticing. Eskimo kisses when Harry wanted Dante's *Inferno*.

"Cocktease," Harry snarled. Malfoy's lean body held him immobile against his own bleeding door, fuck it.

"Don't you deserve it, Scarhead?" Harry felt the smarmy bastard's smirk all the way down to his curling toes.

"More," Harry replied, clinging to sanity by the skin of his teeth.

"Perhaps," the prat drawled, and angled his head just a bit, so that his perfect hair fell across Harry's forehead, brushing the infamous scar and sending all sorts of ridiculously potent impulses southwards. Harry took a deep breath, finally.

"Wanker," he sniped. "Would you rather be snogging Zabini, then?"

"How 'bout you, Potty?" Malfoy shot back, and bit Harry's lower lip with great deliberation, rolling it between his teeth and exerting just enough pressure. Letting it go ever so slowly, he hissed, "Memories of your Weasleyette fondly calling?"

"Not right now, no," Harry sighed, and attempted to take the situation more firmly in hand, as it were. Malfoy only pressed his hips harder against Harry's, trapping his fingers and cutting off circulation at the wrist.

"Not yet, you tosser," Malfoy warned, molten grey eyes glinting dangerously. He lifted his head a fraction and slid his entrancing mouth just enough to access Harry's deflowered ear again, which he lipped, delicately outlining every scalloped edge with his agile tongue tip. "I've waited

a bit too long to rush this."

His voice was ever so much fiercer for being nearly inaudible, and the waft of his drifting breath smelt of Pinot Noir and fresh mint.

"Really?" Harry was startled, though by rights he shouldn't have been, what with all that perpetual tension jangling those air particles unwise enough to linger too long betwixt him and his personal nemesis.

"Oh, yes," Malfoy slipped his artful tongue along the line of Harry's twitching jaw, jabbing exactly where a nerve pounded, his teeth gnawing along the boney ridge till he found Harry's panting mouth in the discovery process. "*Yes*," he said again, as that wicked muscle danced across it, exploring corners and curved lines in an arabesque of mercury-quick darts and licks, and Harry sighed his pleasure, lids drooping.

"Going to do anything about it, stud?" Harry could talk dirty, or at least attempt it, when it was called for. This seemed one of those rare occasions it was bloody imperative.

"Maybe," the rotter was laughing silently at him with that evil gob of his, moistened lips never open quite wide enough for Harry to wedge his tongue where he most wanted it. He nibbled Harry's chin in tiny, tortuous nips, sipped at his quivering upper lip, laved the delicious curve of neck into jaw into swallowing submission, allowing his willing victim naught but the skimpiest of tastes during pauses.

"Perhaps. Or not."

"You should," Harry informed him, in all seriousness, blinking rapidly. "M'a little—a little—"

"Smashed, Potter," Malfoy finished Harry's thought, as he so often did. "That's why, you realize. Like you sober, the first time."

"Y-Yeah?"

"Yeah." One last brush of tight-locked lips, back and forth in a serpent's flicker—not quite a snog, gods, *no*, but a bloody fucking balls-straining preview—and Malfoy levered all that lean angular muscle-mass of his up off both Harry and the door panel, deftly snagging the wand from his partner's limp hand along the way.

"Alohomora," he ordered the recalcitrant lock, "Sesamun apertum."

Harry would've have fallen through the sudden gap in an untidy heap had not Malfoy grasped his shoulder.

"Go to bed, Potty—you need the sleep more than anything," he advised, and his too-handsome face was mocking as always, grey eyes impenetrable as granite, and in that moment of

brought-up-short Harry almost didn't recognize the overgrown prat's all-too-familiar features, overlaid as they'd been with a certain soft intensity only a fiery gasp and a searing touch previous. But the world took a sliding step sideways, despite him, and they were once again simply 'Potter' and 'Malfoy'.

"I think I hate you, Malfoy," he replied sharply, with barely a pause to acclimate, finding his feet beneath him and enunciating every syllable as if it were a Charm to repel succubi. He huffily wrenched his ruffled person out of Malfoy's long-fingered grip. "With a fucking *passion*."

Malfoy smirked.

That is so, so *very predictable of him, sodding git*, Harry silently fumed. *Bloody prickteaser*.

Clenching his hands into tight fists, green eyes flashing, he glared with all the wattage he could summon, given he'd just been *not*-snogged silly.

"Bugger *off*, Malfoy!"

"Huh—so, I elicit strong emotion at last, do I? It's a start, I suppose, you obtuse little nit. Goodnight, Scarhead—sweet dreams."

Malfoy curled his upper lip and then he was gone on an annoying 'Pfft!' of amusement, the gaping door slamming shut and warding itself thoroughly behind him.

"Sod *off*! Bugger you *and* the broom you rode in on!" Harry addressed the door panel, which was not at all satisfactory. Still, he felt a mite more clear-headed provided he minded his 'S's, though he was forced to envision the irksome twat adorned with tail and horns and spitted right through his perfect little 'innie', roasting painfully to a perfect turn over blazing hot charcoal briquettes, for all the unhappily dreary minutes preceding sleep.

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Chapter: 18

HP 'Magic Eight Ball' Part 18

Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center (how many licks to get to the center? 272); minor flangst.

The 20 standard answers on a Magic 8-Ball are:

? As I see it, yes

? It is certain

? It is decidedly so

? Most likely

? Outlook good

? Signs point to yes

? Without a doubt

? Yes

? Yes - definitely

? You may rely on it

? Reply hazy, try again

? Ask again later

? Better not tell you now

? Cannot predict now

? Concentrate and ask again

? Don't count on it

? My reply is no

? My sources say no

? Outlook not so good

? Very doubtful

10 of the possible answers are affirmative (?), 5 are negative (?), and 5 are maybe (?). Using the Coupon collector's problem in probability theory, it can be shown that it takes an average of 72 questions of the Magic Eight Ball for all 20 of its answers to appear at least once.

"I've got Twister!" Hermione announced, as full of herself as could be. Ron snickered, his mouth occupied with chewing, as always. Hermione really did love him; she bought him Muggle snack

foods at Tesco's and then didn't complain about the sugars and additives as long as he ate his broccoli. Ron adored her; he ate his broccoli and brushed his teeth three times daily.

"Ooooh! Twister!" Seamus and Millicent were murmuring their excitement. Dean winced and poked Seamus hard.

Idly, Harry wondered what it'd be like to be loved like that.

"Don't you do what you did last time, Finnegan," Dean muttered, and Seamus actually coloured a lovely shade of rose and seemed rather abashed.

"Alright," he muttered and examined his fingernails as if they were paintings in the Louvre—or, rather, centrefolds in *Purveyor: 'The' Magazine for the Wizarding Male*. 'If you say so."

"I do," Dean replied sternly, and took one of Seamus's nervous hands in his own darker one. Malfoy, sitting Indian-fashion beside a very relaxed Harry, audibly gagged at the visual.

Or that, Harry thought, not too clearly, *that—that* thing *they had*. It had been another rough day at the office and he was out of sorts again. Firewhiskey helped, nash'rally.

"What's Twister?" asked several of the more chipper Purebloods amongst them, and Harry blearily allowed his attention to slide sideways as Hermione launched herself into a long-winded explanation.

He nudged Malfoy sharp in the ribcage. "Maffloy, where'sh your Bally thingie?"

"Vest pocket, left-hand side, Potty," Malfoy hissed. "Pay attention, will you? I've not played this one."

Harry helped himself, fumbling a bit and draping his enervated body all over Malfoy's shirtfront and neatly pleated trousers in the process. The git shifted his hips and long legs irritably under the added weight, nearly knocking Harry out of his lap.

"S-Sorry," Harry said, but he wasn't. Not really. Ma'foy deserved to have him in his space; he'd no qualms about being in Harry's, did he? So Harry gamely stayed put in his new Malfoy lounge chair and kept his somewhat fuzzy gaze on the Muggle toy. "Ish'shmall, Ma'foy—make it bigger," he whinged after a frustrated minute.

"*Hush*, Harry—trying to listen, here! Engorgio!" but his partner uttered the helpful spell in any event, and Harry was happy. *Happy, happy, happy*: Harry was soused, more like, and giddily so.

"Hiya, Bally," Harry whispered, petting it. "Gotta quesh'on."

Yes. Said the Ball. Smugly. Damn thing sounded more like the git incarnate every friggin' day.

"Bally, Bally, Bally, why din'nit fuckin' M'foy Owl me yesherday? I *waited*," Harry had the Ball practically pressed against his mouth so he could whisper—thereby making sure his very best nemesis in the entire world didn't accidentally overhear. If Firewhiskey fumes could've melted Muggle plastic, they'd have done so, right then and there.

Concentrate and ask again. The Ball seemed to be trying to tell him something, Harry concluded, having turned this near-complete non-utterance over several times in the 85 proof pickled pit he laughingly referred to as his brain. Thus, he attempted to follow through on its suggestion; truly, he *did*. But his partner's warmth was too comfy, and the sneaky bastard had his arms 'round Harry once more, holding him upright, and Harry was a little too schnockered to fash himself much about it. Much better to sleep.

"Nah. 'Nother time, yeah?—no worrieeez," he told the Muggly thingamajig bobber, just before Malfoy deftly confiscated it and settled Harry more firmly against his chest, and just before Harry mentally saluted the state of sobriety from a very far distance and hazily slipped into a little nap. *Jus' for minnit. 'Cause 'o Ma'f-Maf-Mal-Draco—yeah. Git was too comf—warmish for hiss' own good.*

"And when you two tying the knot, Malfoy?" he thought he might've heard Padma asking his Auror partner, in those confused seconds whilst the world was occupied with going darkish and buzzy. But Harry could feel the sudden flush of heat right through his partner's clothing, all the same, and oh, it *was* awfully cozy. As good as cuddling before a fire, he decided muzzily. All he needed was a mug of hot cocoa with marshmallows for Life to be spot on sublime.

"And, more importantly, Draco, are you going to dry him out first?" Pans asked, her husky voice like a razor. "'Cause he reeks, you know—do remove him before I pass out from the fumes."

Harry had no memory whatsoever of being tucked into his own bed. He did, however, recall that Malfoy had a very nice chest, even through Auror robes. *That* was mortifying.

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Chapter: 19

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 19

"Mmmph!" Harry cracked an eye open and was treated to several annoying visuals. One, his alarm, which was trilling '*6:30 a.m., dearie*!' in its horrid early morning 'I know what's best for you' voice. Blast and double blast Charmed Muggle alarm clocks.

Two: grey eyes, rather bloodshot, and lintwhite blond hair half-obscuring them, and a mouth that had been giving him highly uncomfortable dream sequences for two days running. Aristocratic

nose plopped in the midst, with nostrils that flared sardonically, and then there were the matched ironically mocking eyebrows and fucking *Merlin*! That was Malfoy in his bed! *Malfoy*!

"Narrgh!" Harry attempted to leap from his mattress, but fell back again limply, undone by a pounding headache and a swirling ceiling. His companion blinked, and muttered, obviously heartily disliking the taste of his own tongue.

"Prat. *Loud* prat."

Harry glared furiously at all and sundry he could see without shifting his throbbing brow overmuch; to wit, the ceiling and the tip of the git's nose. This was a scene lifted from the very worst of those recurrent nightmares, Malfoy in bed with him. He was appalled. Really.

Malfoy rolled over, and certain parts of Harry's anatomy were confronted suddenly with various similar parts of the tosser's. Harry discovered he was not only appalled but also pantless, a breathtakingly startling development, along the lines of realizing one *is* naked as a jaybird whilst in the midst of a job interview. This caused him to hyperventilate.

Always a quick thinker, Malfoy snogged him, to make him stop.

Harry snogged back, 'cause he could.

