



The Mystic Marriage

Heather Rose Jones

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Antuniet Chazillen lost everything the night her brother was executed. In exile, she swore that treason would not be the final chapter of the Chazillen legacy in Alpennia's history. A long-hidden book of alchemical secrets provides the first hope of success, but her return to the capital is haunted by an enemy who wants those secrets for himself.

Jeanne, Vicomtesse de Cherdillac is bored. The Rotenek season is flat, her latest lover has grown tediously jealous and her usual crowd of friends fails to amuse. When Antuniet turns up on her doorstep seeking patronage for her alchemy experiments, what begins as amusement turns to interest, then something deeper. But Antuniet's work draws danger that threatens even the crown of Alpennia.

The alchemy of precious gems throws two women into a crucible of adversity, but it is the alchemy of the human heart that transforms them both in this breathtaking follow-up to the widely acclaimed Daughter of Mystery.

The Mystic Marriage Details

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From Reader Review The Mystic Marriage for online ebook

Bogi Takács says

From my 2015 Hugo award recommendations:

Historical fantasy set in Alpennia, an imaginary Western-Central European country. (Think Austria and Switzerland.) There is a lot of intrigue among ultra-rich nobles living a life of leisure, but a lot of the plot involves alchemy, where they actually *work* and make something with their own hands - yes, both the characters and the author reflects on this. One of the reasons I like this series is the believable, not 'flashy' but still effective magic.

There are four main characters, all women. Two of them are an established couple, whereas two others end up in a relationship during the course of the novel. I was very glad to see a book with queer characters in a long-term loving, happy relationship. The author also tackled some of the problems I had with Alpennia #1, for example this time the pacing was tighter, and the cast was also not all ethnic/racial majority (though I really wish there would've been someone in a major role...). For my part I am really looking forward to the upcoming third novel!

My tweet series: Alpennia #1, Alpennia #2

Where I got the book: Print reviewer copy from publisher Bella Press

Regina says

I loved the first book (Daughter of Mystery - do read if you haven't), which was a delightful and leisurely regency romance between Barbara and Margerit, and made me really glad I stumbled across it.

This follow-up is equally enjoyable, with the romance between their friends Jeanne and Antuniet (opposites attract) this time. But what made me really happy was that the author featured Barbara and Margerit heavily here too because I adore their easy chemistry. Note there is nothing explicit but it somehow fits the elegance of this world.

Anyway, classy work, love this series, and I do hope there will be a third book... Perhaps Antuniet might have a charm to make it happen sooner. ;)

Cat M says

I continue to adore this series. This second instalment continues to follow Barbara and Margerit's lives, while expanding the focus to two characters who played a supporting role in the first book.

Antuniet and Jeanne are fascinating characters to hang a romance on. In Daughter of Mystery they are the two characters it's hardest to get a handle on.

Antuniet is proud and cold and always keeps herself at a chilly distance from those around her. Jeanne is a social butterfly with a reputation for flightiness when it comes to affairs of the heart.

Antuniet is hard to like, but in her blunt honesty easier to trust. Jeanne is easy to like, but her reputation for frippery and flitting between passions makes her difficult to trust.

The contrast between them and the path to bridging that gap makes for a compelling romance and I found myself falling for both characters, but especially for proud, prickly Antuniet.

But what I love most about this book, beyond the captivating romance and the twists and turns of palace intrigue, is the way it becomes clear that these extraordinary and complex women, led by Barbara and Margerit are building themselves a family.

From Margerit and Barbara making a home with each other to Antuniet finding that even after her brother's disgrace there are those who would take her in, to Barbara's young cousin Brandel, who wants more for his future than life on a rural farmstead, they all find themselves drawn together into their own community, their own found family.

It's a story as old as queerness, how we, when relegated to the margins, find strength in each other. How, when our families forsake us, we find and create our own.

