

brave enough to ask Neville about it, the other Gryffindor just said that his feelings weren't going to stop him being friends with Ginny.

Harry was very glad his own love life wasn't that complicated, threat of Lucius Malfoy aside.

"Yeah, he's told me. It's so sad."

Harry hummed in agreement. There wasn't much else to say on the matter. "And, ah, what's Michael up to, this Christmas?"

Ginny's face hardened. "I wouldn't know," she muttered angrily. "We broke up."

That was brand new information to Harry, and his eyes went wide. "What? Why didn't you tell me?" Why hadn't *Neville* told him? Did Neville even know?

"Never had the chance." Ginny glanced at the floor evasively, and Harry narrowed his eyes. There was a story, there; perhaps he could get her to spill it over a cup of terrible hospital tea.

But all thoughts of pestering Ginny for details flew from his head when they reached the fourth floor landing, and came face to face with the subject of their conversation. One of them, at least.

"Ginny!" Neville blinked, startled. "Harry! What are you doing here?"

"Visiting Dad," Ginny explained. Her cheeks gained the faintest red flush. "It's, uh, good to see you."

Neville blushed too, and then a throat cleared pointedly behind him. Harry looked past his friend, seeing a woman in a rather impressive vulture-topped hat that could only be Mrs Longbottom herself. "Neville. Introduce me."

Harry took a half-step forward, palms open. "Well met, Dowager Longbottom," he greeted, bowing in respect, hoping desperately he had the correct form of address.

A keen-eyed smile crossed the woman's age-weathered face. "Ah, of course. Well met indeed, Heir Potter." She held out a hand, and Harry kissed the back of it. "A pleasure to finally meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine," Harry assured her earnestly. "I know it's quite late, but I'd like to thank you in person for all the help you gave me in my third year."

Her smile widened, something like approval in her eyes. "The Potter-Longbottom alliance has stood strong for generations," she said. "I am glad to help it flourish for another."

Neville looked a mix of pleased and petrified, shuffling awkwardly from foot to foot. "Um, Gran," he stuttered. "This is Ginny Weasley. My friend."

Ginny's face coloured further, but she managed a slightly clumsy half-curtsey. "Nice to meet you, Mrs Longbottom."