

WITCHMARKED

By Irina Richards

THIS ISSUE, WE'RE pleased to share with you a preview extract from Irina Richards's upcoming story *Witchmarked*. "It takes place in AD 790, during a fictional Viking raid (there are no surviving records of Viking activity in the British Isles between 789 and 793)," she tells us, of the pages to follow. "In a surprise attack on a small village, a number of local people are captured – including the story's protagonist, Lola, a 14-year-old girl who has been born with a patch of dark hair on her forehead (seen as "a witches' mark")."

"*Witchmarked* weaves together history and mythology. It is a story of Lola's journey to a distant land which she never knew existed – leaving her old life irrevocably behind. At the same time, *Witchmarked* re-imagines storylines from Celtic myths (particularly focusing on the legend of Scathach), introducing a fantasy element. Ultimately, *Witchmarked* is a coming-of-age story of empowerment and finding your own place in an ever-changing world. *Witchmarked* is not meant to be historically accurate – it is, after all, a work of fiction. The historical setting is used more as a backdrop to the main events in the story."

We asked Richards to tell us more about writing a story set so far in the past. "Working on *Witchmarked* is really enjoyable – it's like travelling back in time! I have always had a special interest in the history of early medieval Britain. As there are only a few reliable sources of information about life in those days, I feel that many events that took place during that time – both mundane and fundamental – will forever remain a mystery, making this time period open to speculation and interpretation. I am also fascinated by the contact (and conflict) of cultures around this time period – the power struggles between the Anglo-Saxons, Picts, Scots, and Britons before the Vikings threw themselves into the mix. Whenever I think of that time period, I always depict it in stark black and white; therefore, the dark graphic aesthetic of manga captures it perfectly. I am greatly inspired by historical manga titles such as Kaoru Mori's *A Bride's Story* and Makoto Yukimura's *Vinland Saga*, as well as historical shoujo classics from the '70s and '80s; however, I do feel that the historical manga genre is sadly underrepresented and underrated in the UK nowadays."

Of her previous projects, Richards told us, "My first graphic novel, *Chemical Blue*, was completed in 2015 and published via Sweatdrop Studios – UK's first comics collective, which I am proud to be part of. I have also co-authored an instructional book, *Creating Manga Characters*. At the moment, I am dividing my time between creating *Witchmarked*, working as an artist educator, studying for a postgraduate degree, and raising my young family."

"You can find information about my publications, events, and general goings-on on my website, www.irinarichards.com or follow me on Instagram @irinarichardsart. I am aiming to release *Witchmarked* in late 2019/early 2020 – watch this space!"