Sara Uckelman says

It is a rare pleasure to read the published version of a book that you were a beta reader (and SME) for; in a sense, it was that I already knew the story, but I didn't know the book. At first, as I read it, I kept noticing bits here and there which were different (particularly in places where I'd raised a question or a wrinkled eyebrow in the beta version), but that soon fell away as I got swept more into the story.

I love the basic premise behind the Alpennia books so so much that there's basically no way that I wasn't going to enjoy reading this, and for the most part it solidly delivered on my all my expectations. The continued development of the mystical-rational aspects of the Alpennia universe are the parts I find most interesting; I have a hard time identifying with either of the main heroines, Jeanne and Antuniet, which means I wasn't intrinsically interested in their unfolding story per se, but was rather instead interested in the greater context in which it unfolds, and on that count, the book has everything. We see more of the wider world of Alpennia and beyond, politically and socially, more diverse and interesting characters are introduced (with lots of hints that we'll see more of them in books to come), and many hints laid down in Daughter of Mystery are made good on.

With four main view-point characters, rotating through the chapters in turn, I found following the pace of the story somewhat more difficult than in Daughter of Mystery; I often found myself counting out months on my fingers, or trying to figure out what season it was, or how much time had elapsed between when we'd last had a chapter in the view-point of, say, Antuniet. This part of the story didn't seem quite as skillfully handled as in Daughter of Mystery, but on the other hand I am not sure how it could've been done both differently and better: Certainly I would not have wanted to sacrifice the further glimpses into Barbara and Margerit's lives!

I enjoyed it very much, I can't wait for more, and immediately upon finishing it I turned around and re-read *Daughter of Mystery* because I couldn't stand the thought of having to wait another year or more before the next one comes out.

Corrie says

Woah! What a ride this was! I'm giddy and almost breathless with excitement after finishing **The Mystic Marriage**. It was even better than **Daughter of Mystery** (is that even possible?!) but that could be because I am more familiar with the players now. I know the difference between a Mesnera and a Maisetra, what the tasks of an armin entail, who the players at court are, who most of the characters are without reading the same paragraph twice. This series is not a light read, but if you stick with it and immerse yourself completely it is so damn rewarding.

In this second part of the **Alpennia** series we have two more pov's added to the ones of **Barbara** and **Margerit**, namely those of **Antuniet Chazillen** and **Jeanne, Vicomtesse de Cherdillac**. I thought it made for a more interesting dynamic and I really loved getting into the heads of these two as well. Antuniet made an impression on me in book one, this proud woman who lost everything including her good name and standing following her brother's betrayal. We come to know her story now and oh boy, is it a hard one. I super respected her through it all. And also Jeanne, my gawd(!) that woman took my breath away. There is a particular scene I put in the comments that floored me. There is so much under the surface with this one.

This story has so much, it is such an intense read full of intrigue, mysteries, alchemy, passion, loyalty, love, pride and perseverance. Of smart, exceptional women who would go to the ends of the earth for each other. Alpennia and its politics begin to feel like a second home now. I am looking forward to go to book three, but I need a bit of time to digest all of this. Have some lighter snacks after this rich banquet.

f/f

Themes: be prepared to remember a lot(!) of names, I love Jeanne so much... she is my absolute favorite, well... all 4 of the ladies are but she is special, who knew alchemy was so interesting, my heart bled for Antuniet, so proud... so strong, I wanted for her to find happiness more than anything, the lack of explicit love scenes did not bother me, they were not needed or missed.

5 stars (but that don't seem quite enough to be honest)

Catherine says

Book 2 in a highly enjoyable series. I really like the way that Jones creates her communities of (mostly queer) women scholars, musicians and alchemists and am very pleased that she found a way to include a Jewish community as well as a new character who is a POC. The picture we often get of historic Renaissance Europe in textbooks and so forth tends to be pretty whitewashed, failing to reflect the actual cultural diversity that existed. I also enjoyed the characters (Barbara remains my favorite) and the opportunity to continue to spend more time with them. The villains' motivations didn't work as well for me as they did in the first book, but that, apart from my world building note below, is my only substantive criticism.