As one, and rather as though they'd rehearsed it, they both leapt out of bed after only two minutes of heated saliva exchange, hangovers notwithstanding, and proceeded to flail, flush and gibber. Scattered garments were acquired and donned in record time, and each fled the scene of the crime like bandits in a Muggle spaghetti Western, the whites of their eyes showing and ears laid well back on their respective heads.

"B-Breakfast?" Harry croaked. He was under the impression he was handling this quite excruciating watershed in his life rather swimmingly, actually.

"Pass, thanks," Malfoy responded, apparently of the opinion the less said, the better, and Disapparated immediately, clutching his head.

Their office was an awkward, awkward place, inhabited as it was by the looming spectre of 'What They Did Last Night and Why Couldn't They Clearly Remember?'

Malfoy seemed less oppressed by this than Harry, but he was still snappish and sluggish, if freshly showered and wearing clean robes. Harry jumped at every stray movement and ably demonstrated the descriptive 'ill at ease'. One could barely see his blotter for the discarded coffee cups.

At ten past eleven, Ron strolled in and practically stumbled over the barrier of crystalline silence each office occupant was strenuously maintaining. He whistled between his teeth at the sheer size and consistency of it, and emitted a low grunt of admiration.

"Huh. Rough night, boys?"

"Piss off, Weasel," Malfoy's tone could've etched glass.

"Fuck you," Harry intoned, in total, heartfelt agreement. It was the first thing he'd uttered in Malfoy's general vicinity all morning.

"What's up? To what do we owe the honor of entertaining your cheery viz this lovely morning, Weasel?" Malfoy was polite enough to ask after another minute's worth of Antarctic silence on Harry's part.

"Doholov," Ron returned succinctly, and Harry's intestinal turmoil increased geometrically. Undaunted by the further lowering of the atmosphere, his best mate snagged the lone visitor's chair, spun it 'round, and made himself comfortable, sipping his cup of Ministry swill—er, *tea*.

"Fuck, fuck, and double bloody fuck," Harry observed.

"What he said," Malfoy had the grace to put down the file he was hiding behind and actually pay Ron the honor of his full attention. "So? Spill it, ginger."

"Well...you're aware he's been holed up in Helsinki, right?" At their nods, Ron went on. "Couldn't dig him out of hiding with an icepick and the Finnish government wasn't cooperative, shall we say, to having the Ministry bomb their capital city magically, so…"

"Yes, yes, get on with it—take it as read, Weasley," Malfoy bit out, clearly short on patience. Harry nodded again, nerves twanging. They were both of them well aware of the background on Doholov's recent activities—had been there, done that and not enjoyed the scenery of St. Mungo's after, to be precise.

"He's out—on the lam across Northern Europe as we speak and the M13 Paranormal Division expects him to fetch up in Belgrade day after tomorrow, presumably on his way to bury his sorry arse in the backwoods of China. Consequently, you're up, gentlemen. It's showtime."

"*Fuck*," Harry acknowledged, with a depth of feeling rarely conveyed so succinctly by a simple one-word response. He was not the most brilliant of conversationalists this morning, no, but he could still *communicate*.

"Bollocks and brimstone," agreed his partner, "Too right."

They exchanged speaking glances and, as one, shifted closer to Ron, who was busily examining the eyebrow-level stack of cold case files on Malfoy's desk and the Great Pyramid of used *Grande* cups on Harry's with an amused gleam in his eyes. Both piles of paper detritus were strategically arranged to mimic recognizable examples of antique architecture, as in medieval battlements and mortuary monuments, *as in* defensive construction of an ancient and

testosterone-fuelled sort.

"The rest of it, please, Weasley," Malfoy requested, and a now openly grinning Ron got on with it, pulling a thick file out of thin air and summoning up a blackboard covered with arcane chalk marks.

"Now, Hermione and the rest of the Unspeakable Double Covert Coven Sector A have devised a five-step plan for you, segments of which I may actually reveal to you both, on pain of instant death, naturally—"

"Drink?" Harry asked, carefully not looking at his partner.

Malfoy avoided his gaze, which was a piece of cake, as Harry was studying the lift buttons with an air of total enthrallment.

"S'pose," he replied after a minute. He might've—just might've—sounded a bit sulky about it but Harry wasn't planning to comment. He'd a few choice words to say to his partner before they went haring off all over Middle Europe and he didn't care to stir up a squid's worth of trouble over some minor character flaw of the git's before he'd managed to spit them out.

Concerning Doholov, of course. The unfortunate business abruptly at hand, and by far Harry's absolute *worst* nightmare since old Voldie. To be sure, he and Malfoy only ever discussed work issues when they met after hours, though. Dinners out at various culinary establishments of high repute were simply a byproduct. So were Muggle films—research—and the occasional stroll through the various parks of London—required exercise. Same for the odd Quidditch match or unplanned drop-by at some museum or t'other. Ron and Hermione's flat didn't count, really, since bloody well *everyone* went there and the two of them were hardly alone amongst a crowd of their old school cronies.

No, he certainly wasn't looking for conviviality this evening. Only an opportunity to refresh Malfoy's memory as to certain aspects of Doholov's character and habits. He owed the git that, at least. Doholov was a snake, and a bloody bastard, and very, very dangerous. Harry wouldn't care to lose a fellow Auror on his watch, no.

"Wizard or Muggle?" he asked, merely to maintain *entente*. They'd end up at Cellar Gascon in any road, their usual Wednesday night destination, though Malfoy did occasionally have an odd hankering for Mexican, in which case they'd be off to Green & Red. Harry swore the git was fonder of the moniker of the latter than the bounteous designer tequila, but that was a Malfoy—always daring to be difficult.

"Muggle," Malfoy came back, sending an irritated look Harry's way. "Don't be daft, Potty—we've hit the front page of the *Prophet* twice this month already; surely you've no wish to encourage that rag?"

"Muggle it is, then," Harry was agreeable. *Ah*, he thought, with a vague sense of relief, *there was*

that good old air of Pureblood superiority; strangely, he'd come to miss it after a day spent in the mutual deep-freeze of their shared corner of workaday Hades. Taking the prat's arm, he Apparated them to an acceptable out-of-the way point off Long Lane and they picked up a taxi for the last leg.

"No," Malfoy announced suddenly, when they'd just barely settled into their aperitifs. He stared 'round the coolly quiet space, filled with the murmur of the well-dressed and discreet. "I'm *not* in the mood for this, not right now—come along, Potty; let's go to Decadence instead. We can at least dance there."

"What? Er—wait!" but the prick wasn't waiting. He'd Harry firmly by the arm and was tugging him up. "No!"

"No, Harry, I am *not* waiting. *I* am going to Decadence and you're coming with. It's more than time to live dangerously—who knows if we'll come back from Belgrade in pieces—*if at all*?" he intoned ominously. "Now, drink up and let's hit the loo, shall we?"

"Oh—well—yeah, alright…" Harry drained his lager in two swallows and stumbled to his feet, watching in a daze as Malfoy tossed a wad of Muggle money on the polished bar surface and then toddled right along, as directed. Bloody force of nature, Malfoy was. He'd said it before, but it could always stand repeating.

Harry's fondest hope as Malfoy Side-Alonged them out of a stall in Gascon's loo and straight into the Last Days of Decadence's was that the name of Draco's *other* favorite Muggle bar wouldn't prove to be some flavour of evil omen. Somehow, though, he just had this sinking feeling…

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily.

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Chapter: 20

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 20

Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center; looming Danger!; UST; PWP; snark & minor flangst.

NB: Darling peoples, I've been quite ill, sorry, and the plot-hamster fled to its wheel and wouldn't be coaxed out till I got my hacking cough under control. Thus the 'fickle' and the 'mostly daily' warnings, yeah?

Harry didn't feel like dancing, at least, not in a crush. It was wall-to-wall humanity and he wasn't

holding his drink so much as being forced to clutch it defensively and at times threaten to spill it down the backs of the persons who boomeranged off him with alarming regularity. Malfoy, on the other hand, had established a citadel of sorts at the corner of the bar, ringed by the solid backs of other huddled patrons, and was sipping away at his Glenlivet straight up as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"You had something to say, Potty?"

"What?"

"You wished to advise me of a matter of import? Exchange notes on the case?" Malfoy waved his drink in a 'speak to me' manner, but Harry heard only every third word.

"Er—Can't. Hear. You," Harry attempted to mouth the words, so that perhaps Malfoy might be able to lip-read them.

"*What*?" Yes, that was definitely a Malfoyesque pout, brought on by unacceptable conditions. Harry yelped as an arm snaked 'round his waist to rectify that and he was forcibly yanked against the (very nice) chest of his partner. "That's much better," Malfoy murmured, right into his ear. "I despise shouting. Now, *what*? What part of the upcoming debacle of doom and gloom did you wish to discuss?"

The git reared his patrician head up again and returned to his drink, as if he hadn't just manhandled his Auror partner and co-worker into optimal proximity with brute force when a simple Privacy spell would've done just as well.

"Um…" From his new position, tucked with his back flush against Malfoy's (very nice) chest, Harry noticed an item of interest he hadn't before.

"Oh."

To wit, there were a great many occupants of Decadence waving pens, or styluses, flipped-open cell phones or—heaven's above, was that an actual walking stick? *Yes*, yes it *was*!—or swirling their plastic olive swords and fruity drink skewers about in the musky smoke-laden red-and-violet lit air. Some even toted cigarette holders; long, skinny, black-varnished ones, reminiscent of the Roaring Twenties. A very few wielded long-handled lorgnettes, but those were mainly the group of flapperish ladies—Harry snorted when he counted thirteen of them, all stuffed into fringed, slinky 'little black dresses'—currently gathered about the tiny stage, eagerly hooting at and flirting with the mime-faced, pin-striped suited, bowler-hatted men tuning up their various instruments.

"My…"

Hmmm. A great many individuals indeed, mostly 'differently' garbed, even by Decadence's standards, and all brandishing objects that might be characterized as pointy sticks…er, wands.

Hmmm.

Ah! Harry-the-Auror concluded, and tipping his head back on his partner's shoulder, he reached his free hand up to direct the git's arrogant and somewhat stubbly chin down to his level, and thus made available the tosser's nicely formed ear, close enough so that Harry could murmur ever so quietly into it without fear of being overheard. If they looked like a gay couple sharing a private moment, that was all to the better, per Harry; he and Malfoy had used this same ruse before to evade Muggle attention. Muggles could be skittish that way, oddly enough.

Simultaneously, Harry concentrated, exerting a very subtle—and exceptionally powerful—Glamour over them both. In a less than the flicker of a sooty eyelash, his shock of black hair had gained reddish-amethyst highlights and Malfoy had more honey-blond streaks and dark roots than he'd ever had in real life. To the busy barman, or another patron, or anyone who might be glancing in their direction, the two dapper young men all wrapped up in each other's gazes at the elbow of the bar had looked exactly that way from the moment they'd made their way there from the loo.

"DeeEmm, darling, sweetiekins," Harry hissed, "don't look now, but we've put our fucking foot in it."

Harry did his utmost to come across as flirtatious, but he knew the gelled curl his henna-streaked forelock now sported certainly helped him far more in that regard than did his own natural histrionic ability. It was handy that the shadow cast on his ever so slightly wider forehead by the wayward dangle of hair could've resembled a zig-zag scar to a casual observer—or perhaps not. No…definitely *not*. Naught but a shadow reflecting off the polished bar; a mere trick of the eye.

The pale grey gaze flicked about the crowded room as each orb took on a definite bluish hint. Malfoy's skin assumed a faint olive cast, one that highlighted those startling light eyes, and his hands subtly changed shape—fingers shorter, palms broader—as he yanked Harry just another millimetre nearer, pressing close.

The body beneath the altered slacks and jacket was still essentially unchanged—fit and tense with bottled energy. Harry could feel the tendrils of Malfoy's magic twining about his own, reinforcing it, supporting it, catching imaginative fire.

