

# The Death of Brutus

Brutus ruled Britain for twenty-three years. At first, he sent exploration parties into all corners of the realm; then large groups went to settle in the various regions. Brutus built himself a beautiful city on a river which he called Tamesis; this city he named Troia Nova, though in time it became known commonly as Trinovantium. In the city he built a marvelous palace, whence he administered justice with an iron hand.

At first, the Morforwyn helped the Trojans a good deal; but as they settled down into their towns and on their farms, less was seen of the Ladies of the Lake. Argante married Corineus, and stayed with him at his chief fortress of Dimilioc; but the rest were not seen again by the first generation of Trojan settlers. When they realized that the Morforwyn would not return, a Council of Elders was held at Aberffraw on the Isle of Môn, which was situated off the north coast of Cambria. These elders, who called themselves druids, those of deep knowledge, reached the conclusion that it was profane to write down the stories and wisdom imparted to them by the Morforwyn, and so they committed every word to memory and swore to pass it on to the intellectual champions of the next generations.

Some of the druids believed that the Morforwyn were only semi-divine, that above them was One True God; most of them, however, believed that the Morforwyn were the gods of this land, just as the Olympians were the gods of their native lands; and since they were settling in that land, it was only right that they should pay homage to the local gods.

When Brutus was in the twentieth year of his rule, he announced that Locrin would succeed him as High King. This surprised many of the British nobles, and enraged Camber, who was the eldest of Brutus' three sons. Imogen was also angered, though she kept her wrath a secret, and nursed ideas of vengeance that had been growing since Brutus first came to Armorica. Camber, meanwhile, gathered an army and marched into Logris, intending to take Excalibur for himself. He met little resistance until he was camped outside the walls of Trinovantium itself.

Hearing news of the impending war, Corineus traveled to Trinovantium, and arrived there a few days before Camber's host. He was admitted into Brutus' presence almost immediately. The High King was more portly than he had been before, and his forehead was now completely bald. To Corineus, he looked a good deal older than the easy living should have made him.

"What do you think, old friend?" the High King asked. "My own son has gathered an army, and wants to kill me!"

"What do I think? That Brutus loses his wisdom with his hair! It was unwise to nominate your second son your heir."

"What's done cannot be undone. I have already promised Locrin Excalibur. He's a good boy, worth twice Camber; what else could I do?"

"Refrain from making promises you cannot keep," answered Corineus.

“Come,” said Brutus, “we are friends; I have had men executed for saying less than you have—and you only just arrived. Have some wine. We must plan our campaign. It will be like the old days, in Achaea!”

“No. This is bad, Brutus. This is kin against kin, Trojan against Trojan. It must be stopped, not encouraged. If once civil strife takes hold of this land, never will it be shaken off.”

Accordingly, when the Cambrians pitched their tents outside Trinovantium, Corineus rode alone to Camber. The young man greeted him warmly.

“I am come to dissuade you from war,” said Corineus, when they had settled with some wine beside a brazier.

“I do not come to make war,” replied Camber. “If my father gives me what is rightfully mine, we will return to Cambria without having drawn our swords.”

“It is wisely spoken,” answered Corineus. “I think I can arrange a truce; will you meet your father and negotiate?”

“I would do anything rather than risk so many lives in bloody war, short of renouncing my claim.”

“I will arrange a truce,” said Corineus.

Brutus agreed to meet Camber three days hence. The place was a small wooden house about a mile south of Trinovantium. Camber went inside to await his father, but Locrin and a band of men were already waiting among the bushes. Instantly, they leaped out and barred the doors. Standing back, they fired burning arrows into the thatched roof, which caught light instantly. There were cries from inside the house, but no one could leave by the doors. Several jumped from windows, but they were shot before they had run a dozen paces.

At the same instant, Brutus led his troops from the gates of Trinovantium, descending with great violence upon the enemy host. Leaderless, there was little the Cambrians could do. They were either massacred or fled. Corineus was horrified at what had happened. He immediately jumped on his horse and galloped into Cambria, to Caerleon, where Camber held court. There he found the young man’s wife, heavy with child. Corineus threw himself on the floor before her and told her what had happened. With a sharp cry of anguish, the young queen fell backwards into her throne.

“It was I who organized this truce, which has been most foully violated,” said Corineus. He drew his sword and handed it to her. “You who have suffered most from it must mete out what punishment you think fit to me.”

The queen returned his sword at once and said bleakly: “We all suffer together, for we have all been betrayed. But the killing must be stopped somewhere, and I cannot blame you for trying.”

When Imogen heard what had happened, she fainted away and betook herself to a tall tower in the palace. There she locked herself in and wept without eating a morsel for three days. When Brutus noticed that his wife was missing, he sought her in her chamber, but the door was locked.

“Come forth, my lady!” he called. “Good news, for victory is ours!”

“There can be no victory for the mother who has lost her son,” bemoaned Imogen.

“All men must die; and some bring it on themselves sooner than necessary,” answered Brutus. “Camber was a traitor, and died a traitor’s death, as was most suitable. There is no cause for lamentation.”

Imogen made no reply, and despite all his calling, Brutus could extract no further word from her. At last, he kicked the door, and with one blow it flew open. At once, Imogen flew at him, her hair and clothes in disarray. She held a shining dagger, which she plunged into his shoulder. Brutus grunted, grasped her wrist, and squeezed until she was forced to release the hilt. Then he threw her onto the bed.

“What’s this?” he said. “Are you made of the same stuff as your son?”

“Are not you?” she replied bitterly.

