

whatsoever, even when he was doing everything right. It was the wand's fault, and that could get him killed.

Mrs Longbottom's mouth tightened, and Harry wondered if he had gone too far. Then, she nodded tersely. "I shall look into it. Thank you for the recommendation." She looked down at him, grey-blue eyes betraying her amusement. "That impertinence of yours could make life difficult, when you come of age."

Harry grinned back. "Sometimes, difficult is necessary."

"As is impertinence," Mrs Longbottom agreed knowingly.

Harry suspected that had been some sort of test, and he hoped he passed muster. Mrs Longbottom was a very intimidating woman, even without all the stories Neville had told him. But Harry would not be cowed, not when his friend's life was at stake.

"It never gets easier, seeing them like this," Mrs Longbottom sighed.

"Harry, come meet my dad," Neville urged bright-eyed, and so Harry didn't reply, instead smiling at his friend as he went to gently shake Frank Longbottom's hand.

He thought, perhaps, that the reason Mrs Longbottom did not allow her grandson to visit his parents often was not because she wanted to keep them separated, but because it was too painful a reminder for herself.

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He and Ginny didn't stay too long with the Longbottom family, not wanting to intrude on their entire Christmas visit. Frank seemed far more entertained with the shiny paper of his present than the soft cardigan inside, but Alice immediately wrapped herself in her brand new yellow shawl with a sunny smile.

When they left, Ginny kissed Neville on the cheek, and Harry squeezed his shoulder. "I'll see you back at school," he said, and Neville nodded.

"Thanks for this. It's nice, I think, for them to meet new people."

"Thank you for letting us meet them," Ginny returned. She, likely even more than Harry, knew how important Neville's parents were to him, even though he rarely spoke of them at school.

"I hope your dad gets better soon. I'll write to you, yeah?"

Harry let Neville and Ginny smile and blush at each other for a bit, and then he gently took Ginny by the arm, leading her out of the ward and back to the stairs.

"His parents are so sweet," Ginny murmured sadly once they were alone. Harry nodded. He could only imagine what Frank and Alice Longbottom had been like before the Lestranges had stolen their minds. "What was all that weird formal stuff with you and Mrs Longbottom, though?"