I will say that from a reading standpoint, the fantasy elements remain very light and I tend to read these as historicals, rather than as fantasies. I want to know more - who/what are the saints? How do the mysteries

work? Can they be applied to something other than rituals and alchemy? And so forth. I hope to learn more in Book 3, which will be out soon.

Lynnet says

Ok, so the thing about this series is the synopses are awful. Despite loving Daughter of Mystery (which I didn't read for several years during to the horrible description), I didn't pick up this, the sequel, for years because I didn't realize it was a true sequel. But basically if you're interested in a historical Ruritanian fantasy about female lesbian scholars, this is the series for you. Did you read The Goblin Emperor and want more about the lady scholars? You got it in this series. These are marketed as romances, and while there is a central romance in each novel, they're more historical political fantasies than romances.

All of which is to say, if any of this sounds the slightest bit interesting to you, I highly recommend you check them out.

Rhode says

I tried but after a week it's DNF at 79%. I like all of the characters but I can't care about any of them because it feels like we are ambling along with no specific point or gut wrenching challenge in any of their lives. Two are from the past book, which is fine and pleasant but they get way too much page time for not being the centers of the book.

One is a workaholic who has a massive presentation the entire book's been leading up to but then it occurs offstage, which is deflating. The other is in love with her, but we never see why she radically changes her behavior and daily life to be with her besides "love". It feels temporary and unrealistic.

I guess it skimmed along for four different outlooks but never made me care deeply about any of them. Also, there's a straight woman who gets a lot of pagetime and I'm not sure why because she's silly and obviously trouble in the making.

With the right editor, this could be two enthralling books. Right now I'm bored and tired of forcing myself along. It's pleasant and intermittently interesting, but at 79% I should be turning pages like crazy to see what happens, not forcing myself to focus and read on.

K.J. Charles says

Second installment in an incredibly well developed and realised series about political intrigue in an alt-c19 European principality (too realistic to call a Ruritania) where alchemy and religious mysteries work. It's all f/f, with a huge cast and interlinked stories, so you would be best off starting with Daughter of Mystery to get clued in, which is no hardship as I love that too.

This is a different beast though. Jeanne and Antuniet are both very flawed characters--based on their appearances in book 1 you could fairly say Jeanne was shallow, manipulative and somewhat predatory, while Antuniet is cold, obsessive and proud. And they still are, brilliantly (I do hate a redemption arc that goes 'oh

hey they weren't that bad after all')--but this time we see inside them both to the raw hearts, the wanting something better of themselves as well as the world, the need for a love neither ever got. It works terrifically. Pretty much the entire romantic conflict is grounded in nothing more than their difficult personalities and lifelong emotional habits that need to be broken, and as a result we get an intensely believable and hopeful romance.

This is a long book and full scale fantasy, not a romance novel, so the love story is just one part of a pretty large story which includes alchemy, politics, friendship groups and plotting against royalty. Barbara and Margerit from book 1 both get a ton of page time as POV and there are various threads and characters leading onwards. It's a huge world which makes it a really immersive read, you can just sink in. And the alchemical magic is just fabulous.

These are priced quite high BUT at the time of writing this book is is a Storybundle <https://storybundle.com/lgbt> and book 3 is half price at the Bella Books website <http://www.bellabooks.com/97815949351...> , so if I was you I'd get in there.

Bugs says

This second installment of Heather Rose Jones' brilliant Alpennia series was another wonderfully crafted story for me! I was very excited to read this installment particularly because it was going to be about Antuniet! I was captivated by her mysterious persona since her introduction in Book 1 "Daughter Of Mystery." I was so happy that HRJ told her story in this one.

Whereas Book 1 had more action (because of Barbara's profession and her quest to find out about her past and settle her family's debts), and celebratory intrigue (Margerit's discovery of her magical skills), "The Mystic Marriage" was more internal, quieter, with darker thrills involving cynical plots. It delved into the inner sanctum of alchemy and all its technical properties and characteristics as performed by Antuniet, who seemed to be a natural talent as a very proficient alchemist. Whereas Book 1 dealt with the spiritual side of magic aka miracles, mysteries, Book 2 dealt with the scientific side of magic aka alchemy. The contrast and similarities of these two practices are FASCINATING to read and discover!

