

## *A Synopsis of the Story So Far... Part One: Shields Down*

*The House of Baric* is one story told in three parts. The books should be read in sequence in order to really meet the Barics and their friends during their eventful summer in 1649. *Part Two: A Brother's Defense* picks up the story where *Part One: Shields Down* left off. Here is a quick overview of some details from book one that you will want to keep in mind when reading the second book.



We met Captain Mauritus “Mauro” Baric on a battlefield near the end of the Thirty Years’ War. His nobleman father had just died under suspicious circumstances. He was ordered by his commanding general, his uncle Count Vladimir Toth, to go home and take up his inherited title as a Venetian Baron in the territory of Croatia. Mauro was the last of the Baric family bloodline. His older brother, Mateo, had drowned tragically twelve years earlier. His nanny, Idita, had given him an unusual tattoo to remind him of his beloved, dead brother when the young Mauro needed strength to carry on with what was to come: being sent to be fostered at the grand Toth Castle at the tender age of thirteen.

As ordered, Mauro did leave his commission in the Venetian Army upon his father’s death, and he took three army officers with him back to Croatia: Simeon, Vilim, and Hugo. Mauro also recruited his two aristocratic friends, Fabian Carrera and Stephan Padovi, to come to join his small castle army after the Empire’s current battle ended.

His former childhood playmate and indentured servant to the Barics, Jero, who was only a year older than Mauro, was still employed at Baric Castle after all those years. Mauro promoted him from the baron’s valet to his estate steward. His father’s steward, Silvijo Nestor, was kept on as a business advisor to the two young men. Together, Mauro and Jero took a crash course from Nestor in running a barony and the productive family salt trade.



Mauro’s first year as a baron was complicated: he was severely injured in an ambush within his own borders; the Empires continued to battle on until a peace treaty with the Habsburgs was finally signed; his reclusive mother died in a crazed fit; and he fulfilled his marriage contract to an Ottoman Greek girl, Terese “Resi” Kokkinos.

His new wife turned out to be a surprisingly good match for the solemn young baron. She was smart, educated, adventurous, athletic, exotically beautiful, and was willing to give their contracted marriage an honest try for love.

Mauro found his new bride to be attractive and pleasing. Still, he was preoccupied with the demands of his barony and his continuing duty to the Venetian Republic in defending its borders. He did find time to make a baby with Resi, but the first pregnancy ended in a miscarriage. Since her only requirement as his wife was to create an heir, she became pregnant again a few months later.

In *The House of Baric Part One*, we learn that their marriage arrangement had been made between Mauro’s father, Lord Lorenc Baric, and Resi’s father, Demetrius Kokkinos, as a penalty payment to release the Kokkinos patriarch from prison. Demetrius was an Ottoman sea trader, a middle-man for his clients, and had stolen something from Lorenc Baric. We did not yet learn what was stolen or why this was a threat to the Barics. Lorenc wanted to punish him, but he urgently needed his services more, so a marriage between the Greek’s only daughter and Lorenc’s second son was agreed upon to keep Demetrius honest.

Mauro had avoided the union for many years because he was angry at his father for that and other complicated things. Their father-son relationship had been strained, and Mauro had stayed



away from his family home to avoid any responsibility there. Meanwhile, back in Thessaloniki, where the Kokkinos family resided, Resi waited to be summoned to her marriage. She had not been idle. She had used the years alone to read books and learn about diverse subjects like her brothers were allowed to.

When she finally did come to marry Mauro at Baric Castle in Solgrad, Croatia, she arrived a few weeks after the death of his mother, Lady Johanna Toth Baric. The house was in mourning, and life was pretty glum for Resi and her companion, Ruby Spiros. Together, they managed to fill their time in their new and unfamiliar home. Their biggest comfort was the bathhouse that Mauro had built for her as a wedding gift. A daily visit to soak and swim was always in Resi's predictable routine.



Her companion, Ruby, was to only remain with Resi during her first year there. In *Part One: Shields Down*, that year was now up. The men of the castle would be disappointed to see Ruby go. There were few eligible women within the Baric walls for the dozens of Baric guardsmen to court or marry. Ruby, at nineteen, was the perfect age to catch their eye. The kitchen maids and house servants were mostly teens. The remaining servants were already married or, like Nela the Baric cook, had been at the castle for a lifetime. Franja was one exception, but she had rejected most advances of the eager soldiers over the years. At twenty-four, Franja was almost too old to catch the young soldiers' attention. Simeon, one of Mauro's officers, readily spent his free time courting her.



There were eligible men within the manor house, too. Davor, Mauro's manservant and valet, was now nineteen but rarely got away to enjoy his bachelor years. Jero was twenty-five and was a good catch himself. But his natural tendency was to please others, and he lacked the confidence to put his own desires first. Jero wanted to pursue a courtship with Ruby, but he incorrectly thought she was out of his league. He was actually her favorite among the men at the castle, and she was also eager to gain his affection. They were having a hard time telling each other than in book one.



