

The door opened, and Charlie found himself face to face with his father, who practically crumpled in relief at the sight of him. “Oh, Charlie,” he sighed, wrapping his second eldest son in a crushing hug. It took everything Charlie had not to break down in tears right there. “I hoped you’d stop by.”

“I... I wasn’t sure if I should,” Charlie admitted. “Didn’t know if I’d be welcome. I— Mum didn’t send a jumper.”

Heartbreak flashed across Arthur Weasley’s face. “My boy,” he murmured, patting Charlie’s cheek. “Your mother is... upset. But you will *always* be welcome in this house, you hear me? No matter what.” His gaze turned pointed. “As will Sirius Black.”

Charlie grimaced. “Don’t know about that,” he muttered, imagining how that might go down.

“Arthur! Who is it?” came the call from inside the house. Arthur looked back at his son.

“Are you coming in? Everyone will be pleased to see you.”

Charlie loved his dad, right then, for phrasing it like a question — for giving him one last chance to turn around and avoid the fallout. He almost took it.

“I’ve come this far,” he said instead, and his dad smiled, stepping back to let him inside.

“We have a visitor, Molly!” he replied, and Charlie heard the frantic scramble within as they all tried to guess who it might be.

He followed his dad through to the kitchen, stopping in the threshold, hands clenched tight at his sides.

The family was just at the tail end of their own Christmas dinner, a mostly-eaten Christmas pudding at the centre of the table. Charlie felt like he was having an out-of-body experience, looking in at his siblings all sat around the table without him. The only break in the sea of red hair was Hermione at Ron’s side, and Fleur, tucked under Bill’s arm, the couple staring at him wide-eyed.

Stood at the sink, Molly froze.

“Hi, everyone,” Charlie greeted awkwardly. “Uh. Merry Christmas. Thought I’d just... pop in.”

“Charlie!” Ginny was the one to break the tension, jumping to her feet and launching herself at her favourite brother. Charlie hugged her close, nose pressed to her strawberry-scented hair. *Merlin*, he’d missed her.

That was the trigger for the rest to follow — the twins hugged him, delighting in reminding him they were now taller than him. Bill ruffled his hair like he was twelve again, kissing his temple. “Good to see you, Char,” he murmured softly. Fleur hugged him, too, kissing both his cheeks and thanking him for the bracelet he’d sent her. Even Ron clapped him on the shoulder, looking uncomfortable.