The thing I particularly enjoyed about this book was the intricate procedures of ancient alchemy (science, really!) being written and described in detail. I was mesmerised by all the technical aspects and processes of how the stones and their natural properties were mixed together, combined with astrology to perform different functions, or produce different physical and emotional effects. I felt like I was with Antuniet in an ancient chemistry laboratory using ancient tools to mix various chemicals, burning stones, sharpening them into specific shapes, "fermenting" them accordingly to produce the desired effects! Yes, Antuniet was a nerd. A science nerd. She was an introvert, exceptionally bright and smart, socially awkward, had absolutely no interest in all the girlish frills or the opposite gender, to say the least, deeply engrossed in her work. Her work was her salvation, her refuge, her entire existence.....(well, at least until she met Jeanne!)

I. . ANTUNIET.

In contrast, Jeanne, was the polar opposite - a social butterfly, a flirt, an extrovert with no worries about money. She and Antuniet were no strangers, except that they'd only met briefly in the past. This time, when Jeanne laid eyes on the much younger Antuniet, something tugged at her heartstrings. I adored Jeanne as I discovered more about her. On the surface, she was this loud, flirtatious, beautiful and attractive socialite

who only cared about her social standing and being included in or hosting frivolous engagements. But in actual fact, she was a sensitive, loyal, generous and kind soul who'd do anything for those she loved or cared about. She was fortunate to have money and in a respectable social standing but she didn't let that go over her head. Instead she used her position to help those who were in need. Despite her beauty and wealth, she was unlucky in love. She'd always been partial to loving women and had been "playing" the field without any commitments, primarily as a defence mechanism to prevent her heart from being hurt again but deep down, she really wanted to find true love & spend the rest of her life with her. She wanted what her friend and ex-lover, Barbara, had with Margerit. Someone she could wake up to in the morning and go to sleep with every night. Someone to share her life with, someone she could give her heart to. Someone to love and be loved.

So when Jeanne met Antuniet again, she found herself drawn to her and slowly but surely falling for the younger, anti-social workaholic alchemist. Antuniet, on the other hand, also found herself attracted to this flamboyantly beautiful Jeanne who, she knew, was out of her league. So she never dared to believe that she was ever worthy of love especially not by Jeanne who always had other women pining over her affections, especially at those countless "parties" that Jeanne was known to host or attend regularly. She couldn't believe that someone like Jeanne would want to be with an anti-social, dowdy, unattractive (in her own opinion), strange nerd like her, let alone be in love with her! Obviously nothing was further from the truth as Jeanne found herself having to prove to Antuniet time and time again.

I utterly loved Jones' flair in telling and depicting all the subtle verbal and non-verbal nuances between these two lovelorn souls who were struggling to declare their love for each other simply because neither believed they deserved the other. Case-in-point, Antuniet's quiet jealousy when she spotted Jeanne with other women who were flirting with her, assuming that the flirtation was mutual; Jeanne's unusual lack of confidence with herself when she thought Antuniet preferred to spend time with scholarly women, like Margerit instead of "useless" socialites such as herself. All the endless yearning...ahhhh!! These two poor sods! If only they could just bare their souls to each other without fear! Oh, the angst! Utterly captivating to read!

Their slow-burn romance was depicted so aesthetically that when Antuniet and Jeanne finally believed in the heart of hearts that their love for each other was pure and true, their commitment steadfast, I felt utterly elated, joyous, excited, dead happy for them in my heart and soul. SUPERB!

My favourite exchange between Antuniet and Jeanne....

"Non in solo pane," she [Antuniet] said at last.

[Jeanne] A curious glance. "Not by bread alone?"

"Jeanne," she blurted, before she could lose courage, "I can be your bread and water, but I can't be your cake and champagne. It isn't fair of me to ask you to give up champagne. I would...understand if sometimes you wanted more."

