

A Synopsis of The House of Baric Part Two: A Brother's Defense

The first book in the series introduced you to the House of Baric and the many people living there (the Barics, their servants, soldiers). Their seemingly predictable life in Solgrad was pleasant after spending years at war. The story spotlighted the summer of 1649 when they all were at the crossroads of adulthood and marriage.

In the second book, new characters are introduced that will change the dynamics at the castle. Many new storylines make for a quick and suspenseful read. Baric secrets that are alluded to in *Part One: Shields Down* are unmasked, how Lorenc Baric died is explained, and the backstories of your favorite characters are revealed in this fast-paced 500-page novel. There are more budding courtships and ladies primping, but the women at Baric Castle are more than their pretty gowns and fancy hair. You will also learn that the soldiers care about more than their guns and swords, although swords will be drawn and Patrik and the mercenaries put to good use.

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Mauro's love for his wife deepens, but he can barely contain his hidden personal demons, and someone is still threatening his life. He manages to hold it together as master of the house. Still, he begins to unravel after he learns Jero's true identity while looking through registries with the constable to find out if Branislav Tomsic, his ship's captain, is a pirate on the side.

Part Two: A Brother's Defense starts where *Part One: Shields Down* left off: the mercenaries have arrived at Baric Castle and the camping trip at Leopold's beach is cut short. Mauro, Resi, Ruby, Isabella, Caterina, and Fabian greet Resi's brother and his four companions waiting on their horses in the courtyard. The Baric soldiers had met up with the mercenaries before, and Patrik had made his grudge against the Barics clear in the past. The reunion is tense until Resi and Ruby convince Mauro that her guests will be on their best behavior.

Patricius Kokkinos is young, only two years older than his sister Resi. As a mercenary, he goes by the name of Patrik and is part of a gang of five sellswords. It should be a lucky group of six, but Niels was killed in the last battle. On their way back south, Patrik wanted to check on his sister's marriage arrangement, especially after she had written to him earlier that her life with her new husband was strained and unhappy. *A Brother's Defense* delves into Resi's relationship with her brother and explains why he became a mercenary soldier and hates the Barics. Patrik will eventually approve of his new brother-in-law and even defend Mauro against his enemy—after the two draw swords against each other in the Keep.

Patrik's four companions have backstories that come to light as they interact with the Baric residents, the visiting Venetian ladies and the Baric soldiers:

- Salar Nassim has commanded a rotating gang of five sellswords for ten years (to keep his lucky number six satisfied). He offered their services to the highest bidder during the constant warring in Europe. He is a former assassin, a Persian Muslim, who had left one wife in Athens and another in Rhodes to make his fortune as a mercenary soldier. During their stay at Baric Castle, Salar Nassim takes an interest in young Lady Caterina Carrera, who reminded him of his daughter he hadn't seen in years. At Caterina's request, Salar Nassim agreed to teach her how to cheat at cards. The two unwittingly help each other choose better futures while forming a sincere platonic friendship at Baric Castle.
- Soren is Patrik's best friend in the group. After the young Dane had sailed to and from the West Indies with his twin brother, Niels, they decided to try their luck and earn their fortune soldiering after meeting up with Salar Nassim in Athens a few years back. When Soren is introduced in the book, his brother had just died from a gruesome stabbing in the last battle they fought, and he is a shell of his former self. Soren emerges from the depths of his sorrow through an unlikely friendship with the Baric's lady's maid, Natalija.
- Bem Tavares is a misfit who, at sixteen, left his mother's homeland in Ethiopia to find his Portuguese father, only to discover that his mocha skin color would be his demise in future employment in the European world. We are told of his lucky escape from Portugal to find his niche in Libya as a horse trainer. He had settled into a quiet life with his new Libyan bride (a freed slave), Fatina. His world was shaken after Fatina's former mistress kidnapped her in Ottoman lands. On his quest to find Fatina, Bem met Patrik's fourth companion, Cyro. They would eventually join Salar Nassim's gang in Athens after being stranded in war-torn Candia. While at Baric Castle, Bem helps Lady Isabella learn to ride a horse despite Fabian's warning. The Ethiopian gets pulled into Isabella's seduction as she throws caution to the wind and pursues one last fling before being sent away to marry a stranger or left at a nunnery.
- Cyro/Cyrano Duarte was groomed to become a Viscount and was an unlikely part of this gang. The twenty-two-year-old nobleman fled his responsibilities and arranged marriage in Genoa when his family thought he had perished in a shipwreck. His escape from his destiny took him to Egypt to see the pyramids and then eventually on a ship to Athens. Cyro recounts to the ladies his story about the boat being pirated and stranded on Candia, where he and Bem first became mercenary soldiers to pay for their passage off the island. Being a mercenary added to his quest for adventure. Soon though, Cyro discovered what was truly important to him in life. He planned to travel home and come clean with his faked death after their stay at Baric Castle. He never imagined meeting the girl of his dreams while there, and he fell madly in love with Lady Caterina. Although Cyro was mannered and charming, the young Venetian was not impressed by his underwhelming looks until he revealed his true heritage

and title. Cyrano Duarte presented Caterina with a priceless sapphire ring as a retainer until he could ask her father directly for her hand in marriage.