"'Course, luv," the git agreed and his accent was now a bit more of a bollixed-up essay at Manchester and far less 'cream o' Eton-and-Oxford', the timbre itself a shade rougher than it had ever been for one literally to the Manor born, and his brilliantly white teeth were by no means perfect, though the confusing shadows might've made them seem so, but a moment before. "Never doubt I don't know it."

Their eyes met—very blue and muddy hazel—and Harry patted his recalcitrant hair gingerly, minutely changed and now rather gamine face tilted upwards, grinning a non-dimpled, high-wattage smile and smoothing his streaked mane into a more suitable do. The various hues the bar lights burnished went terribly, perfectly well with the weave of purple thread in what had

been a soberly Transfigured Muggle sports coat and before that scarlet Auror robes. The royal colour was picked up yet again in the skein of his TopMan trousers, culminating in a dazzling 'put-together' Look—Gods! But Harry Potter was a gay man, he *was*.

"How do I look, then, lovie? Fit enough to pull?" He teetered a tad on his stacked heels.

"Smashing, ducks," his erstwhile lover complimented him, preparing to butcher the Queen's street English. "*Nice work, Potty*," he muttered, much more discreetly, nibbling Harry's earlobe for verisimilitude, and then more loudly, and teasing, naturally, for the dickweed *would* tease, even now: "*Always*, my purty little dumplin' o' luv, you turn me *on*. Knock it back now, will'ya, darlin'? Can't jes' stand 'round and gather flies, can we? Wanna boogie!"

"Erm? Uh, Deedeedums, *sweetpea*, are you *sure* this is such a good idea?"

Wincing at Malfoy's revolting attempts at being 'common' and having between them successfully worked the Glamour that would ease them safely out of this roiling hotbed of unexpected Wizardry entirely undetected, Harry had rather thought they'd make tracks whilst the going was good. Absolute last thing they required was to be outed at a Muggle club the night before a crucial mission, after all. That was *not* a done thing. The Minister would *not* approve.

"Fer'chrissake's, *yes,* luvvie! Let's get down tonight! I'm fairly gagging to get my swerve on!" Malfoy shouted at him, swiveling his hips for emphasis, as the band had finally gotten beyond tuning up and were now producing something recognizably danceworthy.

It was sweet cacophony—first a catchy jazz that seduced, then pop-synth House that gave a whole new meaning to He-Who-Was-*Always*-Known-As-Prince lyrics and likely so, given the caliber of musicians involved; every one of which, Harry would swear, had bloody teethed on a diet of Weird Sisters and Pete Burns. All 'round them, pelvic areas were gyrating and cats and dawgs were steppin' out their piggies in some freakishly *baaaad* undulations. Malfoy, blandly unaffected by any threat of 'outtage', calmly whipped Harry's second half-finished lager out of his hand, sloshing the remainder over the brim, and merrily abandoned it, along with his own Scotch, to the bar.

"Hey!" Harry yipped. "I was drinking that, you ponce!"

"No, luv—you were *dancin*', remember?" The prat's essential Malfoyishness was apparent even through an altered jawline and a slightly fuller face. He nuzzled Harry's ear again, distracting him, and swept him along to the music, regardless.

"Baby!" Harry bellowed, two minutes later, having stumbled into no less than three other couples and tripped over two of them. "It's very crowded here! Maybe we should *go*?"

"No! Don't forget—live dangerously, darlin'," Malfoy yelled in Harry's ear, "I wanna party hardy, poopsie! I wanna cut the rug like it's nineteen ninety-*nine*, tootsie-roll!"

Harry, caught rather short by this series of startling statements, blinked in consternation at Malfoy's shirtfront, which apparently the git thought looked more stylin' in a steely grey shade with a lime string tie than the laid-back off-white Harry had Glamoured it to, and silently fumed, being careful to jiggle his various bodily bits in one set location. Merlin, of all the impossibly difficult arses they could've saddled him with as a partner—Zack, Ernie, *Marcus*—why did it have to be this one? What? Was his karma *that* sodding awful?

His partner, perhaps sensing that Harry had progressed to silently fulminating, stuck a deft hand out and spun him 'round by the shoulder, sending him nearly out of his carefully proscribed foot-wide section of tacky floor-space. Once again, he was propelled Malfoywards, and found his nostrils inundated by citrus, the faint odor of lip-lickable perspiration and wood-moss.

"*Relax*, Potter," the Rorschach test on Harry's Life Blotter advised him, and there it was, a brilliant little Privacy spell courtesy M'sieur Malfoy, and Harry could hear normally again and not fear for his battered eardrums. "'M' not taking the piss. We can still talk, you know, if you want to. Just spit it out, whatever it was you were going to say earlier, alright?"

The intonation was quite recognizably his partner's usual hoity-toity one, and it was bone-vibratingly low—and, Merlin-help-him, *close enough*— so that even without the spell, it was highly unlikely any other Wizard or Witch in the room—and there were bloody cartloads, all 'getting down tonite!'—would've overheard, but Harry was still strangely grateful.

"Thanks," he breathed back, a dormouse in a muffler volume-wise, though he needn't have been bothered, really, as he had his fellow Auror all but plastered to him with Magick stickum, hands neatly inserted into Harry's recently embroidered back pockets and both sets of hips moulded together like brand-new jigsaw bits as they swayed and shimmied in unison to the thundering beat.

Harry huffed faintly at all this unasked-for bodily contact and gamely kept up his jaw-cracking 'party' smile, gritting his teeth; there were times he truly disliked those killer-diller instincts of his.

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily.

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Chapter: 21

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 21

*NB: If I stole the name of the WWW Spring Catalogue from someone, please accept my sincere apologies and **tell me**—I'll remove it asap. It was just too 'right' to pass up; I meant no harm. If*

not, ignore this note and get on with it, leaving comments. I likes 'em. Ta, Tiger.

Bodily contact is *not* conducive to reasonable discussion of battle tactics. It can be used as one, true, but only if the combatants are fairly knowledgeable. Or have viewed John Malkovich in *Dangerous Liaisons*, or perhaps in a pinch *Dirty Dancing*, and can thus clearly separate mind from matter.

Harry remained quiet. This was now by choice, and *not* due to circumstances. He was *not* vaguely breathless and he *could* think of intelligent topics of discussion, yes, but it simply didn't seem to be the right time to remind his partner they were off to gladiate with an aged but far from toothless Dark Lion in the bright-and-early. With Ministry backup unknown and unknowable—Double Covert Coven Sector A, aka 'Dicks', and say no more about it—and odds uncertain.

Besides, he hadn't been touched like this in rather too long. His bits had had a spiffing good time this morning, pre-Second Coming of the Muggle alarm clock, and the rest of his various anatomical features agreed unanimously: Malfoy was a very nice armful. And thighful. Yes.

"Potter?" The prat was prodding him, though, so Harry came up with half-arsed nonsense to throw him off the scent.

"You hungry? I'm famished, I am. Could eat a horse."

"Oh, *yes*…" There, now *that* was an arrestable voice if Harry'd ever heard one. Not so much an agreement to grab supper as an outright threat to consume one's potential dining companion. Harry felt mildly insulted at the quite unoriginal pick-up, completely forgetting he *was* dressed to pull, for once. Boy-bait, he was, equipped with personal shark, asea in bloodied waters.

"I *meant*, Malfoy," he snapped back, "for food!"

"'Course you did, Potty," the stranger's face smiled beguilingly at him, so Harry closed his eyes, naturally. Couldn't let himself forget who he was here with, damn it! "I'm simply scanning the menu, that's all. Hardly ever have a chance to see you so very…a la carte, do I? You're *cute*. Delectable, eminently edible and I wouldn't mind—"

"You have a dirty fucking mind, Draco Malfoy," Harry informed him, haughtily. "I am *not* your bleeding dinner!"

"No. Merely…creative, luv, when it comes to combining certain…ingredients. Call me a gourmand, rather."

"Stop that!" Harry hissed, and considered kicking Malfoy's shapely shins. Bad enough he was already responding simply to the act of dancing—*and Malfoy knew it*—now he had to deal with another friggin' raft of innuendo. Well, *enough*, Harry decided. Time for a reality check.

"Our target tomorrow," he began, strictly business, "already knows us, which is foul. We need to change our methods."

"Agreed." Malfoy was abruptly serious. "Your suggestion?"

"Separate instead of the usual one-two, and one of us use my cloak, protocol be damned. That should be you, for the element of surprise. Two—there's a few items in the Wheeze's *Evil Overlords* Spring Catalogue I've purchased just for this occasion. I'd like to use them. Three, get the bastard scum out in the open and keep him there—Ron said the Dicks would divert all the Muggles. We need to use that, if we can."

Malfoy sneered and looked most unhappy with Harry's list of To-Do's. "Don't agree with you, Potty. Not on the first point. We can't provide sufficient cover for each other if we separate. If there were more operatives present, I'd have no objection, but—"

"There will be, " Harry returned confidently, though he wasn't certain of that at all, as it was the DCCS 'A' involved. Still, Hermione would never let him down.

"Takes valuable time to get to position, Potter, and there's no guarantee they know any more than we do when he'll pop. Nixie on separating, though I'll take the W3's stuff in a heartbeat. And keeping him to open ground. Don't want a repeat of last time."

Harry raised his eyebrows, which in this current incarnation were trimmed and plucked to a nicety. They framed his hazel eyes in a very attractive, non-Potter way. "You will?"

"I will, what?"

"Bring shite from the Spring Catalogue?"

"Oh, yes. I've invested ages ago. Brilliant product line, Wheeze's is; making Galleons hand over fist."

Harry had to laugh. Who knew that when he'd been advised there was a second secret investor it'd be Malfoy, of all possible twats? Hah! Great minds!—Wait! Better not to go there…

"Right. Erm—good, yeah. So—*I've* got Expanding Rubber Sprinkles, Doxy Dust and a dose of Sudden Moat, along with a few others."

"Brill. I'll bring my Squirmy Gerbils, Miracle Debolloxer Mister and the aerosol tin of Frosting the SnowBalls. Maybe some Detonating Dice, too. Think that'll be enough?"

"Yeah—should be." Harry hid his smirk; he'd a few more 'specials' up his sleeve that no one knew about, not even up-your-arse angel investor Malfoy. "Hey, er, Malfoy. Did you ask your Eight Ball about it? How it'd likely work out?"

"About tomorrow? You *worried*, Scarhead?"

Harry swallowed hard; he really hadn't known quite how to broach this, what with the events of the previous run-in with Doholov fresh in his mind. 'Disaster' was the least of it. But, trust the prat to air their dirty linen with aplomb. At least he wasn't instantly ridiculing Harry for bringing up the damned Muggle Eight Ball.

"…Maybe. He's like Salazar all over again—creepy, slimy and a top-notch Wizard. Have to be daft not to be a little worried, I suppose. You?"

"Only for you," Malfoy's reply was quick, but the blue eyes were focused intently on Harry's mouth rather than his Glamoured gaze. "You take risks you shouldn't, Potty. It bothers me."

Harry stared at the anxious *not*-Malfoy eyes peering down at him, derailed. And stared some more as the Magicked saxophones wailed to the high heavens, trying to reconcile *face* with *voice* with air and attitude. And couldn't, quite.

"We need to go," he declared abruptly. "It's late." This was exactly what he did *not* want, this muddying of the oceans between them. And would *not* stay to listen to, nor allow his very carefully constructed defenses to be dismantled on a whim and an ardent, caring glance.

"Then, one last dance, Harry." The voice he knew so well it was all but cellular was but a whisper against his styled and Metamorphagus-hued hair and it seemed the Privacy Charm was finally fading. Harry barely heard Malfoy's determined plea, even straining, close as they were. "So I have something to come back for, yeah?"

Harry stiffened in his Auror partner's steady grasp, instinctually resisting his own bloody urges to fling himself even more firmly into it rather than the git's always terribly deadly and no doubt in-bred Charms. Malfoy probably couldn't help it, being like that. It was how his family got ahead in life, that brilliant combination of arrogance and charisma. But Harry didn't say 'No!' right way, either.

