

He reached into his grandmother's large handbag, pulling out a pair of squashy packages in shiny paper. "I brought you these. And, uh, I've got some friends with me, too. They'd like to meet you."

Harry shuffled closer, peering over Neville's shoulder. Mr and Mrs Longbottom were a far cry from the happy, rosy-cheeked couple Harry had seen in Moody's picture of the original Order of the Phoenix. They were worn and gaunt-faced, bodies frail and hair pure white. But when they looked at Neville, even though their eyes were unfocused, they both beamed.

Neville set a present each on their laps, leaning in to kiss them on the cheek one at a time, heartbreakingly soft. Harry stepped forward, clearing his throat. "Hello, Mrs Longbottom," he greeted in a hoarse almost-whisper, stood beside the woman's bed. She looked at him, though her eyes were blank. "I'm Harry Potter. I think you knew my mum." He knew from stories that Alice Hopkins, as she had been before she married, was one of Lily Evans' Gryffindor roommates, and best friends.

Alice Longbottom continued to stare at him, her fingers digging weakly into the paper-wrapped present.

"I just wanted to say," he continued, speaking loud enough for Frank Longbottom to hear, too — he was looking over, curious in a sort of dazed way. "Your son is the best friend I've ever had, and you both should be very proud of him." He heard Neville gasp softly, but didn't look away from Alice's vacant gaze. She reached up, patting him on the cheek.

"James," she muttered, letting out a feeble little giggle, then turned to focus on opening her Christmas present.

Harry stood there, shocked, for several moments. Eventually, an aged hand curled around his shoulder. "That was a very fine thing to say, Mr Potter," Mrs Longbottom said quietly. The pair of them watched as Neville introduced Ginny to his dad, and Harry wondered if Ginny saw the adoration in Neville's eyes as she didn't hesitate to begin chattering to the man like an old friend.

"It's the truth," he said, looking up at the woman with challenge in his eyes. "Neville's brilliant. And you should see how well he's doing in our defence club."

The old woman sighed. "Sometimes I fear in trying to teach him how wonderful his parents were, I put far too much expectation on that boy's shoulders. He's lucky to have a friend like you, Mr Potter."

"I'm the lucky one," he insisted. "And— I know it's not my place, so please excuse my impertinence, but Neville needs a new wand." He had to take his chance, while Neville was distracted. "His father's wand isn't suited to him at all, and it's holding him back. I know you want to honour your son's memory, but... being friends with me is dangerous. I wouldn't want Neville to get into trouble and have a spell fail him because his wand isn't truly his."

It was mean, perhaps, to play on the old woman's fear for her grandson like that — but it was also the truth. In the last few months, Harry had seen Neville's spells go awry for no reason