In *Part Two: A Brother's Defense*, Mauro is a good host to his visitors for his wife's sake but goes about his regular barony duties. With Stephan gone in book one, and Fabian deciding to leave for Venice early in book two, Mauro's direct duties included, for the first time, training the male servants in sword fighting. The mercenaries had pointed out that all men should know how to protect themselves, and Mauro agreed. During this training, Jero's history is revealed to the reader. It becomes clear that his special relationship with his master, Lord Lorenc (Mauro's father), was because of Jero's hidden parentage.

Jero is a central protagonist in the second book as the story delves deeper into the Barics' secrets. His courtship with Ruby progresses after their time together on the beach. Jero tells Mauro about his wish to marry her, but then Ruby receives a letter from Thessaloniki telling her a marriage to a local man has been arranged. Both are heartbroken. Mauro wants Jero to marry the woman he loves but is pragmatic about his chances. To calm their mutual misery, Mauro sends Jero on an errand to Zadar until Ruby leaves with Patrik for home, as required by her father's letter. But Ruby doesn't yet leave because of the turn of events at Baric Castle.

Mauro's captains and best friends, Fabian and Stephan, had returned to Venice. Stephan had proposed to his long-time sweetheart, Mira, and he left Solgrad for good to make the wedding arrangements. Fabian falls for his parents' "trap" to entice him home, where he discovers he has been assigned a bride. Fabian defies his parents' wishes and arrogantly returns to Baric Castle to pout over it. Eventually, Fabian accepts his fate (but not before having an angry falling-out with his true love, Isabella.) He informs Isabella that her future had also been decided back in Venice by her father, and she must give up her newfound independence and return home to marry. He returns with her.

While Fabian had been away briefly in book two, Isabella had rekindled her artistic side and discovered she could paint as well as draw. Cyro convinced her that she could pursue her art under a man's name, and Isabella's hope for an independent future was elevated, especially after learning to ride like a man. Isabella was pragmatic and understood she must eventually marry. Her past heartbreaks are revealed, and one of the biggest is her love for Fabian. It turns out Isabella's mother had bigger plans than matching her only daughter with the third Carrera son—her first choice had been Fabian's oldest brother. Because Fabian and Isabella could never marry, they could never bring themselves to be kind to each other in the book. Fabian relishes bringing Isabella the bad news that her time at Baric Castle is over, and she hates him for it. With a new marriage match waiting for her back in Venice, she and Caterina dramatically departed in the carriage they had arrived in back in book one.

Lady Caterina Carrera flits from one mad love to another, beginning with losing Paolo in book one. Salar Nassim convinces her to meet with Cyro each evening in the garden to find things of beauty to bring to him during their card lessons. In the end, Caterina flips her opinion of Cyro and decides she is in love with him. She happily joins Isabella, returning to Venice to wait for her new fiancé to bring a hefty marriage proposal to her father.

Resi's personality blooms with her brother's visit. Feeling good in her second trimester of pregnancy, she goes about her active days, including challenging her brother to a duel with the sparing blades Jero had given her in book one. Mauro discovers what is going on, and he and Patrik have their own fight over it in the Keep—with real swords. Resi sorts out the misunderstanding with her brother and her husband, and the men eventually see in each other what she sees in each of them. Resi also sees her husband's unraveling and begs to know what is troubling him.

With half his friends gone (Stephan, Fabian, Jero, and the ladies), Mauro gets back to sorting out his own troubled life, beginning with his mother's unpacked trunk. He makes a disturbing discovery in her letters found there about his parents' past and how his father died. It isn't until after he pieces his family's secret together that Mauro does tell Resi the whole truth about how his father died and Jero's complicated place in the family.

Serious spoiler alert! Keep reading to know how the book ends!

