

Differences

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Fandom: Merlin (BBC)

Pairing: Merlin/Arthur pre-slash

Rating: PG

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Warnings: spoilers for season 1

Summary: Since his encounter with the questing beast Arthur has been noticing things about Merlin. Things are not quite the same any more and he needs to understand why.

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Arthur couldn't help noticing that Merlin seemed different. Ever since that rather odd conversation where Merlin had come to see him after he had started to recover from his injury, Merlin wasn't quite the same. At first Merlin was quieter, less given to suddenly speak to him out of turn, but that only lasted a few days; it was something else, something Arthur couldn't quite figure out that was bothering him.

Sometimes it was almost as if the whole questing beast incident hadn't happened at all, but then he would look Merlin in the eye or catch Merlin looking thoughtful and his instincts would fire off. He tried to pretend there was nothing to notice, but when he found that he had to remind himself not to notice more than not, he realised Merlin really was changed. The strangest part, however, was that this change made him feel safer.

No matter what he told everyone else, his experience with the questing beast had shaken him. No matter what his father said he knew that there were some things that could not be beaten by the sword and, although he would never say it out loud, he did not think it was one of Gaius' normal concoctions that had saved him. He had felt the fever running through his body, felt the magic that fed it, and he had felt the magic which cured him. He might have been mostly unconscious, but he remembered some things and Merlin kept showing up in his dreamlike recollections.

The fact that he was thinking Merlin and magic in the same thought had worried him for a couple of days, but then he had done some serious thinking and it had finally dawned on him that he had nothing to be worried about. He called Merlin an idiot with regularity, but he did not really think that. There were some things over which he and Merlin would never agree and he thought Merlin could be naive, but he had realised Merlin was very far from an idiot.

Merlin had brought him his super and made up the fire and was standing there looking into the flames, the same far away look on his face that had made Arthur look twice in the first place. There was something in that expression that Arthur knew had not been there before. He had asked around and he knew Merlin had gone charging off after he had begun to recover and that the situation had involved Gaius as well and when the two had returned Gaius had been somewhat worse for wear, but he had not asked Merlin about it directly. He suspected Merlin

had thought he would for a little while, but it appeared Merlin's worry had evaporated at the same rate his had.

They were back to sniping and joking and arguing, but Arthur could feel that there was something standing between them now, something that he suspected, but did not know for sure. He wanted the doubt gone.

"Merlin," he said, and Merlin turned to him, face suddenly animated again.

"Yes, Arthur?" Merlin responded, as informal as ever.

"I wish to ask you one question," Arthur said simply and quietly.

"You can ask me anything," Merlin said, tone light and face open as if he had nothing in the world to hide.

Clearly Merlin thought this was any normal conversation, but Arthur was all too aware it was not.

"Swear to me you will give me the true answer," he said firmly and Merlin's smile dropped a little.

"What is it?" Merlin replied, neither agreeing nor refusing.

Arthur was skilled with games of words and was not swayed.

"Please, Merlin," he said, looking his friend directly in the eyes, "swear to me."

For a few moments Merlin stood there silent and serious, that look in his face that had at first made Arthur so uneasy, clear to see.

"I swear," were the words Merlin eventually replied.

Arthur had his promise now and he knew that Merlin would indeed answer truthfully, but for a moment he felt like just brushing the whole thing off and turning away. Merlin made him feel safe; it was strange but true and the part of him that was not a prince didn't understand why he had to know the reason. That it was true was enough for that part, but the rest of him needed the answer.

"Are you a sorcerer, Merlin?" he voiced the thought that had been plaguing him for days.

He saw Merlin's expression flicker, saw the lie form behind Merlin's eyes and then watched it be wiped away.

"Yes," came Merlin's response and then silence descended.

For a fraction of a second he felt fear attempt to take hold in his heart, but it was a notion that could no longer stand against what he knew. He had asked his one question and it had been answered truthfully and now there was no longer the doubt between them. The fear flickered like a lamp running low on oil and then it went out just as surely the lamp would have. In its place was something unsure, but warm.

"You are the reason I am alive," Arthur said simply, not asking, just stating what he felt, "not Gaius. I felt the magic that brought me back."

"Not my magic," Merlin said, not moving from his position by the fireplace, "it was old magic; I only fetched it. I would have cured you if I could, but the questing beast's power was too strong."

Silence descended again as Arthur just sat there and looked, properly looked at Merlin, taking in everything and not the mask Merlin usually wore. Merlin did not ask him what he was going to do and did not try to leave, he just stood there and waited.

"You do not fear what I will do with this information," Arthur said, knowing it was true.

"No," Merlin replied, seemingly completely placid, "I have not feared that for a long time, it was just the fewer people who carried the burden of knowing what I am the better and I didn't want you trying to do something nobly heroic like sending me away for my own good."

Arthur considered Merlin's reasoning for a little while and had to concede that it was something he probably would have tried to do. Every moment Merlin was in Camelot Merlin was in danger, but Arthur no longer doubted Merlin could escape himself if necessary.

"You're right, I probably would have," he admitted and saw the first glimmer of surprise on Merlin's face.

"But not now?" Merlin asked, some of the old Merlin showing through.

"I don't think you need my help in that way," Arthur replied, standing up and walking around the edge of the table.

Merlin stood his ground and Arthur walked towards his sorcerer of a manservant and knew for the first time that he was in the presence of an equal. What Merlin did not have in rank he made up for in character and Arthur finally admitted that, even though he would be king one day, the man in front of him was not inferior to him. Merlin's power was not the same as his, but he finally knew what he could see in Merlin that he recognised and that was its weight. Something had happened to Merlin, something that had given him a responsibility he had not had before.

"What happened," Arthur asked, standing close to his friend, "what changed you? I understand the heavy load of power, Merlin, I will understand you."

For a moment Merlin's eyes opened in surprise and then he saw Merlin realise that this wasn't so surprising. Looking into Merlin's eyes then, Arthur felt as if the final piece of a picture had finally been put into place as they finally saw each other for what they really were.

"I killed someone," Merlin said after a few moments, still meeting his gaze. "She deserved to die, but I did not stab her with a sword or club her with a mace, I called down death from the sky and destroyed her. She died because I willed it and I didn't know I could do that. I spoke a word and she was dead."

Uther did not like tales of sorcerers, but Arthur had heard them anyway and the power Merlin described was still awe inspiring, but he refused to give in to the emotion. He remembered all too well when he had realised that his word would mean death; it had been a hard lesson and Merlin's reaction, to his own revelation, made him feel safer still.

"All I have to do is give an order," he said, stepping just a little closer.

He watched as Merlin considered this for a little while and then Merlin smiled just a little bit.

"Are you saying we are the same?" Merlin asked, clearly somewhat amused.

Arthur smiled back, feeling that warm sensation inside him growing just a little bit more.

"Apart from you not having my stunning good looks and being an idiot, of course," he said and felt his heart lifting as Merlin laughed.

"And you forgot I'm not a royal prat," Merlin replied and it was Arthur's turn to laugh.

It felt so right and, for the first time in his life, Arthur knew he was looking at someone who understood him and whom he understood. Not his father, not Morgana, not a single one of his knights had ever let him feel that before.

"Sit down, Merlin," he said, speaking not to his servant, but to his friend, "let's drink ale and talk."

There was so much he didn't know about Merlin and so much he wanted to and he was determined that secrets were a thing of the past. Merlin had changed him and he was pretty sure he had changed Merlin and it was time to put aside any differences between them. Merlin told him he would be a great king and with Merlin by his side he almost believed it.

The End