Stolen Glances

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Summary

Arthur always notices when Merlin isn't looking at him... And when he is.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

Every time Merlin steals forbidden glances at Arthur his heart tha-thumps, like a distant drum hammering against the confines of his chest. There are times he thinks it's going to burst right out of him.

Arthur, naturally, never notices.

"Merlin!" The pretentious young prince roars, shrugging off his clothes as he progresses across the room, heading for the change wall set in the far corner.

"Yes, sir?" Merlin mumbles, fighting to advert his gaze. He's well aware of what'll happen if he stares too long at Arthur's broad back, strong shoulders and muscular legs. Arthur is like fire to a fly, mesmerising and deadly. Merlin would be unable to resist if he snuck even the swiftest glance at his master.
Arthur slides around the change wall and tosses his remaining garments over the edge, stripping down to nothing and wrapping a towel around his waist. "Make sure the water is warm this time, will you?" He pauses, then sticks his head around the corner to glance at Merlin. "Warm, Merlin. Not boiling."

Merlin nods curtly, still avoiding Arthur's gaze, and turns to the kettle strung up above the fireplace. "Warm. Of course. Yes, sire."

Arthur purses his lips, frowning slightly, and ducks back behind the makeshift wall. Merlin exhales heavily, shifting uncomfortably, and tips water into the basin. Dipping his fingers gingerly into the water, Merlin relishes in the pleasant, balanced temperature. He needs a bath himself. His neckerchief does little to mask his own smell, and he gets wafts of body odour every time he raises his arms. Arthur has been working him hard recently, and he's had less time to bathe despite sweating excessively. He wonders how the prince puts up with him.

"Are you ready out there, Merlin?" Arthur calls. Merlin's heart leaps at his own name, the sound of it sweet and light on Arthurs tongue. It's not spoken with the royal's usual drawl, drawn out and tinged with frustration. This time Arthur speaks his name as if it's something precious. He says it the way he says Guinevere's, and that makes Merlin somewhat uncomfortable, and maybe a little warm.

"Yes, sire."

"Good. Fetch me my washcloth."

Merlin nods. "Yes, sire."

Arthur comes around the corner, dressed in naught but a towel. He pads across the room to join Merlin by the tub, a frown still tainting his brow. "Yes, sire this- yes, sire that... What's gotten into you recently, Merlin?"

The warlock shrugs his shoulders and turns away from him, scooping up the carmine washcloth and assortment of soaps.

"Merlin?" Arthur's voice is quiet, different from his usual tone. Almost gentle. "Something's up with you, what is it?"

"Nothing, sire."

"See, there you go again!" Arthur tips his head at Merlin. "Sire- you're so polite today."

"There's no pleasing you, Arthur." Merlin snaps. "First you complain I don't treat you with enough respect, then you complain that I'm too polite."

Arthur seems a little taken aback by this, his jaw snapping shut.

Merlin feels a blush creep across his cheeks, ducking his head. "No, sorr- sorry, Arthur. I shouldn't have... Sorry."

"No, no," Arthur shakes his head. "It's fine."

Merlin can feel the prince's eyes on him. He can imagine the luminescent blue of them glowing in the firelight, wide and bright. The blush darkens around his cheekbones and tingles the tips of his ears. He keeps his head facing away from Arthur and passes him his cloth and soap.

The prince accepts the items and sets them down on the small table beside the tub, still staring
suspiciously at his servant. "Well, Merlin," He feels the water, surprised by the perfect temperature. "You know you can tell me anything."

Merlin frowns. "I thought you were going to say, 'you can't hide anything from me'."

"That too." Arthur chuckles lightly and drops the towel from his waist, letting it tumble limply to the floor.

Immediately Merlin's heart flutters and he twists away, edging towards the door. "Well, if that's all, sire-"

"No!" Arthur calls.

Merlin can hear the splash of the water sloshing over the wooden rim of the tub as Arthurs sinks into it. He sighs and turns, raising an eyebrow at Arthur, but not quite looking at him.

"You haven't met my gaze all day, Merlin." Arthur's voice is soft and gentle- as if trying to caress the truth out of Merlin, like calling to a frightened animal- inviting him to look at him. "For a while, in fact."

"Yes I have."

"No," Arthur shakes his head. "You haven't. You're not even looking at me now."

"Yes I am."

"Merlin."

Merlin clenches his jaw. "What?"

"You can't hide anything from me."

Merlin nearly laughs. Nearly. "Look, Arthur-" He begins. "I have a lot to do; so if you're done with me, I might just-"

"Come here."

Merlin inhales sharply, eyelid twitching. "Did I forget something?"