Jeanne's mouth parted in surprise. "Toneke, that's a generous offer. Are you certain?"

"No, I'm not certain!" The words burned on her tongue and she kept her eyes on the floor for fear of not being able to get them all out. "I'm terrified. I'm terrified I might lose you to someone more charming, more beautiful than I could ever be. But I'm also terrified that I'll lose you by holding you too tightly. I don't make you laugh the way she did. I can't flirt and I can't dance. And the parties you enjoy so much only leave me tired and lonely. I can see where it will end. What you feel for me will shrivel up into regret and obligation."

She felt the touch of a kidskin glove under her chin and Jeanne's fingers warm through it, drawing her face up so that she couldn't avoid her eyes. "Toneke, no one can see the future, but have more faith in me than that." Jeanne's eyes searched hers, looking for that faith. "Do you trust me?"

"I trust you," Antuniet said, "but I want you to be happy."

"I am happy. I am more happy than I deserve to be. And it wasn't what you thought."

THIS [dialogue above]...pure lyrical love poetry (*imho*). Truly THE essence of romance between two unlikely souls. So sensual. So poetic. So romantic!!!

And my favourite narrative of the book?

This below....

"That day when she'd [Antuniet] returned to Rotenek, near penniless and alone with nothing but DeBoodt's book and her vow, she never would have believed that her brightest gems would come in human form. Jeanne, Anna, Margerit, Barbara—all tried by fire and enhanced through the long, slow layering of work side by side. Was there need for any other talismans than these?"

- says it all about the book and its message. At least to me.

Apart from Antuniet and Jeanne's compellingly memorable journey, we also got to find out more about Barbara and Margerit. More crucially was how Antuniet's contentious relationship with Barbara and Margerit (because of events that occurred in Book 1) was dealt with and rectified. The whole journey of reconciliation between Antuniet and Barbara, and then between Antuniet and Margerit was written with intense realism. It was an emotional ride and an utter joy to experience with these 3 superbly developed characters.

All in all, this is a MUST-READ! I absolutely love this book! I was an instant fan of the Alpennia series since reading the 1st chapter of Book 1! I'd recommend starting with Book 1, "Daughter Of Mystery," though, followed by this, "The Mystic Marriage." A brilliantly written historical fantasy series!

Well done & thank you, Ms. Jones!

My commentary: **In Bug's Own Words**

Penny says

Great follow-up. In addition to Margerit and Barbara's voice (from Daughter of Mystery), now we also have Jeanne and Antuniet's.

I think the author could've created a better plot for Jeanne, rather than relegating her to be a mere "supporting character" for Antuniet. As for the latter, despite recognizing some of her flaws, I confess I liked how she was developed. It's always interesting to think about at which point honor ceases to be something positive to be instead an obstacle for moving forward.

For the "supernatural" part, I confess I'm still trying to understand some terms and effects of alchemy. The

author's prose is not exactly truncated, but I felt lost at some parts. And I know it may sound paradoxical, but the book as a whole is extremely well written.

Now I wonder if there will be a third book? Perhaps with Anna taking a lead role? Or Akezze?

Flowerscat says

I liked this better than book #1, it moves at a faster pace and the characters are more well developed. I love how Antuniet grows in character throughout the book - I started the book not liking her very much, and ended it by rooting for her. We get four POVs in this book - Margerit, Barbara, Jeanne and Antuniet, and each character is given time and space to develop. The storyline has more intrigue and mystery than book #1, and the romance, though not explicit, plays a more central role, without distracting from the plot. The only part I didn't enjoy was the ending, which felt a bit rushed - it would have been nice to see Margerit's veriloquium (a kind of truth mystery) in action, just like we saw the castellum in action in the the previous book, and it would have been nice to see another POV (view spoiler)

Nick Imrie says

Another delightful Alpennia novel. Like Daughter of Mystery, The Mystic Marriage is a wonderfully wholesome, heart-warming love story. Jones has a great talent for writing enchanting characters; the sort that feel like old friends by the end. These books are really the antithesis of 'grimdark' fantasy. They have a fundamental certainty that good intentions, hard work, forgiveness, compassion and a sense of humour really are enough to bridge the divide between hearts. And yet, they're not sappy by any means. Understanding isn't easy, and good will isn't guaranteed. Those characters who fail to do the right thing suffer by their own hands.