He didn't say 'No'.

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Chapter: 22

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 22

Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center; !Danger!; snark & Death Eaters!

The 20 standard answers on a Magic 8-Ball are:

? As I see it, yes

? It is certain

? It is decidedly so

? Most likely

? Outlook good

? Signs point to yes

? Without a doubt

? Yes

? Yes - definitely

? You may rely on it

? Reply hazy, try again

? Ask again later

? Better not tell you now

? Cannot predict now

? Concentrate and ask again

? Don't count on it

? My reply is no

? My sources say no

? Outlook not so good

? Very doubtful

10 of the possible answers are affirmative (?), 5 are negative (?), and 5 are maybe (?). Using the Coupon collector's problem in probability theory, it can be shown that it takes an average of 72 questions of the Magic Eight Ball for all 20 of its answers to appear at least once.

Part 22

Belgrade in the Springtime was fucking lovely. Harry would've given half a vault just to be a Muggle tourist, but no—he was scheduled to cast life and limb into the breach again, all for a measly pay cheque.

"What say you, Ball?" Malfoy was asking. "This café? That one? Should we loiter at the corner?"

Harry didn't know what the Ball replied—it was mute, if not dumb—and told himself he didn't care. Better to get this over with sooner rather than later. Like that maybe-Muggle Wellington: 'rough ground lightly.'

Malfoy didn't know of quite all the finesse he'd rigged, in any event. The combination Tracker/Apparator on the Magic Eight Ball, an undetectable spell the M13 Paranormals had snagged from the Prussian Embassy some time back in the early Seventies, and little known, for instance. It'd function to simultaneously send an alarm to HQ *and* Portkey Malfoy fifty yards to a safe place of the Ball's choosing, as needed. Harry would *not* go through watching his partner suffer again, not if he could help it.

His own skin, for another, which was coated with anti-Hex Oil, thanks to the Triple Secret Covert Coven Sector (the aptly nicknamed 'Ticks' division, run by a so-very-undercover Parkinson she was well-nigh transparent, she being a Slytherin of sufficient reptilian mind to carry off both shopping *and* infiltration into enemy strongholds like nobody's business, even in her sodding sleep). Though the git was probably all oiled up, too, given his connexions, and didn't *that* bring carnal images of slick, shiny Draco-skin to the forefront of Harry's mind he could simply do without!

Right. Now it was only waiting for Doholov to make his move and then game time would commence. Harry dreaded it, and swallowed hard at his rebellious stomach acid.

"You know, I'm a tad peckish, Scarhead," Malfoy announced. He'd got the world's worst timing, the tosser did, Harry griped to himself, though outwardly he maintained a cool facade. Can't function unless he's been fed and watered, groomed and properly cooed over, just like some toff's prized Thoroughbred racehorse.

"Fancy a pastry? Coffee?" Malfoy was inquiring, completely unaware his Auror partner was now quelling illicit visuals of mounting him. "Can't counter-curse and hex on empty bellies, can we?"

"Look, prat, I ate breakfast already—" which Malfoy would know, had he stayed over after the Thai take-out had been consumed in Harry's postage stamp living room, late last night, "—thanks. Look—are you quite sure you want to bother sticking 'round for this job? I know working for a living's a real pain in your arse, Malfoy. We wouldn't want to impede your regularly scheduled tea breaks with inconvenient criminal masterminds, now would we?"

"Stow it, Potty," Malfoy was unfazed. "Just a suggestion…from the Muggle Ball."

"Wait—*what*!" The Eight Ball said so? It said to nosh? "Well, why didn't you mention that *before*, berk! Let's go!"

The git's eyebrows canted up. "Harry?" he asked carefully, after a long, pregnant pause. "Did you manage enough sleep last night? Bloody Hades, I *knew* I should've stayed—you rest so much the easier when someone's there with you," he fussed, twiddling the Eight ball between his long fingers.

"Shut it, damn you," Harry snarled. "I'm fine—I already *said* so. Now, where to?"

"There, I think," his partner indicated a nicely fitted out café with outdoor seating. "Alright, Ball?"

Yes - definitely.

"How much time do we have, oh Great Muggle Oracle?" Malfoy asked after they'd had their orders placed in front of them.

Concentrate and ask again.

"Oops! Sorry, Ball! Erm, ten minutes? Fifteen?"

Most likely.

"Brilliant. Finish your breakfast, Potty. Don't dawdle. And drink up that orange juice, will you? You need it for your blood sugar."

"Stop mothering me, Malfoy."

"Stop needing it, Potter."

"Prat."

"Tosser."

"Berk."

"*Eat*."

Harry felt like bait again, sitting on his arse in the fresh air picking apart a flakey croissant on a sunny morning. He knew he was Doholov's personal target, and he knew, too, that Doholov always struck at the weakest point of the Wizard. And that would be Harry's partner.

Not because Malfoy was in any way an inferior Wizard, or Auror, or anything of the sort. And not because Malfoy was the son of a recanted Death Eater or a possible recruit into Doholov's not-so-secret operations. Because he was *Harry's* secret, despite himself, and despite the git. Despite headlines in the *Prophet* about trysts and sexual innuendo galore and dancing that mimicked perfectly the mating process, right down to the thrusts and the pants; and no matter what temptations had been brought on by thong swimwear, repeated exposure to that (very nice) chest or spillover excesses of that inbred Malfoy Charm. And Harry, who'd walked willingly into the Forbidden Forest once with the whole bloody world at stake, would do it again for Malfoy at the drop of a hat.

Though he'd never, *ever* admit that.

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Entropy, luv. That's the name of the game. Say 'hullo' to ions colliding and unholier-than-thou coincidence. Say 'hullo' to elderly café waiters with enormous beetling eyebrows taking your Muggle credit card and Accio'ing your wand in the process. Wish 'good morning' to a swift, unexpected Incarcerous binding one's partner to a quaint little wrought iron chair in an equally quaint little foreign eatery, thus rendering them unable to access theirs. And greet certain Death and Chaos with a smile, as it stares you in the face, bushy brows framing maniacal grins of pleasure at your imminent demise by rogue Death Eater.

"Ball!" Malfoy barked, remarkably cool in his new outfit of instant hempwear. His eyes were trained on Doholov and they were ice-cold. "Is it him?"

It is certain. They'd been fooled by a Polyjuiced imposter once, to Potter's detriment and Malfoy's pain; never again.

"Excellent!" Satisfied, Malfoy showed his lovely teeth in all their perfection, and went silent as the tomb within the encircling ropes, though his lips moved ever so faintly and his fingers twitched.

"Crucio!" Doholov ordered, with no further ado, wand on the blond. Malfoy arched his back under it, smile gone rictus, and beads of sweat sprang up on the paled patrician brow. The Muggle Ball quivered madly and teetered on the tabletop, shrinking rapidly. No one minded that, what with all the other excitement going on.

Harry, meanwhile, was springing into *Action, Gryffindor-style*.

"Dicks!" he shouted and heard several faint 'pops!' "*Ticks*!"

Good on them, the arseholes; could've been here already, but what the fuck—beggar's can't be and all that rot.

"Finite!" Harry yelled at the Cruciatus on Draco. It stopped abruptly and Malfoy drew a harsh

breath, opening his eyes once more. "Sectumsemp—" was next out of Harry's mouth, aimed at Doholov.

"Silencio!" shrieked a feminine voice from behind him, cutting him off mid-cast. "Ob—!"

Harry Potter could throw off Imperius, Cunfundus and bounce an AK back on the sender, which was common knowledge. He'd torn through the Revised Auror Handbook, 15th Edition, like nobody's business, and had every spell, hex, curse, charm and potion listed there memorized, tested and filed neatly in his usually somewhat messy mind, which was *not*. He knew a few things about Dark Magic and Wild Magic that would've made Dumbledore choke on his full and frolicsome beard, had he lived to learn of them instead of peacefully nodding off to Avalon over his breakfast porridge one morning. And—and this was *crucial*—he'd swotted up secretly on Muggle spies and covert personnel.

Particularly James Bond, though the man was purely fictional. 007 was a personal favorite for Harry; an idol of sorts, as he was still determined to be the absolute Best Auror on the Force, even if he was no longer the youngest. Even if that meant paperwork; even if that meant dealing on a daily basis with the despised Draco Malfoy. And even if that meant going a bit beyond—and around—the usual methods, who would be the wiser, after all? 'He who defeats the Nastiest Dark Wizard of All Time laughs last', as the saying goes.

So, Harry Potter took a very deep breath, lowering his heart rate, and then another, nearly stilling it, in the best Bond tradition, and blessed the genetically low lactate levels in his bloodstream. And felt Time literally slow down to a crawl.

And Harry sprang into *Non*-Action, Gryffindor-style, with a Patented Potter Twist.

"—liv—"

Like a film sequence run at 1/8th speed, Harry saw every attenuated movement of Doholov before him—the wand stretched toward Draco, the beginnings of the casting of a second Cruciatus, the dark blipping whizz of a tiny black ball through the air, on a cool, clean arc to its Malfoy-assisted destination—and heard every noise in bits and bites—the strident voice of the woman behind him, triumphant; a torn gasp of Latin issuing in a pained whisper from his partner's strained mouth; Hermione, at last—and where the fuck had she *been*!— calmly intoning the beginnings of a binding charm on someone Harry couldn't see.

Harry did know what would happen if that final syllable of that very cursed word hit him—not *that* many common curses start with 'Obliv' *he* knew of, which logically meant this one would be *very bad news*—and he ducked, or slumped rather, given his induced near-death state, just the veriest smidgeon, just in the nick of time, as Time, the entity, caught up to him.

"—ate!"

And it sailed right over his head, landing on one Antonin Doholov, Death Eater-at-large.

Harry's heart thumped once, twice and got on with its usual business.

Ducking still, Harry weaved and whirled, his chair spinning wildly away behind him, and kicked the legs out from under another of Doholov's accomplices in his rush, not bothering with the man himself, as Doholov was already nicely occupied with staggering back and actively being both quite constricted in the neck area *and* extremely forgetful of why he was in Belgrade, much less a touristy café, a flapping hand going frantically up to his throat.

"Vhwa?—*vwhaa*!—ggh!" Doholov gulped, bushy eyebrows doing caterpillar curlicues across his perplexed brow. He clearly couldn't recall why he might be unable to breathe. His henchwoman gaped at him, utterly aghast.

"Sir!" she screamed, "*No*!" and then ceased objecting completely, as Harry's pugnacious fist to her jaw dropped her abruptly at his feet.

"Finite!" Harry screamed in Draco's general direction, over one flexing shoulder, kicked the unfortunate woman aside and proceeded to mill down two more delurking henchpeople using a particularly dirty martial arts technique, learnt from the revered school of Jackie Chan. The ones he couldn't physically lay hands on he took out with a whole series of curses, practiced for just such an occasion. Behind him, Malfoy joined in, casting Protego and systematically removing one Death Eater after another with a sniper's aim.

Merlin, but it felt good, Harry thought, grinning like a madman.

Pops were sounding all around him from the various operatives of Dicks and Ticks Apparating in—just like Muggle machine-gun fire, Harry observed with some small part of his brain, the part that wasn't directing him as he bashed another opponent's face in and hexed a third with rancid boils—and a very muddled Doholov reeled sideways, lurching towards him. Instinctively, Harry shoved the capering, confused man away with a free elbow, knocking the older Wizard's wand from the fingers of the hand not actively clawing at his own throat, and shouted "*Apparate*, you fucker!" straight into the Death Eater's stunned eyes and purpling face.

Obliviated by his own henchwoman, actively choking on a shiny black plastic marble of Muggle origin that was rapidly enlarging right in the midst of his trachea, Doholov did exactly as Harry ordered—or rather, the Magic Eight Ball did, obliging soul that it was—land itself and its flailing bearer a safe fifty yards *away* from Draco Malfoy, as per Harry's pre-set and very carefully engineered spell.

