

## The Seven Stones

**A. Mussbacher**

FriesenPress

(372pp)

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*Introducing a multitude of people, storylines, and questions for a beginning series, The Seven Stones is a rich fantasy novel.*

The first book in a series, A. Mussbacher's fantasy novel *The Seven Stones* introduces assassination plots, political complexity, a hidden history, and a touch of magic.

When Leona, a general, travels from Lamora to Uvar to protect the empress at the signing of a peace treaty between nations, she is caught off guard by an assassination attempt—not on the empress, but on her. In the aftermath, Leona is kidnapped by Taineian, the partner of the head of the Thieves' Guild, Leas.

When the Senate of Lamora declares Leona a traitor to cover their backs, she's forced to team up with Leas to discover the identity of the shooter. Meanwhile, Leas is on her own secret mission to collect the seven Stones of the Immortals. The mission appears to be shared by a guide that she and Leona clash with along the way—someone chosen by one of the Immortals who's able to wield some of their power. And the people whom Leona cares for—including her assistant-cum-daughter figure, Semara; her second-in-command, Jas; and her new admirer from the Thieve's Guild, Farid—are put in danger.

The story is sometimes burdened by its numerous points of view. Its chapters are short, but some still have several ill-signaled perspective shifts; secondary characters are lost in the mix. And the novel moves at such a pace that some of its crucial, character-defining moments are rushed through, including Taineian's capture of Leona, which happens off page.

The worldbuilding is rich, focused on details including the world's history, politics, and geography: "The desert stretches out around them like a red carpet that dances at the edges in the distance." However, the modern, casual dialogue strikes a strange note, grating against fantastical concepts like guides and guilds. Further, some central elements are kept vague—including the origin of the seven stones, which isn't revealed until near the end of the novel. And while the ongoing action means that intense scenes featuring skirmishes, intrigue, and even dances are plentiful, they're often short on centering details; some tangle together, and others are cut off too soon. And at the book's climax, significant twists are also rushed through at the expense of continued interest.

In the series-opening, intrigue-packed fantasy novel *The Seven Stones*, issues of trust and politics are at the fore.

EMILY GAINES (May 9, 2024)

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