

The chanting curse-breakers grew louder, the ants grew more vicious. Harry grit his teeth against the urge to cry out as he felt something start to *tear* inside his skull.

Bill was right that the magic would try and latch on. The horcrux had been in place for almost fifteen years, and it was not giving up without a fight — but Harry was ready, and he was stronger than this pathetic little scrap of Voldemort's soul. He gathered his own magic, shoving it alongside the ritual magic, forcing the soul out of his body. He could hear screaming — his own, perhaps, or maybe the horcrux's — and then there was a blinding wave of pain, like his head was about to split in two.

And then silence.

Harry sucked in a sharp breath, blinking his eyes open. He didn't dare move, in case the ritual wasn't over. He could hear footsteps, and the rat in the cage was screeching up a storm.

Then someone slid Harry's glasses onto his face, and the world came into focus; Bill stood in front of him, grinning, sweat glistening on his brow. "Hey, kid. How you feeling?"

"My head hurts," Harry replied, his voice raspy — maybe it had been him screaming. Bill chuckled, helping him to his feet, bracing him when he wobbled and almost fell over.

"Yeah, sorry about that. But you can take a potion when you get home, that should help. Hey, stand still a second for me, yeah?"

Bill moved away, and Harry planted his feet while the redhead checked him over with his wand. A huge smile broke across his face. "It's gone," he confirmed. "No trace of it left." He turned to one of his coworkers, calling something in what sounded like Arabic, and Harry was scanned a second time by an older man with a salt and pepper beard. The man frowned, doing another set of spells, then gave a decisive nod.

"No foreign magic," he confirmed, speaking English for Harry's benefit. "The horcrux has gone, and as far as I can see it has not left any damage behind. Bill, you will monitor his progress, yes?"

"As best I can while he's at Hogwarts," Bill confirmed, stepping in to sling an arm around Harry's shoulders once more. That seemed to satisfy his coworker, who nodded and went to help the rest of the team clear up.

"Snape can help with monitoring," Harry offered. "If there's any specific spells you need to use or anything."

"I'll get in touch with him about it," Bill confirmed. "We're not really worried, but considering none of us have done this before... it'll just be to make sure there's no lingering effects on your own magic. It was part of you for a long time, after all." He squeezed Harry's shoulder at the green-eyed teen's alarmed look. "Don't worry, magic is resilient — your magic especially. You've a strong core, I'm sure it'll plug the gap in no time."

He turned, directing Harry over to the side where someone had set the metal cage. It was indeed a rat inside; a huge grey one, its beady eyes staring at Harry as its tiny body heaved