Currently, that happened to be in the exact centre of the shopping district's busiest traffic intersection.

Where a very, very forgetful and now quite blue Antonin Doholov was promptly knocked flat to the uneven pavement by a passing delivery lorry.

Had anyone had the presence of mind to touch base with the Eight Ball at that very moment, they'd have noticed immediately the message triumphantly displayed on its triangular white plastic bobber:

Outlook good.

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily. And nearly done:

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Chapter: 23

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 23

"*Harry*!"

Now, there was a voice Harry didn't expect! Panting, he looked up from the field of fallen Death Eaters, scattered quaintness and abused café fare to see his girlfriend before him, arms wide.

"Scarhead. Alright?" A calm question from behind him snagged his attention just before Ginny tackled him. There was a firm grip to his upper arm and then the fleeting touch was gone.

"Yeah—yeah. ***Ginny***! What are *you* doing here!"

Harry swung around, hoping to catch his partner before Malfoy took himself off to the next task, and took a limpet Ginny with him. She was snuggling into his shoulder and giggling madly, clutching at him every which way and emitting little screams and shrieks in the best schoolgirl tradition.

"My hero! Oh, *Harry*!"

"Malfoy!" Harry shouted frantically after the blond striding off towards Hermione. "You?"

"You were *wonderful*, darling! So heroic!" Ginny was chortling. "Are you hurt anywhere? Is that *blood*?"

Malfoy sneered back over his shoulder, focusing just above Harry's head from the looks of it.

"Fine," he replied shortly, and kept right on going. With a frustrated sigh, Harry wrenched his attention back to the ginger handful hugging him like there was no tomorrow.

"Gin, what *are* you doing here, really? I thought you were in the Hebrides," Harry asked,

working on disengaging her fingers from the folds of his now-filthy Auror robes.

"Oh, Harry, you great silly-head! That's just a ruse!" Ginny smiled merrily at him, and let herself be set aside. "I work in Ticks division, don't you know. Have for ages—recruited right out of Hogwarts. Of *course* I'd be here—it's the biggest coup the Unspeakables have had in ages. And *you*—you did such a lovely job, Harry; no wonder they call you 'Hotter Potter', going all Muggle commando like that! I'm impressed! Dad'll be absolutely over the moon when I tell him!"

"Er—" Harry *hadn't* known, but didn't *that* just make a helluva lot of sense in the established wonky pattern of his life to date. Certainly explained Ginny's long absences. "So, you work with Parkinson, Gin?"

"Me, Blaise and Luna do—see? Over there," she pointed out, and Harry peered through the pastry crumbs, scattered prone black-robed bodies, twisted wrought iron and bits of torn awning to see two more of his old schoolmates, chatting with Hermione, Parkinson and now Ron and Neville, as well. Shacklebolt stood nearby with the other, elder Aurors and smiled brilliantly at them all, visible pride in his Aurors like a bright cloud hoving 'round his toque. In the cordoned-off intersection, a team of MediWizards were retrieving Doholov's body from the cracked pavement and exclaiming over the tyre tracks that decorated him. Various others were busily rounding up stray dazed Death Eaters and setting the shopping district back to rights.

"Does *anyone* actually do what they *say* they do?" he whinged, but Ginny wasn't listening. She had her eyes fixed on Draco, who looked as though he was finishing up his intense discussion with the ad hoc Hogwarts Alumni Association Meeting going on over by the remains of their table for two.

"Oh, let me just go catch Malfoy, too; congratulate him—so handsome like that, isn't he? All pale and chiseled—back in a half a tick, Harry!"

Harry would've liked to follow, since he, too, wanted to congratulate Malfoy—for the covering of his insane arse during the glorious rout of the baddies, for the superb spellwork with the handy-dandy Muggle Ball, and last but not least, simply for *surviving relatively unscathed*, and thus *not* breaking Harry's heart into a million pieces—but he'd been surrounded meanwhile by a swarm of clean-up personnel and had to answer a formidable number of searching questions and be checked over for stray injuries.

When he got a chance to look up next, Malfoy was over by the team of MediWizards huddled industriously over Doholov's body, watching carefully as one of them wielded a pair of very large tweezers. Harry couldn't help but feel a bit queasy as the miniaturized Eight Ball was extracted from the ex-Death Eater's gullet and dropped carefully into a glass vial, but Malfoy only frowned ferociously at its slimy state-and-condition and, from his wand movements, cast about five Scourgifys on it in rapid succession.

Then Harry didn't see his Auror partner at all for the next two hours, both of them being whisked off to St. Mungo's for a standard physical, and then separately de-briefed by various gushing

higher-ups.

It was after four when he stumbled back into their shared cubicle at HQ, cursing roundly the boggling amount of office procedure that tagged the heels of action like the Hounds of Hades and gagging madly for a cup of coffee—or a nice, strong tot of medicinal Firewhiskey. T'was almost enough to make him rethink his career choice.

"Drink?" Malfoy materialized by the door whilst Harry was still staring blankly at the squadron of paper aeroplanes atop the filing cabinets, perfect as always in every way, from the top of his lint-white head to the tips of his shiny loafers. Harry immediately stomped very hard on his nearly overwhelming urge to reenact Gin's schoolgirl squeal-fest on his partner's (very nice) chest. Which would inevitably lead to other, more intimate things, like slatherings of sexual innuendo—or dancing. Possibly even—gasp!—an official date.

Nothing like two well-placed Crucios to convince one that perhaps going so far as to date one's secret crush might not actually be the *worst* thing ever in the entire world.

"Sure," he replied, "you berk. Nice of you to find a moment to drop by your office," he teased and was just starting to grin happily at the thought of actually relaxing over a shot or three with the person who knew him best when every *other* person who knew him really, really well poured into the tiny room like a tidal wave, sending the paper-thin Magicked walls bulging with an excess of overly-animated Wizardry.

"Coming over, mate?" asked Ron, plopping his bum in Harry's chair as if it were his own, complete with customized arse-groove. "After-party to celebrate Doholov's demise in the works. Letting us all scamper off early for once, Dawlish is."

"Harry, are you *sure* you're alright?" Hermione wanted to know, feeling up his brow and cheeks worriedly. "You should rest."

"I've laid on snacks," Hannah volunteered. "And crudités." *She* doubled as a caterer's assistant by day. Harry didn't even want to know how she'd ended up moonlighting in the Unspeakables.

"No finesse, Potter;" Pansy commented as she made her usual stagey 'entrance', and just before her painted lips twitched faintly with approval, "none whatsoever, as is expected for a galumphing goon like you, Hotter Potter—but still, good work out there this morning, Gryffindor He-Man." She tapped across the room in her stilettos and Blaise grinned up insouciantly at Harry when she draped herself familiarly in his lap, thus rendering Draco's chair inaccessible as well.

"Pans! Get your pretty little Prada-clad arse off my miserable excuse for seating!" Harry's partner started to protest his loss of territory to invading fellow Slytherins, but was drowned out by the deluge of continued commentary from their gathered nearest and dearest.

"Harry, would you mind terribly giving Dad and me an interview on your Muggle martial arts training?" Luna was asking, tweaking his sleeve. "It's for the *Quibbler*—we're doing a whole

series in honour of Muggle Appreciation Month."

"Harry, that spinning plate sequence," Susan Bones piped up from his other side, her voice gravely awed, "was that lifted directly from the Cirque du Soleil?"

The Creevys erupted into the room giggling like wild things and bear-hugged Harry till he was forced to fight them off, promising to chat with them individually later and tell them all about it.

"Harry, sweetie—we've so much to catch up on!" Gin was all smiles and giggles as well as she sauntered in, hanging off Neville's arm, a displaced barnacle. "I can't believe what you've been getting up to whilst I was overseas! You've got to tell me these things!" Good old Nev, thankfully, only glanced from Ginny to Harry, grinned guiltily and didn't venture a single, solitary word of approbation. He only nodded, bless him.

"Harry, could you show me how you managed that move with the café chairs? That was righteously *bad*, man, firing 'em off like that, one after the other," Dean was wanting to know. "Just like bloody cabers—I *mean* it; that was brilliant!" Seamus just stared at Harry, blushing, all googly-eyed with admiration till his own Auror partner poked him very hard.

"Nice trick with the near-death Zen mode, Harry," Blaise smirked, "but I wouldn't try it too often. Sends our Draco here right up the bloomin' wall when he thinks you're about to expire."

Malfoy snorted at the implication and did his Thoroughbred stallion imitation, tossing his head haughtily and looking down his flared nostrils. Harry grimaced at him from across the crowded room, reluctantly at first, and then felt himself relaxing a tad at the prat's companionable return wink, a bit of the tension of the day leaching quietly away.

"Well…alright, I guess I'm game. Last one to Apparate to Ron and Hermione's a rotten egg, then. No—better! Has to down a half-pint of Hendrick's!"

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Chapter: 24

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 24

The 20 standard answers on a Magic 8-Ball are:

? As I see it, yes

? It is certain

? It is decidedly so

? Most likely

? Outlook good

? Signs point to yes

? Without a doubt

? Yes

? Yes - definitely

? You may rely on it

? Reply hazy, try again

? Ask again later

? Better not tell you now

? Cannot predict now

? Concentrate and ask again

? Don't count on it

? My reply is no

? My sources say no

? Outlook not so good

? Very doubtful

10 of the possible answers are affirmative (?), 5 are negative (?), and 5 are maybe (?). Using the Coupon collector's problem in probability theory, it can be shown that it takes an average of 72 questions of the Magic Eight Ball for all 20 of its answers to appear at least once.

Part 24

Fortunately, it happened that it was a Friday, the day they'd taken Doholov down. They were all gathered at Ron and Hermione's and there was Firewhiskey and nibbles aplenty. Life was not so very shabby, after all, Harry thought.

"I've got the Game of Life!" Hermione boasted, right on cue with the unseen workings of the universe, and waved a wand over the game board and 'people pegs', setting them up properly. "Everyone find a partner, if you haven't already!"

Seamus leant forward from Dean's encircling arm, looking over the colour choices of the tiny plastic Muggle convertible autos, as well as looking rather smug. His one finger sparkled: the ring finger. Everyone could see that because he insisted on waving it about under their collective noses when passing the peanuts, pimento cream-cheese stuffed celery or crisps. He now waved it over the selection of autos, causing them to make adorable 'Vrooom!'ing noises. Dean, if at all possible, was smugger yet.

"What's the Game of Life?" asked several of the soberer Purebloods amongst them perkily, glancing up from their eternal game of sodden Snap! With various cries of heightened interest, they gathered 'round Hermione's newest Muggle party game offering like vultures over a fresh carcass.

"Really, Neville?" Ginny's light voice was exclaiming from across the crowded coffee table. "I never knew much of the healing properties of aloe vera! You say it's a succulent? Sounds simply *fascinating*, that word. No, really, let's have the pink one—blue is so fuddy-duddy."

Nev blushed and mumbled something about not being able to differentiate the 'baby girl' pawns clearly that way, but acquired the pink convertible in any case.

"And then there's the new EuroBludger we're introducing this autumn, which is a marvel of aerospace design, really," Bones was droning on at the Creevey's, both of whom were simply agog, though that might've been the Firewhisky. Certainly, they were all drinking, which is what they did at Ron and Hermione's flat, after all.

Except for Pansy and Blaise, who'd evidently succumbed to propinquity and peer pressure and were heatedly snogging up against the door to the loo. If they were ingesting anything, it was spit.

Harry, tucked firmly against Malfoy, didn't budge an inch to get into the game. The git had his beloved—and squeaky clean—Eight Ball in his lap and was petting it with the hand not occupied with absentmindedly stroking Harry's arm. Harry could've sworn the thing purred. Certainly the white bobber was in ecstasy. He might do that, too, actually, if Malfoy kept it up for much longer.

