

# THE TABLE ROUND

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*Excerpt*

## ACT TWO

### SCENE 1: Guinevere Arrives

*(The courtyard of the castle. Arrows out first, hooded women known as the WOADS enter, led by SCÁTHE. She surveys. Clicks her tongue. And then makes way for the warrior-queen.)*

**GUINEVERE.** Is this Camelot?

**SCÁTHE.** My lady, 'tis.

**GUINEVERE.** At ease.  
We come as guests unto these hallowed halls.  
Invasion may come hereafter. Go, seek the King.  
If he would woo a Queen, I await him here.  
If he would not, then let him send his Knights—  
And I'll win *them* instead.

**SCÁTHE.** It will be done.

**GUINEVERE.** Then go. And all my warriors, disperse.  
I would seem maidenly and weak, too frail  
To woo too harshly. Yet, knock your arrows sure:  
Should any offer harm—yourselves be not demure.

*(The WOADS fade away, weapons at the ready.)*

**GUINEVERE.** What wouldst thou, Camelot? Thou call'st me hither,  
Whither I would not be, but that thou call'st me: Queen.  
I *am* a Queen, of a country thou hast ruined;  
Monarch of a mangled people thy "Holy" King  
Hath deemed less worthy than his own to stay alive.  
And here am I, summoned to sleep within his bed...

*(Coming to her knees with both hands on the ground.)*

**GUINEVERE.** I cannot feel the Earth. The Magic  
Of my ancestors, the roar of that Red Dragon  
Are muffled here in Camelot, buried  
Beneath the stone and steel that weigh unnatural  
Upon our fragile land. What wouldst thou, Camelot?

I feel myself am conquered, here, already.  
Trapped between these standing stones—that *he*  
Hath built to other gods than mine. And yet:  
I'll be no beggar here, constrained by war to wed,  
But make proud Arthur bend the knee, and beg me to his bed.  
By all *my* gods, I swear it.

(*A hiss from SCÁT*HE, as ELAINE rushes on from upstage.  
SCÁTHE trains her bow on ELAINE.)

**ELAINE.** My lady, Guinevere!

**GUINEVERE.** Who calls me, ha? (*Turning quickly.*)

**ELAINE.** (*Curtseying.*) The Lady of Shalott, your Grace.

**GUINEVERE.** A woman greet me here in Camelot? No King  
To do the deed?

**ELAINE.** King Arthur waits for you inside.  
Indeed, we've all been *waiting* very long. But let that be.  
I pray you, enter in, if you be she. The King awaits—  
What? (*Sees SCÁT*HE; *draws knife.*) Still hesitating?

(*SCÁT*HE knocks her bow. GUINEVERE gestures peace.  
SCÁTHE lowers bow.)

**GUINEVERE.** I... would stay here.  
I like the bracing air this courtyard yields. (*Taking ELAINE'S knife.*)  
And what is more: I think I hear him coming.

(*LANCELOT rushes on, armed, as GUINEVERE curtsies, all  
charm.*)

**LANCELOT.** Elaine, stand down!

**GUINEVERE.** (*Hiding the dagger.*) Your Majesty,  
I humbly lay my heart at your command.  
A woman frail and—O.

(*A beat. LANCELOT holds GUINEVERE from behind at  
knifepoint. SCÁT*HE trains on him. ELAINE wavers.)

**LANCELOT.** Bid your guard stand down.

**GUINEVERE.** I come unarmed.

**LANCELOT.** I think not so.

(*LANCELOT slowly takes the knife from GUINEVERE'S  
cleavage, and puts it in his pocket.*)

**GUINEVERE.** Your Majesty—!

**LANCELOT.** Elaine: go fetch the King.

**ELAINE.** But, Lancelot...

**LANCELOT.** Go to!

*(ELAINE'S face hardens, and she turns on her heel to exit. LANCELOT and GUINEVERE remain locked. SCÁTHER bristles. A beat, then:)*

**GUINEVERE.** You are not he.

**LANCELOT.** My lady, no. But one you *more* should fear.

**GUINEVERE.** King Arthur's dog?

*(GUINEVERE spins out of the hold, coming to her knee with her hand on her boot, other hand raised to halt SCÁTHER'S attack.)*

**LANCELOT.** Sir Lancelot du Lac.  
*(Aloud.)* Right hand to the King. Defender of the Crown.  
*(To GUINEVERE.)* And not one tricked by simpering, nor beaten  
By the batting of your lids. Call off your guard.