“I grieve for him as much as you, my lady. As he was my son, I lament his death; but as he was a traitor, I slew him. So must we deal with all traitors. Come. You are my wife, and High Queen of the mightiest kingdom on the face of the earth! Take heart, and be strong!”

Imogen looked into his face with sullen eyes. “Queen I am,” she said; “but I was also a mother.”

Brutus grew impatient. “And still you are, to two fine sons: do not forget Locrin and Albanact. Come to the great hall. Tonight is our victory feast!” And with this, he left her.

Now there was at court a young doctor, who for many moons had been passionately in love with Imogen and, though she perceived it, she never acted upon her knowledge. Now she called him to her. He entered her chamber and bowed low.

“Juventus,” she said, raising him to his feet. “I am betrayed, and in need. In my peril I have only you to turn to.”

“How may I help your Majesty?”

“I have need of a sleeping draught,” she said.

“How potent must it be?”

“Never to awaken.”

Juventus frowned. “My lady, I cannot do it; you must not so despair. All grief must end.”

“No: some lives for ever. But this is not for me.”

Light dawned in Juventus’ eyes. “There is much danger in what you suggest,” he said slowly.

Imogen placed her hand on his cheek and raised his face to gaze into her eyes. “Juventus,” she said, “are you blind? For many months I have looked on you and longed for you. Now I am decided. We can fly together into Armorica. Fear not Brutus, or his men: they will be in such disarray, they will not even notice that we have gone.”

“My lady!” Juventus fell on his knees and showered her hands with kisses. “I shall do it!”

Brutus had gone from Imogen’s chamber to the banquet hall; but his way took him past a shrine that he had erected in the centre of the palace. It was a

shrine to Artemis, which he kept even though his kingdom now had its own gods. Now he stopped and knelt in prayer before her image.

“Artemis, great lady,” he prayed, “I have waded so far through blood, that I dare do nothing else. Blood begets blood; but to stop now would surely mean my death. I must be cautious, for my enemies hedge me in. Blood is the only way. What else should I do? I chose my path many years ago, and now I cannot turn from it.” He stood up and faced the idol, arms akimbo. “This is the way of things, and there is no escape from the violence of the world. The only thing to do is become the best warrior—it is the only way to survive. There can be no regrets: joy in it, rather. Come what may, I shall die a warrior’s death!”

His head held high, Brutus turned and took a step to leave the sacred enclosure; but the hairs prickled on his scalp, and he turned slowly. All was the same as before: the marble of the statue was still a ghostly white, and trails of smoke from the incense burners still curled lazily towards the ceiling in the still air. Nothing was different, and yet Brutus had thought he had heard words.

“It must have been the wind,” he said to himself; “it is the battle, playing tricks on my mind. I shall not die tonight!”

And, wrapping his cloak more tightly about him, Brutus took himself to the great hall. When he arrived, he saw that Imogen was there before him.

“My lady,” he said, “I see you have found your right mind. Welcome to the victory hall!”

“My lord is correct, as always,” replied Imogen, with a smile. She held out a cup. “Let us drink to victory over one’s enemies!”

Brutus smiled. “Victory!” he said, and drank the wine in a single gulp.

Towards the end of the feast, Brutus began to feel ill. He called Juventus, but the physician said that it was probably the ill effects of so much wine after a hard day on the field of battle.

Brutus snorted. “Do you think I can’t handle my wine? Get out of my hall, young goat!” He rose to strike him, but overbalanced and pitched onto the floor, where he lay groveling among the rushes. The entire hall was immediately silent. Brutus began to writhe, his hand clutching at his throat and belly. Juventus snapped out some orders to bear him to his chamber, and six warriors stepped forward and carried him away.

When Imogen reached her husband’s chamber, many of the nobles were present. Juventus sat at his side. But seeing her, Brutus dismissed them all. When they were alone together, he held out his hand for her to take. She did not stir.

“I am glad,” he said, between laboured breaths, “that you have forgiven me. Camber was a traitor, who deserved to die; but I would not want your ill feelings.”

“Do you repent Camber’s death?” Imogen asked.

“No, of course not. He was a traitor.”

“But he deserved at least the death of a warrior. You had him trapped and slain like an otter.”

“All is fair in war,” answered Brutus. “Once . . . many years ago . . . I attacked, a camp at night, when all were asleep. We won the victory. That is all that matters.” He grimaced, and flinched with pain.

“Is my lord in pain?” asked Imogen.

“The worst I ever felt,” answered Brutus; “but I’ll recover; the leech says so.”

Imogen reached to her bosom, and took a flask from between her snowy breasts. She threw it onto the bed. “What is left in that,” she said, “is enough to kill an ox. You’ll be dead by morning.”

Brutus’ eyes were wide with horror. “You treacherous, murderous bitch!” he choked. He tried to rise from his bed, but a paroxysm of pain wracked his body, and he fell back, heaving. Imogen now closed the distance, drawing a dagger from the folds of her dress.

“By blood you lived,” she said coolly. “You deserve no less than to die by blood!” And so saying, she plunged the dagger into his breast. His back arched, and the veins stood out for a second on his throat; then he collapsed, and was still. Imogen wiped her hands clean on the bed-sheets and walked calmly from the chamber.

No mortal in Britain ever saw her or Juventus again after that night. Locrin had his father buried with all honours, then ascended the throne in Trinovantium himself. Seeing the need for a strong alliance, he sent into Cornwall a request for marriage to Corineus’ daughter. He married Gwendolyn two months after his coronation.