

Bird man

Cartimandua

The River of Skulls was worse than I imagined any game designer could dream up? It too me was the manifestation of all that was uncivilised about Planet Maponos (Tara 6). It stunk of age, the crypt, decay, was crawling with swamp dragons, full of strange twisted trees and many areas had not regrown from the Great Fire.

Gododdin trophies littered the trees as a warning to those who entered their domain.

Praise be mostly Madrawt thank Dispater our imperial god.

And thank Tzu Strath for the vaccine against the Choking Death for the place had mosquitoes.

The only beauty was above, in the tree tops where flowering vines bloomed and butterflies and glorious coloured humming birds and noisy apes lived.

As for the path we took, *littered in snakes*.

I hate snakes, can't explain why, but the sight of them even in a cage makes me shiver and these were not in a cage?

A complete contrast to the dry wilderness we had come from.

Such a hostile planet, I was glad I had come and seen first hand what I was glorifying as a refuge for the last of the free.

Now looking ahead at Nostradamus walking behind Mingo as we followed an ant cohort that was clearing a path through the swamp.

"Mingo's first road, Mingo 1," Mingo had joked but he was serious in building a road to Torrs the capital of the Gododdin.

And never realised that roads brought commerce, which brought wealth that meant a demand in trinkets and luxuries and an end to his life style.

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And had heard much of these Gododdin and was afraid. A cohort of ants to protect us, they must be more savage than Mingo!

And soon we came to the banks of a large river that swarmed with reptiles and I saw the Temple of Skulls and was revolted for it lived up to its name.

And on the other side of the river was Queen Cartimandua herself.

She was as beautiful as I had written and ruthless judging by all those loitering skulls.

I was learning much about the Bird people who I had turned into heroic saviors of our world. Soon I would ask Mingo to take me to Tzu Strath for here I do little to help Little Arthur reach his destiny.

Only by writing could I do that.

And why I suspected Mingo knew that and would keep me here amongst the mosquitoes, perhaps hoping I did get bit and contract a new lethal disease!

I could understand that, just the sort of thing Nostradamus would do.

Great minds think alike.

With me gone he hoped to get his son back, but things had gone too far for that.

I was not privy to the private meeting between Cartimandua and Mingo, but that night the City of Torrs came alive with revelers. Peace had been declared between the Gododdin and Mingo who was the Artebrate.

Which was why the Manticore Legion soberly stayed alert that night as did Cartimandua's palace guard?

Trust was lacking.

"Want me to pass your writings back to your publisher?" Nostradamus asked.

Astonished I looked at him.

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“I have lines of communication open to Tzu Strath; it’s up to you?”

I took it.

I did not report him to Mingo and my suspicions about this master spy were confirmed. Perhaps deep down I wanted King Mingo Drum Vercingetorix dead and buried for Arthur’s star to rise and mine as well.

For Arthur and myself were linked through my writings.

Anyway after Cartimandua we headed north towards Bird man Nations I never knew existed and I doubt even Nostradamus knew. And all the time the ants cleared a road and the climate changed from swamp to forest and it got colder.

Behind us came an army of flightless Bird men and ants and in the sky, the Manticore Legion and Gododdin cohorts for our numbers were growing.

Were we off to a glorious war?

And always at my side the lion creature Old Rag and the two proboscis elephant Baldy. Yes, I felt a prisoner and they were my guards.

And then she, Queen Cartimandua came for me alone.

She wore little apart from her blue woolen cape and her beauty stirred me, even if she did have wings and a tail.

She was still all woman.

“You are Vern Lukas, I have heard of you,” she told me, *well who said position didn’t bring its rewards*. So I knew straight away what she wanted *apart from me*.

“You can make me immortal Vern, do you mind if I call you Vern?”

“Not at all and I wasn’t lying, like I said she was some woman.



Illustration 83: River of Skulls

“Mingo is about to lead an attack on the Madrawts which means you will want to go and watch, then write it up. I want you to write about me Vern, I am not the savage the people of Tzu Strath make me out as.

The humans we both know will own this world; I don’t want to end up in a zoo Vern. I want the luxuries the humans offer, want to help me get them?”

After that we saw each other too much and I found I was becoming addicted to her. Sex does that to men, and before you know you cannot get enough and love raises it ugly head when you start writing poetry and everything seems beautiful then Cartimandua states, “You only want my body.”

That was true, what a body, I have eyes, and she got what she wanted, immortality in ink and illustrations of her in feathered clocks and golden armour, her hair a wash,

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the stars behind her and the sun under her feet.

To make men envious of my catch.

To make men she see was more than just a bird.

To make men want to come to Maponos to see her.

To catch a Bird woman for themselves.

And I painted her out equal to Queen Boadicea of the Icinea.