"Tell me, oh Miraculous Muggle Magick Ball, is Potter happy? More importantly, is he sober?"

Signs point to yes.

"I can show you that myself, if you'd rather," Harry offered, feeling very daring and, for once on a Friday evening, both awake and aware. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, unchecked since

the morning. Thoughts of snogging, thong swimwear and fucking sessions on the billiard green beckoned. "Privately."

"Can you now, Potty?" a pale eyebrow tipped up, and Harry pinched the git's thigh in quick retaliation.

"Or not, as you're clearly uninterested. I'll go find someone else, then."

"Oh, no, my little He-Man," the prat grinned. "I do believe I require a detailed demonstration of *all* your secret Muggle techniques, speaking strictly as your partner. Can't have you swinging furniture about without me. Nor flirting with the Grim Reaper, either."

"Berk. Not so secret *now*."

"And I haven't forgiven you for it, either, prat, keeping such things from your partner. Any other 'secrets' I should be made aware of?" Malfoy's grey eyes glanced meaningfully over at Ginny and Nev, now carrying on with alcohol-oiled excitement over their space's directions to hie themselves off to the next square and begat hordes of little pink-and-blue Longbottom 'people pegs'. One could tell at a glance they were headed straight for the Poor House.

"Don't think so." Harry shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. Perhaps his rather simplistic idea of attempting to work the tosser out of his system via repeated shagging might not be such an excellent one, after all. Malfoy seemed a tad prickly this evening. He might not cooperate. One only had to recall the door debacle to know he was more than capable of teasing Harry unmercifully still.

"You sure about that?" Malfoy turned back to his Ball with a little huff of exasperation. "Muggle Ball, tell me the truth: is Potter lying?"

Without a doubt.

"A-hah! I knew it!" Harry was pinched himself, far harder than he'd nipped the git. This actually sent an electric thrill of sheer, unadulterated lust up his spine, which he resolutely attempted to suppress.

"Merlin, Malfoy! Touchy!" he protested, gamely shielding the burgeoning bulge in his crotch from prying eyes.

"I wouldn't be if you were honest with me, Scarhead." Grey eyes bored intently into Harry's green ones till Harry lowered them finally, flushing ever so faintly. "But that might be too much to hope for," Malfoy sneered.

"…No. It wouldn't. But it had better bloody well be reciprocal, Malfoy," Harry threatened, after a split-second pause to consider further. He was *not* a coward. If need be, he would willingly die for the quick-witted, snappily dressed man at his side, no questions asked. He'd just been

reminded of their sundry mortalities that very morning, and it had quite frightened the shite right out of him. He trusted Malfoy with his own life; perhaps trusting him with his emotions might not be the worst thing ever to happen. Perhaps mere shagging was *not* the answer. But, still…no need to be hasty. He was not a blind fool, either, to go offering himself up on a platter, with all the trimmings. "I'm not bothering myself with you if—"

That got Malfoy's attention; quite suddenly, he was right up Harry's nose, literally; practically pressing their foreheads together and stealing Harry's oxygen. His eyes were perhaps the most intent and serious Harry had ever seen them, the pupils ebon' pinpoints in depthless, murky seas, scraps of silver darting through them like shining shoals of fish.

"I can assure you, Harry, that everything you feel for me, I feel for you. And more. You have no need to be concerned."

Malfoy's intonation matched his gaze perfectly: the scrape of sharpening stone across steel, promising action; the odor of burnt coffee grounds in the bottom of one's mug, teasing the senses; dense and many-layered, earthy and vastly overpowering were one of a delicate sensibility. Reassuringly rock steady, if one were not. The smell of a man of courage and conviction; the invincible air of a man who got what he wanted, as he wanted, and had built a quite a reputation over the last few years for achieving his desires fair and square.

The surge of lust became a full-body flush. It could not be tromped on, roped in nor disguised.

Harry blinked at the blur of steely grey, the pores on the prat's nose—gosh, they were very small, really, that bastard; how could a man have such perfect skin?—and the fingers that had wrapped themselves like eagle's talons 'round the slopes of his shoulders, claiming. Then, he replied the only way he could at this juncture.

"Then…show me."

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Chapter: 25

HP Magic Eight Ball Part 25

Warnings: AU; EWE; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center; PWP; snark & minor flangst.

NB: Dedicated with smiles and heartfelt 'thank you's' to the 90-odd people who followed this on ; the 20-some who favorited, including the ones who've read my fic across fandoms (love you guys!); the commenters who kept me going, encouraged and cheered even when hacking my lungs out; one very special person who's offered to beta this monstrosity (so that one day this fic

might be free of the author's stupid SPaG errors, never mind her various failings in plotting and characterization); and whoever else who might take the time to wade through nearly a month's worth of my sustained silliness in the future. You are the very best: and I purr happily in gratitude. Tiger

Harry felt like the Muggle Ball bobber, spinning topsy-turvy out of his own Floo. Malfoy had set his teeth with a firm little click at Harry's challenge—rather like a door finally closing at Harry's back— politely made their excuses to the gathered company, and had them ushered out of Ron and Hermione's hearth nearly before Harry quite realized it was indeed 'show time'.

Time to put his Galleons where his mouth was, 'cept his mouth was doing nicely, occupied with Malfoy's, and Harry had no good reason to gnaw on his hard-earned knuts.

Malfoy's knuts, though, were an entirely different matter, except—again, *that* word, proving the prat was a perpetual exception in Harry's life—Malfoy wasn't letting him do much other than murmur the odd 'meep' of delight and respire, when he remembered to.

He was being grazed upon, firm lips traveling over every surface, clothed or not, and tongue and teeth sometimes, too, and it was delightful to be the feast. He'd expected to be shoved, bitten maybe; certainly bossed around a bit by his elder, more practiced partner. But this was better, this fondling, this care. Harry had not realized quite how deprived he really was of the pleasures of touch, of taste—until Malfoy showed him, capably pinning him to the wall most convenient to the Floo at hip and opposing shoulder and nibbling him into a dazed semblance of submission. It was Harry's door all over again, only a thousand times better. It was the two-minute intense snogging of the other morning, the one he recalled with guilty fervor, only there were no fumes, bad breath nor stomach-roiling regrets this time. He could put his own tongue wherever he chose and be assured Malfoy would eventually find it and meet it; he could curl his feebly grasping fingers forward, reaching, and know Malfoy's would slide from their death grip 'round his wrist and twine about them, tightening, never letting go. For every slight motion Harry made towards him, his partner was there, answering soundlessly yes, and yes, and *yes*.

"Want you," the prat ground out at some point, Harry didn't know quite when. "Gods! But I want you," he repeated in that gravelly voice, biting Harry's shoulder blade right through the fabric of his high-collared shirt, but Harry didn't need a verbal confession to know that. There was a dick flexing hard against his belly, rubbing rhythmically, and Malfoy was practically steaming with residual heat. Harry wanted to curl up into it and be seared to death, if possible.

"Now. Please now, Harry." Another lingering, drugging exploration of his mouth, plumbing the depths of every ridge and furrow, hollow and curve, and Harry would've done most anything Malfoy asked of him. 'Now' was not a problem; he'd wanted this 'yesterday', and a countless number of mostly empty days before that.

"Let me in," Malfoy muttered, "Let me have you," 'round the dampened patch of woven cotton scraping across Harry's one nipple. "Harry."

"Um," he replied, now that his own tongue was no longer being sucked down Malfoy's throat. "Yes."

He would've liked to ask Malfoy to make it all be faster—*harder*—**now**, but no. He didn't want that really; he wanted to be savored. To have Malfoy—*Draco* run a palm down the centre of his torso and pop every button and undo every clasp, buckle and zipper in a flourish of Magick. To be carefully unwrapped, like a holiday parcel; to hear his name on the git's burning breath when he discovered Harry's clavicle and diaphragm; to say 'Draco' slowly in return as if it were an open-ended invitation to partake, and tilt his head back just that way against the unforgiving wall as he was marked with sharp canines and relentless suction.

But frustration was growing, nagging away at him. Harry tapped Malfoy's shoulder just the once and returned the favor of undressing with a wandless charm : his favorite git in all the world was finally bare-arsed naked, all at once, and by, Merlin! the heat of his fine-grained skin spiraled up a thousand degrees without robes to hinder it. He gasped, Draco did, at the rush of chilled, stale air in the flat and pressed as much of himself as he could against Harry, still as of yet half clothed, trapping trembling thighs still surrounded by sagging trousers, and wrapping arms like Muggle steel-cord pulley devices 'round Harry and his on-again, off-again button-down shirt, gathering all of Harry to him with open-mouthed greed and fingers that bloody bruised. Harry went, more than willingly, a floppy doll, and relished it, that feeling of welcomed invasion—the tongue in his ear, the teeth nipping at his throat, the gouge of forefinger seeking entry into his innermost places. His hair being tugged by the slide of sweat-roughened palms, and Malfoy muttering the beginnings of words of want, and lust, and 'Fuck!' and '*Now*.' All of it so very necessary *now*, with the floodgates agape and undammed.

"Oh, yes," Harry nodded frantically, muttering, wanting more, and struggled, strangled by his own apparel. He couldn't touch as much he must and he was dying without it. Cloth of any sort irritated him immensely when Malfoy—Draco—was just there, one onionskin-thin layer away. Grumbling, Harry wished every stitch to perdition, remembering again he was a *real* Wizard, fuck it, and there was finally, finally only skin. Lovely, lovely skin.

It tipped the balance, that. Impelled them both to exert force; to fling themselves against each other, bones knocking at the collision, and chomp down on each other's mouths. It was a bit painful, especially where clenching fingers overlaid stray muscles and scarring still sore from a morning spent cavorting with Doholov, but Harry didn't mind that. He'd already been seduced, admirably well, by a man who excelled at games of that nature; he rather wanted Malfoy to flat-out forget all that 'technique' shite and only just need to shag him, right through the wall, and devil take the pretty words and any consequences.

"Harry," Malfoy said yet again. Harry spread his legs as far as he could at the command implied, which given all that Muggle spy training, was more than enough. He twined a flexing thigh 'round Malfoy's hipbone and ground their cocks together, as he was by no means innocent of a few wiles of his own. It did the trick; that forefinger found him and delved in.

"Yeah—yes!" Harry praised his assailant, and offered up his neck to the man with the mouth like

a bloody Hoover. Gods-fucking-*Merlin*, Malfoy was *intense*! He wanted to be swished and swirled about this way for bleeding forever, if that was what it did to his nerve-endings and his throbbing dick.

"*No* going back," Malfoy told him, and twisted two digits in such a way that Harry went both tense and lax simultaneously. Malfoy braced him against the wall with a grunt of effort. "*No* second-guessing," he informed Harry. "And *no* regrets, Potty. Try it and I'll hunt you down and skin you."

"And you—and *you*," he gasped back, caught up in shimmying the other leg up Malfoy like fucking tree trunk and he a bloody squirrel with balls swollen larger than his head. "You, too, motherfucker," he managed, despite being awash with three fingers and a great deal of suddenly conjured lube.

"No worries," the prat had the audacity to grin at him, and then sucked air through his nose, the very tip of his bulbous prick aligned finally at Harry's pucker. "Ready?"

"Gods!Fucking!*Yes*!" Harry bit out. "What the bloody *fuck* are you waiting for?"

"Good?"

Malfoy had Harry's weight propped on a kneecap and was crouching just enough for purchase, long spine bent. He angled in on the upthrust and Harry nearly swallowed his tongue on his affirmative. He was dry-mouthed; Draco kissed him, all saliva dripping down his chin, and plunging tongue; a samba—nay, a fucking Bolero—of concerted piratical plundering.

