

When he and Neville eventually ran out of excuses to be away from the common room, they made their way back. Harry saw Hermione and Ron in the corner of the common room; Hermione was holding what looked like a collection box, speaking very quickly. Ron looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. He brightened up when he saw Harry, apparently having already forgotten the dark-haired boy was mad at him. "Great! Harry! Hermione, you can tell Harry all about spew, look."

"It's S.P.E.W.!" Hermione corrected, but Ron had already vaulted over the back of the armchair and headed up to the dormitory. Harry shared a confused look with Neville.

"What's in the box, Hermione?" Harry asked, already sure he was going to regret doing so.

Hermione's following tirade about house elf rights was the last straw for Harry. "Hermione," he cut her off mid-sentence, "have you ever actually spoken to a house elf?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Did you do *any* research whatsoever into the specifics of a house elf's bond with its family?" Harry continued. Hermione faltered.

"It's really hard to find information on it in the library."

"Hermione, house elves get sick if they're not bonded to a house," Neville piped up, looking puzzled. "I thought everyone knew that."

"They what?" Hermione was round-eyed.

"Their magic needs the bond to balance it. Without access to the family magics that come from being bonded to a house, the elf's magic gets unstable and starts turning inwards. It's awful to watch, I've heard. Back in the olden times they could survive in the wild on the natural magic in the forests, but then the muggles started chopping them all down, so the house elves started bonding themselves to wizard families instead," Neville told her. Harry would bet anything a family like the Longbottoms had at least two house elves. According to Sirius, the Black family had one at every property, and the Potter family had two at their ancestral home and a few others scattered about. Harry wasn't old enough to claim the Potter properties and elves yet, but he would one day.

"Well... that doesn't excuse them from not being paid! If anything it's worse — they can't leave, so they're forced to do all the work."

"House elves *like* doing work," Neville told her. "Our elf Hetty was devastated when I decided to start tending the greenhouse myself."

"Maybe you should do a little more research before you start jumping in where you're not needed, Hermione," Harry suggested gently, his heart going out to the crestfallen witch. She was just trying to do the right thing. "By all means, focus on laws to make house elves treated better with their owners. But don't assume what they want without even talking to them." He ran a hand through his hair, wincing against the brewing headache. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to bed. It's been a hell of a day."