Although the castle compound was five centuries old, the manor house had been more recently built by Mauro's generous grandfather, Lord Fredrik, and then renovated by his father, Lord Lorenc. There were secrets within and outside the manor house walls that only a few knew about, and those secrets were protected. For example, it was forbidden to venture outside the eastern wall. The opening to a hidden cave was within the mountain there. A tunnel went through an old, dried well from the cellar under the east wall. Resi and Ruby were led on an adventure to the forbidden cave by Geoff, the young stable groom. They brought back some cave stones that Mauro and Jero argued over, and Geoff was punished for his role in taking the women there.

Resi thought it was best to keep some of what she did at the castle secret, although Mauro seemed to eventually know about everything that went on in his home. She was the recipient of an elegant case that held training swords that Jero had once taken in secret when his master died. Jero had unshared stories about his life at Baric Castle while Mauro had been away, fostered at Toth Castle.

Mauro had many of his own secrets and demons that tormented him from his troubled childhood. Little by little, he found he could share some of his past with his new wife during their sailing adventure, and after the ball, for example. Little by little, he found he could share some of his past with his new wife during their sailing adventure and after the ball. Mauro showed Resi a secret place that was previously only known to him and Jero—he took her to the hidden passage within the wall of the great hall.



When the war against the Habsburgs wended down, and peace seemed permanent, Mauro finally got a chance to enjoy some time at home and get to know his neglected wife. Sorting his dead mother's effects and putting her memory to rest was also on his mind, but that chore was set aside in *Part One: Shields Down*. His home life was still troubled, and there had been no time for it. The Venetian Navy had seized Mauro's cargo ship while his crew intentionally sailed in restricted waters. In a desperate attempt to bribe the unbribable Lieutenant D'Alessandro, the naval officer in charge, Mauro organized a grand ball at his castle with the help of his close neighbors, the Leopolds.



During the elaborate planning stages, two visitors arrived unexpectedly at Baric Castle: Ladies Caterina Carrera and Isabella Valli, the sister and a family friend of Fabian Carrera, Mauro's best friend. The two young Venetians had detoured from their journey to beg for Caterina's brother's help to get out of arranged marriages to Hungarian noblemen. Their arrival pushed his comfortable existence on a different course, and Fabian was unhappy about the inconvenience. Mauro and Fabian's closest friend, Stephan Padovi, had recently left for Venice to arrange his marriage to the love of his life, Mira, that same week. Stephan could no longer add a neutral voice of reason that the two friends had always counted on.



The Venetian ladies were a welcome arrival for Resi, though. They were just in time to help with dance lessons for the ball. The two ladies added more to the festive evening than dancing. They plotted with Resi and Ruby to trick the navy lieutenant into returning the baron's ship. Mauro had been angry when he learned about their daring seduction scheme, but it had all worked out in his favor. As a reward, although it was not thought to be one by the refined Venetians, the Barics and their visitors took a three-day outing to the seaside while arranging the release of Mauro's ship.

The excursion was an ideal opportunity for young love to bloom. Mauro and Resi got to know each other better after a year of barely interacting; Jero and Ruby began their innocent courtship in earnest; Fabian and Isabella's complicated friendship continued on its volatile course.

Their idyllic holiday was cut short when Resi's brother, Patrik, and his four mercenary friends arrived in Solgrad for a visit. The mercenary soldiers had spent the last few years fighting in Habsburg territories and were heading south to go home again. Patrik had wanted to check on his sister's marriage arrangement, especially after she had written to her family that her life with her new husband was strained and unhappy. Patrik held a festering grudge against his new brother-in-law. His four companions agreed to accompany him, but they also decided that it would be a short visit if the situation proved to be friendly. They themselves had a reputation of being the unfriendly ones. They and the Baric soldiers had met up before, and Mauro did not expect their visit to be easy.



*A Brother's Defense* begins right where *Shields Down* left off: the aristocrats had been alerted by Mauro's scouts that the mercenaries had arrived. They ended their seaside campout to return home early to welcome them. Jero had just returned from his brief adventure with Mauro's crew, sailing back to Solgrad with the newly released cargo ship. Galloping home in high spirits, Jero met the group of mercenaries on the road before the castle turnoff and did his duty to escort them to Baric Castle. Despite Mauro's earlier instructions, the Baric soldiers were not so welcoming, and the visiting sellswords entered the walls on high alert. Unable to convince the visitors to turn over their horses and unpack their load of weapons and armor, Nestor took the decision to leave their guests to tensely wait in the courtyard for the baron's return.