"Faster!" but Draco was already on it. The motion joggled them sideways across the wall, scraping Harry's back on minutely cracked plaster, reminding him this wasn't merely another pointless wet dream or early morning wank fantasy. He was being shagged—was shagging—his *secret*, and it was so much better than any fantasy, he'd no words to offer up in gratitude.

Only flesh, slick with sweat and stray lube; his own head, bobbing and pecking at the incredibly handsome one before him, pressing butterfly kisses across a brow furrowed in concentration, licking up perspiration as it trickled down the planes of Malfoy's cheeks as if salt were ambrosia. Only his innards, tightening unbearably at every surge that thumped him into the wall; fluttering in anguish when Draco drew that magnificent cock of his out nearly to the bitter, saline end. Only hands, so firmly gripping the berk's flexing shoulder blades, Harry knew there'd be marks on Draco's back no Episky could erase. Bone-deep, the imprint he'd leave upon Malfoy, as permanent and unyielding as Malfoy's impression upon him.

"Like that? Harry?" Oh, *Merlin*. Those eyes and their feral gleam—Harry could drown there happily, easy at last in full-out desire. "Budge—up—a—bit," Malfoy directed, watching their two selves fuse and separate with a serpentine intensity. "That's it, Potter—that's *it*."

"Shut up!" Harry was at the end of his patience. He wanted Malfoy speechless and incoherent,

damn it! He wanted to not be alone in this—this firestorm Draco was deftly whipping up in his arse. And he could barely hear that deep voice over the thunder of his own heartbeat. He felt it, though, reverberating through his cock and his quivering belly.

"No," the git panted, "No! Talk to me—talk to me, so I know you're here, prat. Make me believe it."

Gods! If *that* didn't melt him into a squishy puddle, nearly at the moment of reckoning. Harry admitted he was doomed, he was—no doubt about it. "Draco," he moaned, frantic to make his intentions clear. "*Draco*!" He wriggled madly against knee and plastered wall to adjust himself, wedge the bones of his narrow pelvis even wider, give more in any way he could. "I'm—*I'm here*, you fucking arsehole! Can't you *see* that!"

"Harry," and that voice, that guttural voice was a deathblow to Harry's last little fidgets concerning maintaining some situational control, and last-ditch attempts at self-protection, and all that meaningless rot about not giving himself away too cheaply. He'd follow that voice anywhere, from Tibet to Cairo, and spread his legs anytime Malfoy wished it, if only for the experience of having his name come out of Draco's mouth just that way.

"Harry," Draco said again, and Harry's balls drew up tight against him, little crinkled, furry mounds of prickly red-hot tension, and Draco had a skillful hand wrapped 'round Harry's insanely hard cock, and it really *was* fucking Muggle heaven, and Nirvana, and all he could ever want to keep on breathing. 'Cept he *wasn't*, not now, and neither was Draco, lower lip caught between his teeth, eyes closed so hard and so tight his black-tipped lashes tangled damp like rain-soaked hedges, and his patrician head was tipped back atop a corded throat.

Harry came as he watched Draco swallow, the effects zinging like lightning across every neuron not already occupied with doing mundane tasks like engineering the actual ejaculation, and even some of those. Sloppy, slimy streams of opaque white, sprayed all over the delineated boundaries of Malfoy's chest—*gods! But that was just a fucking* nice *expanse of flesh there!* Harry's inner sportsman noted, avid even at that moment—and even past it, arcing over Draco's torso to graffiti the carpet and the scattered detritus of whatever the fuck it was they'd been wearing before. He nearly blacked out—certainly saw crimson, and heard a train rush by as he went off, buffeting him about in the currents—and was only brought back to reality slowly by the labored sounds of his own lungs heaving and the weight of the git's heavy head on his aching collarbone.

"Fucking 'bout time, Potty," Malfoy observed, when he'd achieved the ability to do so. "Lame brain."

"I want you to admit something, Potter," Draco informed him. "I want you to say you've never had better."

"I've never had better," Harry parroted obediently. "Possessive, much?"

His hair was ruffled in quick retaliation and the berk's eyes were gleaming with a smile as he

teased spit curls out of tangle with nimble fingertips, the quirk of his swollen lips half in shadow from the one or two candles he'd waved into flickering life. They'd downed a shared glass of water and limped off to Harry's unmade bed, still gloriously sticky, legs wobbly yet.

"Oh, yes, Potter. Decidedly so." Just as full of himself as a bloody Kneazle crammed with cream and herring, Harry thought, and felt the devil urging him on.

"Any particular reason why you think you've the right to, Malfoy?" Harry was fishing, he knew, but the catch was a breathtakingly huge one, record-breaking in his personal experience. He'd use a bloody net if he had to, to not let this prize get away.

"Twat," Malfoy stifled Harry's smile, eating it right off his lips. "You've no room to maneuver, you realize—not anymore. I've got you," he taunted, between kisses that made Harry's head swim, "and I'm keeping you," oh, Merlin—he'd promise anything, *anything* at all, "for ever and ever, and I'll shag you," Harry had no choice about pressing himself up against all that sinfully fit muscle mass, like filings to a magnet, "till you beg to be kept."

"Uncle," Harry gasped. He was terribly dehydrated. Riding a cock with his mouth stretched around a man's probing fingers did that to him. Coming repeatedly added to the effect as well. "F-Fucking *uncle*! Mercy, Malfoy!"

"I'll slap a ring on you later today, you little pricktease," Draco threatened, "just say you will, for now. You know I won't stop asking, Potty."

"Fucking—bastard!" Harry protested, as the tit's other hand guided him down, down to a penetration that skewered his heart as well as his arsehole. "It'd better be b-big and—and *flashy*!" he demanded. Harry was a gay man, he was—and the thought of Seamus going him one better was not to be bourne.

"What, Scarhead?" Draco wanted to know, twisting his hips against the tangled sheets in the way that left Harry mindless and burbling with sobs of delight. "Finnegan's rock got you jealous? Believe me, I can do better than that little thing," he scoffed, barely out of breath, which wasn't fucking fair in Harry's opinion. Damn the arse, keeping him captive like this; he'd no willpower left in this condition and didn't dickweed know it!

"Say yes, Harry," Malfoy coaxed, and rolled his hips again. He tweaked one of Harry's nipples just to be a twat. "You know you want to."

Harry, now held up solely by two hands under his armpits, could only agree that he did. He wanted heaps of things, actually, and Draco Malfoy was certainly one of them. Besides, all those size queens in Decadence would give their fucking eyeteeth to be where he was at this very moment, straddling a bloody Greek god, riding cockhorse.

"You're an arrogant SOB, aren't you?" he asked his bedmate idly, smoothing down eyebrows disturbed from the sleep-shag cycle they'd got going. "And I'm starving, by the way. Can't walk,

though, likely. You bastard."

"Hardly an SOB, Harry. You've met my mother; a bitch she is *not*. Father likes to call it 'determined', actually. A trait I admit I've inherited. Now, *you*. You're stubborn," Draco pointed out, knocking Harry's hand away, only to capture it and kiss every knuckle, one by one.

"Riiight," Harry agreed dubiously. "No, I'm not," he added on principle, though he really was. Anyway, Narcissa as a potential mother-in-law was daunting, but Lucius as *any* sort of relation, even strictly by marriage, was downright icky. T'would be a sticking point, that one. They'd argue. "Food?" he asked plaintively, a hint of whinge in his raspy voice. "Sustenance? Any plans to feed me before you kill me further with your cock, berk?"

"…We'll Apparate to the Manor, then," Malfoy decided, obviously spur-of-the-moment. He grinned that daredevil smile that always presaged trouble. Harry's blood pressure instantly shot up. "I always wanted to try that—you know, bed to bed. Hold tight."

"Bast—!" Harry's protest was cut short by a bearhug, and only the front half of his latest favorite epithet for Malfoy was left behind to echo in the flat's musk-fragrant bedroom as the candles sputtered out.

TBC…a fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily. One more chapter to go, dear ones, to Clear Up a Few of Life's Burning Questions. The Muggle Magic Ball will return one more time, in triumph:

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Chapter: 26

HP Magic Eight Ball Chapter 26

Warnings: AU; EWE; NC-17; Junior Aurors!Harry smuff-filled center (how many licks to get to the center? As needed. Repeat at will); Bonding at Wandpoint!; Uncomfortable In-Laws in the Offing!; minor flangst; some PWP for additional flavor and colour.

The 20 standard answers on a Magic 8-Ball are:

? As I see it, yes

? It is certain

? It is decidedly so

? Most likely

? Outlook good

? Signs point to yes

? Without a doubt

? Yes

? Yes - definitely

? You may rely on it

? Reply hazy, try again

? Ask again later

? Better not tell you now

? Cannot predict now

? Concentrate and ask again

? Don't count on it

? My reply is no

? My sources say no

? Outlook not so good

? Very doubtful

10 of the possible answers are affirmative (?), 5 are negative (?), and 5 are maybe (?). Using the Coupon collector's problem in probability theory, it can be shown that it takes an average of 72 questions of the Magic Eight Ball for all 20 of its answers to appear at least once.

Chapter 26: Epilogue and A Few Small Details Cleared Up

"So, Muggles, Malfoy?" Harry confirmed, wiping sandwich crumbs off his face and scattering them on the bedsheets. "*Depressed* Muggles? That's your 'cause'?"

"Why, yes, you imbecile—would you *stop* that? That's why there are lap trays, Potty—mannerless morons like you."

Malfoy—*Draco* budged up against the piles of pillows and his tray adjusted itself with nary of a slop of tea over his terribly antique twee china cup. His buttered, jam-spread wheat toast even stayed balanced, the berk.

"There's a need, you know. Even if they've been Obliviated, they don't truly forget. It's buried in their subconciousnesses, and Muggle psychiatry doesn't do the trick. Ergo—my rehabilitation programme. It's multi-pronged, naturally."

"Of course," Harry hid his grin in layers of fillings, many of which were leafy green, vibrant red and terribly healthy, though the avocado not so much. The thick, succulent applewood-smoked rashers on his BLT and the farmhouse cheddar were both from Malfoy's own hogs and dairy cows, he was sure. The tomatoes were 'hothouse' and the bread 'whole-grain' and 'crusty' and baked by Sorbonne-trained elves, still warm from the oven before the actual toasting and fragrant with a yeasty overtang. He was bloody dying of hunger, though, so he spared not a regret for frittered eggs in burnt butter and phosphate-packed bangers and such and noshed instead on champagne-laced tropical fruit cup and full-grained, fibre-filled foodstuffs. Besides, one less thing for the berk to complain of, his diet.

There'd be lots to bitch about in the future, no doubt.

"We live a long time, Harry—we're Wizards," Draco had said sometime earlier that morning. He'd been so very intent, his eyes shadowed, a finger running continuously along the lines of Harry's bristly jowl. "A few more years of Aurors and then you're done with it, and so am I. I'm not twiddling my thumbs, laying about watching you risk your arse till some stray curse clips you. That's absolutely not on, so deal. I have plans for you."

"Don't try and run my life for me, Malfoy," Harry had warned, quite seriously. "I won't stand for it."

"Don't end up deceased or incapacitated then, arsewipe," the prat snapped back. "and I won't. In any case, it's fine, *now*. It's 'later' I refer to. We're young and we're spry. I've no objection to allowing you to play at hero for a while longer—it's good for the Cause."

"And how is that?" Harry wasn't sure he wanted to know all the details. Knowing the prat, there'd be badges and banners and likely a catchy jingle. Only the best of Wizarding PR firms for his nibs, naturally, and that's likely translate to Nott, Goyle and Greengrass the Younger, Ltd.

"SpokesWizard to the Wizamgot, for one, and the Overbearing Council Clan of Accredited Magickal Sourcerers, for two, and a few rousing speeches here and there for the *hoi polloi*. Mayhap a tear-out card in the *Prophet*, asking for funds, with your image on it. Nothing major," Malfoy shrugged and Harry tensed automatically, realizing full well that the plan would actually translated into serious heaps of his personal time, better spent doing other things. Likely there'd more pictures, too, of him cozying up to sundry Muggles and kissing their shell-shocked babies, Merlin forbid. After all this time, he certainly knew how Malfoy's mind worked; a very dark and

frightening place, that.

