



Kaoru Kurimoto,  
**The Guin Saga Book 1:  
 The Leopard Mask**  
 (Hayakawa Shobo, 1979;  
 Vertical, 2002)

The Guin Saga plans to be 100 volumes long. That seems like a lot, until you've read **Book 1: The Leopard Mask**.

The tale opens with Rinda and Remus, sole survivors of a destroyed royal family, weaving their way out of thorn bush. Completely unprepared for a journey across enemy territory, the twin children are soon captured by the foe. Briefly rescued by a warrior in a leopard mask who remembers nothing but his name, Guin, and the ominous word "Aurra," they are quickly recaptured and begin a trip through political and magical intrigue far more tangled than their thorn hideaways.



Leopard-headed Guin and the royal twins are good company for the journey. Stripped of his memory and any knowledge of his own personality, Guin falls back on the most basic behavior his body suggests, becoming a terrific warrior almost by default. His loyalty to the children and careful observance of the enemy forces speak more of his character than he seems to realize.

The twins are children any parent would be proud of and any children would want for friends. Rinda is confident and commanding without becoming bossy or losing her kinder feelings. Remus is strangely kind and trusting for a child raised to be a dictator, and can always overcome his shyness when really needed. For all their charm, the characters are realistic, flawed by their own strengths. Rinda's self-assurance cracks exactly as a brave girl's would; Guin's bravery borders on the insane, and at least once is overruled by the calmer heads of the children. The interaction of the three characters is also well captured, with the interplay of talents and personalities forming a greater single until without any enforced agreements. Each member of the trio is in an equally desperate situation, and their desperate attachment to each feels not only natural, but necessary.

Much of the story's charm comes from Kaoru Kurimoto's folkloric treatment of the story. Royal twins seeking their destiny and the fate of a cursed warrior are epic material. The Middle Kingdoms they struggle through are more awash in mysticism and miracles than many high fantasy worlds. But Kurimoto and the characters together treat the entire situation with the pragmatic acceptance of folklore. No one ever stops to notice how amazing their surroundings are, or how very mystic their circumstances. It makes magic feel even more integral to the plot, and allows miracles and nightmares to infest the world with no need for explanation. The translation team at Vertical deserves credit for preserving a simplistic, almost fairytale cadence in the writing without weakening the maturity of the tale or the force of the language.

**The Leopard Mask** ends with the most audacious cliffhanger I've seen an author attempt. And it ends far too soon. Giving up no answers to its deeper mysteries, moving the heroes from one peril to another even more uncertain, *The Leopard Mask* feels less like the first book in a series and more like a rich chapter in a much longer novel. The rest of the tale can't come soon enough.

Vertical is currently planning to bring out only the first five volumes of the saga. If those volumes get half the audience they deserve, perhaps Vertical will share Kurimoto's daring and publish the full series.

- **Rambles**

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