More than anything, I like the handling of Jeanne and Antuniet. Both their characters and their relationship. As I read the book, I kept imagining a different, meaner book like a shadow behind this one. A shadow made up of many of the other trashy historical romances I've read.

Jeanne, Vicomtesse de Cherdillac, is a bed-hopping social butterfly with exquisite taste. As a stereotype, she pops up again and again through-out fiction. And invariably, she is a secondary character. There to be mean to the heroine, or to suffer a terrible fall as a moral lesson to the rest of the cast. But here she was allowed to be a whole person: a practised flirt who is perfectly capable of fidelity when her heart is won; a woman whose modishness in no way precludes serious thought or deep emotion.

Antuniet is brittle, defensive, driven and humourless. In a hundred other books, she is the maiden aunt or spinster governess; a figure of mockery or pity. And yet here her defenses are understood as a rational and reasonable response to a harsh world. Her dedication to her work is clearly driven by passion not compensation. And her gentle blossoming when shown trust and acceptance is immensely touching. And as Antuniet and Jeanne teeter on the edge of social disaster for their scandalous ways, there is no melodramatic hysteria or mournful regret for their sins. Instead, a brave and sober assessment of what they lose and what they gain by being true to themselves.

So the characters were wonderful, but the plot and pacing were sorely lacking. Daughter of Mystery was slow; but The Mystic Marriage is stationary. The faults in both books are the same: strong openings and endings bookend an otherwise utterly turgid plot. And it's disappointing to see the problem getting worse rather than better in the series. It's crying out for a good editor. All the necessary components of a great book are here, and with some harsh pruning and reshuffling of some of the scenes, it could have been achieved.

Fingers crossed for the next volume - I will definitely be reading it.

Shira Glassman says

19th century lesbian scientists creating magic rocks! So, *The Mystic Marriage* is the story of a proud, emotionally closed-off, initially friendless and basically penniless young woman, Antuniet, struggling to redeem her family's honor after her brother /insert spoilers for Daughter of Mystery/. There are three subplots in the book: Antuniet's alchemy, i.e. trying to create the magic rocks and impart special properties to them; a complicated political cold war of intrigue between two middle-aged princesses both of whose adolescent sons *might* have the throne some day; and the romance between Antuniet and Jeanne, a society butterfly whose extroversion and flirtations are the biggest foil to Antuniet's sullen depths the author could possibly have created.

As you'd expect from a romance between a flirt and a Wounded Bird trope, a lot of trust has to be painstakingly earned before they Get There. Antuniet is fond of disappearing suddenly, giving up too quickly because it's easier. Jeanne truly has to earn her trust, over and over again. But they're not alone. Not only do they have the first book's couple watching over them, but the rest of their society's queer women as well-- some married "with an understanding", some widowed, but all close in the friendship of their difference just as in real life.

I really enjoy getting to read about queer women who have bigger lives than just the romances of the book's focus, so I enjoyed the presence of not only *two* main f/f couples (one of which was entirely stable throughout the course of the book, *a huge relief* as it's rare to get the pleasure of reading about established queer couples) but also their friends. Also, this book introduced Jews into Jones's fictional corner of Central Europe, and since we were there in real life, I'm glad we get to be included in fiction, in the form of Antuniet's apprentice Anna and to a lesser extent her sisters and father. (Although: Anna's nose is too strong? Suuuuuure. Yes, I know that was the gentile POV character's opinion. I'm gonna sass about it anyway.) And we weren't anything stereotypical or creepy, for which I am completely grateful.