"OCCAMS?" Harry gulped. Gods, but how he despised dealing with *those* people—all pointy hats with stuck-on stars and enough Attitude to turn a regular Wizard's stomach sour. "Please, tell me *not* OCCAMS."

"Yes, Harry. Be pleasantly surprised I've not installed you on the Governors' Board, do."

"Spare me," Harry pleaded, "if you truly do love me," and gazed sorrowfully at his socially uninvolved recent past. It was going extinct rapidly, his lack of PC and PR, even as he watched his soon-to-be-lawfully-wedded fellow Wizard plot and ponder.

'Other things', though. He should consider those. Such as marriage, which hadn't been much more than a distant blip on his horizon for many years. He still wasn't certain of all the details—Malfoy's usual *modus operandi* was to skip merrily over the more upsetting and head straight for the jugular, which was why he'd employed unfair tactics on Harry in the first place, shagging his brains to mush for hours upon hours. Harry had been browbeaten—nay, cockwhipped!—into submission, though the promised ring was not yet on his finger.

"Of course I love you, git. But seriously, Potty," Malfoy went on, swallowing his tea and interrupting Harry's train of thought. Harry watched him warily, his groin still indicating addled interest even after hard use. 'Doomed', yes. That described him. "It's a good Cause—you should be able to get behind it, given those horrid Muggles of yours. Your aunt sounds like a right good fit for our Daily Cheering Programme, and we could gainfully employ your slob of a cousin for rebuilding all those villages He-Who-Was-Terrifying-on-a-Daily-Basis ever so masterfully blew to smithereens. There's a great deal of property damage left to rectify yet. Not to mention the important historical landmarks."

"How'd you get into this, Draco?" Harry wanted to know, licking truffle-flavoured mayonnaise off his fingers but genuinely curious, all the same. "I'd have thought Pureblood orphans or some such—not just plain old terrified Muggles, of all things. Where's the catch?"

"Oh, burning at the stake, boiling oil, persecution, mayhem—you know, the various side effects of fear and unreasoning hatred? They're quite convincing vehicles for change, Scarhead. One must nip the problem in the bud with matters like these, in my experience. Find a way to allow for tolerable elbow rubbing on both sides. Voldemort proved that beyond doubt, don't you agree?"

"That's so—so bleeding democratic of you, twat," Harry smirked, ducking the question of what Voldemort proved or didn't deftly. "Live and let live, even. So, erm, Muggle-hugging. Not that I don't agree, in principle. But why *you*, of all people? It really doesn't come across as your sort of thing."

Malfoy shrugged and returned to his toast. "It's not, but it should be. I've a NEWT in Muggle Studies, Potty—and I haven't forgotten Professor Burbage for a bleeding minute. I owe it to her.

To all of them."

"…Fair enough," Harry nodded, and let it go. He owed the dead, too; more than he could relate. And if the git chose to rehabilitate already 'dealt with' Muggles, then let him. He'd play along. But there was another issue, of paramount importance to *his* life.

"Your, er, father. And mother, of course. What'll they say to this, Malfoy?" he waved the last bite of his sandwich at the enormous bed, and themselves, established like a ruddy nesting pair in its midst. "I can't think they'll be exactly, um—"

"Happy? Pleased? Possibly—possibly not. Not my problem," Malfoy replied decisively. "And not yours, either, Harry."

"No?" Quite honestly, how much guff did the tosser expect him swallow? Harry knew a set-up when he saw it.

"No. The Muggle Eight Ball advised me. It says to marry within the month, 'without a doubt'. Mum can't be arsed to rearrange her social obligations in a mere month, much less kick up a fuss and return to the Manor—trust me, they haven't sufficient time available to spring into any unfortunate rearguard action."

"Look, Malfoy, don't be offended when I say this, but your Mum's a very determined woman, and I wouldn't put it past her to just fetch up on the doorstep, wedding planner in hand. And I'm not—repeat ***not***—having her fucking run me ragged with that shite."

The berk Vanished Harry's bruncheon—the tray, the remains of the last mayo-smeared rasher, the half-full teacup; the lot—with a careless wave, along with his own, and was suddenly all that much more in proximity to his officially affianced.

"I've told you—'no worries', Scarhead. I'll take care of all that; you just prepare to let me shag you legally."

"Mmm," Harry couldn't say much against it, what with that tongue. "Mmmpgh!" He did struggle a bit, however. Slightly. Well…not that much.

"As of today, in fact." Malfoy was just so full of it, and consequently full of himself, Harry could retch. In place of that, he boggled, certain his hearing had suffered during their marathon of mutual mauling.

"What?"

"Garden-party reception, prat. Four o'clock sharp. Final fittings for our robes in an hour; rings delivered from Gringott's shortly thereafter. Bonding ceremony at three, Minister Shacklebolt officiating. Your bleeding best mate Weasel will be here to provide his dubious moral support in, oh, perhaps three-quarters of an hour or so."

"**What**?" Harry moved quickly onto aghast, appalled and astonished. Bushwhacked, baleful and buggered were next, hustling up the bar in readiness. He opened his mouth, *really* ready to protest this time. Vehemently!

"We can shag in the shower, Potty," Draco leered, slipping in for the kill. "Multi-task."

"No!" Harry yelped. "No, no, no, no. ***No***, Malfoy! I will not—*will* **not**—No!"

"Yes," the git said, and reached around Harry's scowling self to adjust the water in the already steaming shower. "You will, Harry."

There was a marble bench seat built in, six different nozzles from 'Rain Forest' to 'Shiatsu Massage' and a host of professional product Harry hadn't seen outside of the perimeters of a full-service salon—not that he ever set foot in *those* places.

The bastard shite ponce cum-sucking arsehole had Apparated him again! Just to get him into the fucking *shower*! Harry's ire was absolutely immense. It boiled up and over like the froth out of Vesuvius, the scum from a Snape-approved cauldron, the—the—*the*—!

"*What in the **bloody fuck** do you think you're*—!"

"Harry," and oh, there it was again, Harry's undoing. "Harry…"

The water was perfect—not so hot as to scald; not so tepid as to leave soap scum from the lather the berk was applying to his tense shoulders and ramrod-straight spine—and those hands were the best thing invented since pre-sliced flobberworms in tins. Harry allowed his future life-partner to snog him, though he bit back 'round the edges, rather, just to show Malfoy all was not perfectly sanguine in Harryland.

Married! Married in less than three hours! And to the very bane of his existence, therefore sentencing him to life of disharmonious dissention, uncalled-for social events requiring designer Wizard garb and mind-shattering shagging! Oh, *Merlin*—his karma was in sad shape and his *next* damn life had *better* be better than *this*!

He'd be a Kneazle, he would, Harry decided. A pedigreed one. A *Malfoy* one. Serve 'em right.

Malfoy lavs came equipped with lubrication, apparently, as well as loofahs. *That* he could get used to.

Malfoys came equipped with long, pale pricks surrounded by paler blond hairs that curled when wet. Doused with citrus-scented bodywash and licked clean and delightfully turgid, they bobbed in a beckoning frenzy. "Harry, oh, Harry!" the berk cried out as Harry sucked and squeezed and nipped just to be that way, and nearly fell onto the bench as his knees gave way, almost before Harry could spell a Cushioning Charm under his (very nice) arse—the one he had plans for later.

The one he'd bloody *own* for the remainder of the git's long years in this realm of tears, laughter and the raw stuff of Life.

"Do I *really* have to go through with this, Ball?" Harry asked it. His fingers trembled with pre-wedding palsy and he was gagging for a Firewhiskey. Ron, catching his mate's case of nerves like a bloody Muggle virus, twitched and fidgeted about him, describing some ginger-tufted irregular ellipse solely determined by the path of priceless antique breakables and furniture far too ghastly aged and valuable to sit upon.

It is decidedly so. The Ball was twinkling at him, damn it; practically chewing on its non-existent beard. Harry was positive it was possessed.

"And *will* I be happy, joined at the bloody hip for all eternity with that infernal *prat*?"

As I see it, yes. And, quite possibly, it was possessed by Dumbledore, the sly old coot. Harry wouldn't put it past him; be just like him, poking his pointy nose and flyaway hair into Harry's life, even now.

"What about my career—is he going to make my life even more difficult? I *like* being an Auror, damn it! Must I end up as Minister some day, just because he says so?"

Concentrate and ask again. The Ball's bluish liquid innards came over a bit hazy. Harry jiggled it gently to help it along.

"Er—sorry, Ball. I know vagueish questions like that upset you. Just the last then, alright? Being Minister? Will I *have* to?"

Better not tell you now.

"Er—mate," Ron was staring, eyes swiveling from the shiny black Ball, which rather gave off the air of someone really wanting to skive off, and his admittedly cranky-but-very-powerful-Magickally best friend since age eleven. Both presented oddly addled auras, in his view. "You *really* need to get a leg up now—you'll be late."

"Hang on half a sec, Ron; this is *important*," Harry waved him off with an uncaring hand. He had bigger cauldrons to stir right counter-clockwise at the moment; *Burning Questions*, rather, that must be answered to the very best of the Eight Ball's ability before he knowingly embarked on the Good Ship *Draco*. "What about family, Ball? Are we going have winsome, spoiled-rotten little Potter-Malfoy brats to deal with?"

"*Merlin*, Harry!" Ron was shocked, his blue eyes popping wide at Harry's offhand dismissal of the importance of spawning future generations to belt up and carry on. Which was likely all Hermione's influence, as Ron didn't actually wish to beget a Very Large Weasley-style Family, not to Harry's knowledge, at least, having had quite enough of fighting over available resources as it was. Hermione, though—*she* was a different story, being the one-and-only. Ron was in for

the Battle of the Intentional Midriff Bulges, Harry knew. He wished him well, from a safe distance.

Most likely. The Ball wavered a bit over the question of siring younglings. **Ask again later**.

"Right," Harry said. "Er—my in-laws to be. Are they going to murder me when Draco's not looking?"

My sources say no.

"Brill," Harry observed dryly. "Will I, um, actually manage to tolerate them? Or they, me?"

Very doubtful.

"Ah…well. That's just jolly good. Er, um—what else, *what else*?" Harry took a quick spin about the room, trying frantically to recall any other matters he might need advice on before hitching his proverbial cart to the scion of the Malfoys. Not that Draco wasn't a very fine gallop.

"Um, Harry," Ron tried again, apparently getting rather desperate to whip his best friend up to the starting gate, to the point of actually laying hands on the precious Muggle Oracle, attempting to pry it from Harry's clenched fingers. "For crying out loud, let's *go*! Get your flippin' hands off that Muggle widget! Ferret-face is likely champing at the bit out there in his huge fucking gazebo and *I'm* not bloody managing his miffed arse if he barges in after you! There's *limits*, mate!"

"Oh—right, right," Harry was distracted, by the clock chiming three p.m., by the feeling that cliff-diving sans safety rope was in his very near future, by the horrible, thrilling, rather wondrous suspension of disbelief overall. This really couldn't be happening to him, could it? "Any last words, Ball? Is he—is *he* going to be happy? With me, I mean?"

You may rely on it. The Ball replied sanctimoniously.

It jerked and spun suddenly, the little white triangular bobber gyrating and the Muggle Magick Ball itself trembling. Then it grew quite toasty in Harry's white-knuckled death grip, a relaxing warmth which somehow Magickally transferred over to Harry, inexplicably easing his tension.

Good fortune will befall you. The Eight Ball assured him, twirling its invisible waxed mustachios, not like a Crup puppy *at all*. **In bed**.

Finite to the fickle fateful fic in drabblets, mostly daily. All done