**GUINEVERE.** Why should I so? We watched your bravest Knights  
Ride out from Camelot. And thou alone,  
*Sir Lancelot*, remaining to defend.  
*(Coming to both knees.)* To harm a helpless woman? And King Arthur's bride?  
You wouldn't dare.

*(A tense moment, before ARTHUR rushes on, attended by MERLIN, MORDRED and ELAINE.)*

**ARTHUR.** Sir Lancelot, stand down.

**MERLIN.** Hold, Lancelot!

**LANCELOT.** Your Majesty.

**ARTHUR.** Your pardon, lady. Believe you are well-met.  
Although our greeting here was—*hearty*,  
And rough as may befit a bachelor court,  
Believe ourselves are gentle as the lamb.  
Upon our shield we bear no beast but this:  
The Virgin Mary pregnant with her Christ.  
And child-like, we here lay by—*yea, all of us*—  
Those arms we bear, unbloodied by our guests;  
That with: *(Doing so:)* *bare arms*—we may embrace  
The Queen of Wales, whose golden crown

We hope shall grace this azure field of ours,  
And make a triple crown to quell all Britony,  
And bring this warring isle beneath one blessèd Hand.  
Hail, Guinevere. Well met.

**ALL BUT LANCELOT.**

*(Kneeling.)* Hail, Guinevere.

**MERLIN.** Aye, and I shall greet ye, too! *(Helping GUINEVERE to her feet.)*

**GUINEVERE.** My lord and liege. *(Kissing MERLIN'S hand.)*

**ARTHUR.** You know the Merlin?

**GUINEVERE.** 'Twas they who sent me hither.

**LANCELOT.** Your Majesty, I must protest. This *woman*  
Brings a guard where she was wont to woo!  
This is no embassy of love: but war.  
And were you wise, you'd throw the woman out.

**MERLIN.** When she's come so far in cold? O, poo. *(Looking around.)* What d'ye...?  
*(Seeing.)* Mordred! There's a lad. Go fetch the lady in.

*(MORDRED moves forward, but:)*

**ELAINE.** She will not budge.

**LANCELOT.** For that she means some treason to the crown.

**MERLIN.** *(To MORDRED.)* Hop to it, boy!

*(MORDRED steps back, seeing SCÁTHE'S arrow. Besides:)*

**ARTHUR.** ENOUGH! I say: *Enough.* I'll woo the maid alone—

**GUINEVERE.** I am no maid.

*(ARTHUR and LANCELOT take this in. MERLIN smirks.)*

**ARTHUR.** *(To LANCELOT.)* Her guard I spy.  
I'm not so old, dear friend, but that my eyes are good.

**LANCELOT.** She comes here armed!

**ARTHUR.** Why should she not?  
When I to foreign nations ride, I bear my arms,  
Display my might, lest courtesy prove cowardice;  
And diplomacy, disguise.  
*(To GUINEVERE.)* Yet here I see a Warrior Queen—  
Who would make of me her prize.  
Lady, you have not spoke the while.

**GUINEVERE.** You've left no room to speak. What should I say?

**ARTHUR.** One answer: Yes.

**GUINEVERE.** One answer to what question? I have not been  
*Five minutes* in your hallowed court, but I:  
Have been insulted, threatened for my life,  
*Spoken* to at length, and now am bade  
To answer only "Yes!" Is this the chivalry  
That poets sing belongs to Camelot?  
The Merlin's name I know. This Lancelot,  
Though rude, declared his lineage to me.  
But *thou*, whome'er thou mayst be, who bear  
A *Virgin* on thy shield and prattle on  
Declaring all crowns *thine*—  
What, sir, may be thy name?  
Though I may guess it: I'd have all men speak plain.