I feel like the pacing on this book was probably better than the first one, too, and it took me a lot less time to read. Also, like the first one, this is a plot (and to secondary degree, characterization & relationships) focused adventure story, and any time a character takes someone to bed it fades to black. To me that helps cement the period-feel of the books and also provide that bit of dignity that comes from having queer representation and indeed queer focus in stories without sex scenes.

There is true value in the sheer amount of woman-focused adventure in these books. The political intrigue is a conflict between two powerful older women, and the four POV characters plus the apprentice and a few other scholars and members of the lesbian clique are all women. Nor does this female focus make the book's population seem unnatural; there are plenty of male characters who play important roles; they're just not allowed to dominate the story as they usually would. I also congratulate the author for including diversity *within* women who love women -- one of the clique's members, Tionez, says she loves her husband so it's easy to read her as bi, but neither this nor her frivolous personality traits get her blackballed from being able to love women or be friends with the main, exclusively-women-loving characters. This is important. I love that a lesbian novel included someone who fits the "bad bi" trope who is still allowed to frolic with everybody else and be a trusted friend. There are real people like her and they are still part of any "us" I count myself in.

Warning for a G-slur somewhere in there and a homophobic nun saying annoying shit for maybe one paragraph. (Oh, and Antuniet has a two-second affair with a man in the beginning of the book but it's over before it starts and you won't have to deal with any more lesbians in m/f sexual encounters for the rest of the story.)

Jem says

The second book in the Alpennia series focuses on the recently fallen Antuniet. After losing her brother to execution, her mother to suicide and her childhood home to confiscation, Antuniet Chazillen has left Alpennia in disgrace. While in exile, she vows to return again in triumph. But being a scientist at heart, her 'vengeance' is to gift Alpennia with a spectacular scientific discovery--which she intends to use to clear her family name and restore their honor.

Her path to success is no easy task. Battling crippling poverty, ostracization by society, the never-ending court intrigues, and a very distracting (and dangerous) attraction to her benefactress, the introverted, anti-social Antuniet must learn to navigate the confusing politics of her time, renew old friendships and build new ones, fall in love for the first time and still have time left over for crafting the perfect jewel. Phew! Busy girl ;) Which leaves her love interest Jeanne with not much to do except bring her lunch and dinner and occasionally help stir the cooking pot (of the jewels :). Jeanne is everything Antuniet is not--social butterfly, lover of women, event organizer par excellence, and in those days, possibly old enough to be Antuniet's mother!

In order to bring this highly unlikely pairing to fruition, the book spends a lot more time developing the romance (yey! for lesfic lovers) compared to the first book. Just imagine all the issues they need to overcome: workaholic vs party girl, introvert vs social butterfly, significant age-gap, multiple casual lovers, forbidden love, etc. etc. The relationship starts, sputters, picks up again, gets derailed, finally gains traction, only to run smack against 18th century mores. Huge angst-fest right there.

Behind the scenes, intrigue continues to dog the royal court of Alpennia. Rival princesses and their respective scions jostle for any advantage. Foreign interests continue their meddling ways, reaching out to both sides of the rivalry. Rumors, possible treason and assassination attempts abound and our ladies (including Margerit and Barbara from Book 1) find themselves caught in the crossfire.

There are occasional discussions of the esoteric details of alchemy as practiced by Antuniet (just as there were of visions and saints in the first book) that may cause non-geeks to zone out but alert readers will appreciate the careful attention to detail (e.g. precession shift over 200 years and distances from the equator of different cities causing inaccuracy in Antuniet's cooking 8-))

The book features 4 POV characters in alternating chapters as Barbara and Margerit still play major roles in the book. Its amazing how the story flows effortlessly forward despite this structure. Romantic tension and kingdom intrigues weave seamlessly throughout, culminating in a rousing climax (of the literary kind) in a melodramatic courtroom scene.

5.5 stars (5.0 for being as good as the first book + 0.5 stars for the angst ;))

P.S. Re the lack of explicit sex -- I didn't miss it at all. The romance was just as powerful.