"Yes. That I'm you're prince and you have to obey my commands. Come here."

Merlin hesitantly steps towards Arthur and the tub. His mind rages war against itself, fighting not to think about how Arthur is naked beneath those dark waters. Trying not to look him in the eyes for fear of drowning. Battling not to reach out and run his fingers through the soft strands of golden hair that crowns Arthur's head. "Yes, sire?"

Arthur raises a hand from the water, shimmering droplets splashing onto the floor. "Come here."

Merlin steps forward again.

"Closer."

Another step.

"Closer."
Merlin moves to stand beside the tub, not looking at Arthur, but past him, through him.

"Why won't you look at me, Merlin?"

Merlin clenches his jaw again and shrugs slightly.

"Merlin," Arthur's words are carried from his lips by barely a breath, so delicate Merlin can hardly hear them. "Look at me."

The warlock swallows thickly, steeling himself, and turns his head. His eyes refuse to follow, however, still trained on the distant window.

Arthur's hand, wet and warm, falls down to hold Merlin's wrist, tugging slightly. "Look at me, Merlin."

Merlin inhales deeply, closing his eyes before opening them and focusing his vision on Arthur's face. Every contour of the prince's features are distinct in the flicker of firelight, shadowed in places and shining in others. His eyes, as Merlin had imagined, are glowing. His golden hair glimmers yellow, not yet damp.

Merlin can feel his heartbeat rising, as always. His heart crashes against his ribcage, hammering against him. 

"God, he's so beautiful."

Arthur stares right back, his gaze relentless and trapping. Merlin can feel all the air in his lungs escape, his shoulders sagging under the tension he'd been carrying in them.

The prince continues to peer at him from beneath hooded lids and long lashes, his tongue darting out to dampen his lips. "That's better."

Merlin gulps and forces his vocal cords to work, opening his mouth to stutter, "Pleased, sire- may I go now?"

The corner of Arthur's mouth twists up into a gentle smile and he shifts his fingers to press against Merlin's pulse point. "Do you want to?"

"I-" Merlin frowns. "Yes. Yes, of course. I-I can't intrude on your privacy and... Gaius will be wanting... leeches. I have to clean out the leeches, see? And collect some... stuff. Yeah."

"You talk so much rubbish, you know that, Merlin?" Arthur can hardly keep the laughter from his voice.

"What?"

"Your pulse, Merlin." Arthur prods at his wrist with the pad of his thumb. "It's quickened."

"S-so?"

"And you're blushing."

"So?"

"Merlin," Arthur drags him down to his level, not relenting his gaze. "You're not attracted to me, are you?"

Merlin scoffs. "You? You're a- you're a pompous dollop head. A royal, pompous dollop head who's so self-absorbed he imagines everyone's in love with him. Well, not me. Nope."
"Really?"

Merlin nods. "Yeah."

"Oh." Arthur lets go of his arm, withdrawing his hand. "Because if you were, I'd say the feeling's mutual. Actually, I was going ask you if you wanted to join me in here. See, the water's quite a marvellous temperature for once, and you smell bloody awful." He quirks an eyebrow at his servant. "But, y'know, if you're not interested that's fine, too..."

Merlin stares, gobsmacked. "Wait... What?"

"Never mind, Merlin. You've go so much to do. Don't let me keep you."

"Arthur, what-"

"It's so warm in here. So nice. Though a little roomy- could definitely use some company," Arthur teases, tucking his hands under his head and leaning back, eyes sliding shut.

"Arthur, do you... Like me? Merlin thinks.

Arthur continues to lie with his head cradled in his own hands, ignoring Merlin with a smirk plastered on his lips. Merlin bites his lip and begins to shuffle away, confused and sort of exhilarated. However, just as he shifts to make towards the door Arthur shoots his hand out and grabs Merlin's, pulling him down and planting his lips against Merlin's mouth. Merlin's eyes pop and his breath catches in his throat, his lips parting slightly against Arthur's. There is a moment, elongated by surprise, in which the prince and the servant still, lips pressed against one another's.

Then, as quickly as the kiss begins it ends, and Arthur pulls away. "Merlin," He speaks, his voice a deep rumble. "You know, I always notice when you're not looking at me... and when you are."

Merlin just stares back, wide-eyed and shocked into silence. He doesn't even have the decency to blush.

"I expect to see you first thing tomorrow morning." Arthur smiles, blinking up at him.

Merlin nods, stumbling back and heading for the door.

"And Merlin," Arthur calls. "I'm serious about that bath. Take one, will you?"

Merlin feels a smile crawl across his features, grinning at Arthur. "Yes, sire."

End Notes

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