**ARTHUR.** You heard them call me "Majesty."

**GUINEVERE.** As many lordlings are.  
This nation's full of many kings. Which patch of land is thine?

**ARTHUR.** I am the High King, Arthur. And heir to Pendragon.

**GUINEVERE.** But fought a dragon?

**ARTHUR.** Aye, and beaten her as well.

**GUINEVERE.** Wouldst beat me, too?

**ARTHUR.** Wouldst challenge me?

**GUINEVERE.** I would. Unless thou fearest to fight a woman.

**ARTHUR.** A woman, aye. A dragon, Lady? Never. (*Takes dagger from LANCELOT.*)

**GUINEVERE.** The wager, when I win?

**ARTHUR.** My hand.

**GUINEVERE.** Still on thine arm?

**ARTHUR.** As thou prefer'st. And when I trounce thee, Majesty?

**GUINEVERE.** I'll take thy hand, indeed.

(GUINEVERE reveals that to ARTHUR'S dagger, SCÁTHER'S given her a sword. ARTHUR and LANCELOT are momentarily nonplussed. ARTHUR gives LANCELOT the dagger, and that knight retrieves Excalibur, sheathed, which he makes a show of

*presenting to the King. ARTHUR draws Excalibur, considers, and then hands the blade to LANCELOT, electing to fight GUINEVERE with the sheath. GUINEVERE sees the insult and attacks.)*

*(They fight. It's brief. GUINEVERE feints and has the king kneeling on point. The onlookers hold their breath.)*

**ARTHUR.** A happy loss. My hand, if thou wilt take it.

**LANCELOT.** She hesitates.

**MERLIN.** The offer does not entice. Give more there, Wart.

**ARTHUR.** What, Lady, can I offer?

**GUINEVERE.** Your heart.

**ARTHUR.** 'Tis here. And yours to take. If you will cut it out.

**GUINEVERE.** And marry me a corpse? I have my pick of those in Wales.

**ARTHUR.** But are any of them Kings?

**GUINEVERE.** The gentleman is modest.

**ARTHUR.** The lady is too kind.

**GUINEVERE.** Indeed, I am. You came once to my country, sir.  
To do us a disservice: killed many of my kin,  
And Christianized the rest. Was this kind?

*(No answer.)*

**GUINEVERE.** We're starving. Your Knights have burnt our crops,  
Left us with the elderly and ailing.  
This army that you see, Sir Lancelot,  
Is all that you left standing.—Myself,  
And what beauties my youth may now possess,  
Are all the wealth of Wales that still remain to us.  
And it is *hard* to come as beggar who am Queen.  
What will you give me, if I chain me to your bed.

**ARTHUR.** Nothing.

**GUINEVERE.** Then I have come for naught?

**ARTHUR.** Not so.  
For I'll give nothing to one who makes herself a slave;  
But to one who makes herself a wife...? The world.  
You condemn my Camelot, seeing here the means  
Of your destruction. So I have been.

But all things die; the seasons change;  
Kings may rise and fall: and what is left, but dust?  
Or so I once believed. For I was, like you,  
A servant to the gods, or rather say: a plaything.  
For your pagan gods, from Cerridwen to Chronos,  
Care nothing for the people *in* their care.

I do.

And I repent the means of your conversion.  
Well may you condemn a Christ that comes  
With rack and tortures to put his cross to shame:  
'Tis shameful!—and no salvation. But this I swear:  
Yourself and all your Woads are welcome here.

**LANCELOT.** Your Majesty!

**ARTHUR.** Nor will I force your hand, fair lady,  
To marry where you do not please.

**MERLIN.** Now, Wart...

**ARTHUR.** Stay a month here as my guest. Armed, as pleases you.  
Myself shall send my servants to feed and tend your poor.  
Those whom we have wounded, allow that we may heal.  
And if, by this small dowry, you find myself sufficient:  
Then take a King, take England. Take England, take the world.  
Are we agreed?

*(A beat. EVERYONE leans in slightly. Then GUINEVERE takes ARTHUR'S hand ceremoniously.)*

**GUINEVERE.** We are.

**ARTHUR.** Then come thou, Lady—and enter *Camelot*.

*(Exeunt.)*