Mauro's father, Lord Lorenc, had had an affair with the woman who nursed Mateo as an infant after Lorenc's first wife, Margaret, had died in a plague. Jero was born of that love affair with Sonja. But Lorenc didn't know about Jero's existence until he had already married Mauro's mother, Lady Johanna, and Sonja had been taken away. Idita explains to Mauro that Sonja died after leaving Baric Castle, and her bastard son was sold by her impoverished family. It turns out that the Baric's aristocratic neighbor, Lord Dubovic, liked to "rescue" orphan boys, and he "purchased" Jero.

In brief, Lorenc bought Jero back with a sum of gold and a promise of Mateo's marriage to Dubovic's daughter before the three-year-old bastard child had any lasting harm. But Lady Johanna (Mauro's mother) would not have Jero declared Lorenc's legitimate son because it would put her own son behind him in line for Lorenc's inheritance. Vladimir Toth, Lorenc's brother, agreed with her. As a compromise, young Jero was indentured to be a playmate and servant to the Baric boys, and his parentage was hidden until Lorenc could figure out how to manage his three sons—Mateo, Jero, and Mauro—from three different women. He never did manage it, and Jero was kept in the dark his whole life, even after Lord Lorenc's death, until Mauro put the clues together.

Mauro wanted to do right by his half-brother, but exposing it would be complicated. At the same time, Mauro also learned that the same neighbor, Lord Dubovic, had conspired with Mauro's mother to poison his father. Why? Because the Barics have been quietly mining emeralds from the cave outside their wall for generations, the one Resi, Ruby, and Geoff had explored in book one. The bankrupted Lord Dubovic needed that treasure to pay his mountainous debts. He thought Lady Johanna would be his key to getting the emeralds since she was miserable in her marriage to Lorenc and loathed her boring role as Lady Baric.

The Barics had clandestinely sold emeralds with their urns of quality salt to unique buyers around the region with the help of Demetrius Kokkinos' connections. Demetrius had discovered this special hidden cargo once, years ago, and took some emeralds for his own. That was the reason for his imprisonment in Count Toth's dungeon, and his bond out of prison was by promising to keep the Baric's secret. The marriage between Mauro and Resi sealed that promise.

With the help of the remaining four mercenaries (Cyro left Baric Castle after Caterina went to Venice) and three of his soldiers, Mauro finally took revenge against his father's killer with an elaborate scheme. Lord Dubovic was plotting to finally get rid of the last Baric at the same time. To his advantage, a community party to celebrate the baptism of Constable Radic's newest child was planned in Solgrad, and Lord Dubovic used this party as cover to send assassins to kill Mauro once and for all. He invited Baron Baric to a fake council meeting at his castle and intended to ambush him en route there. Mauro had a bad feeling about going to Dubovic Castle, and he prepared a counter-ambush.

This suspenseful part of the book has so many details and nuances that it cannot be well-summarized in a sentence or two. But, in a nutshell, Dubovic thought he had killed Mauro and took Baric Castle by force, along with Ruby and Verica, returning home early from the village party.

Resi had not gone to the party because she was worried about Mauro's premonitions. She had stayed behind to wait for her husband to return to take her to the celebration himself. Geoff witnessed the Dubovic soldiers taking hostages and clued her in on the frightening events. She refused to escape to the cave with him, but she did know a secret place to safely stay.

Jero had returned from the errand in Zadar just in time to win Baric Castle back heroically. Although Dubovic's men held the castle, Jero, coming home alone, knew of a hidden entrance: through the old well by the cave, where he ran into Geoff. Jero knew to look for the baroness and found Resi hidden in the false wall, where she and Mauro had taken refuge after the ball. Together, they figured out how to get Baric Castle back or at least rescue Ruby and Verica in the great hall. After a chaotic fight

with arrows from the locked-down Keep, Jero and Lord Dubovic were alone in the great hall. Resi, Ruby, and Verica fled to the safety of the bathhouse.

Dubovic was injured from Jero's arrow shot and tried to get Jero to let him go. In his ramblings, Dubovic confessed that he had killed Mauro that same night and revealed why Jero had been indentured in the first place. Jero was overwhelmed by the mad man's confessions, and Jero could not let the old baron get away with his plan to steal the Baric emeralds and possibly Lady Baric herself. Jero kills Lord Dubovic moments before Mauro and Patrik, who had made it out of the ambush at Dubovic Castle alive, arrive to save Jero.

Everything eventually turns out well, except for Mauro's captain, Simeon, who was grievously wounded in the ambush and had to have his leg amputated by Idita to save his life. That ruined Simeon's plans to marry Franja, whom he had just proposed marriage to the day before and was awaiting her answer.

Mauro straightened out the injustice with Jero's servitude, got the murder charges lifted with the empire, and Jero was given the Baric family name with the blessing of their stern Uncle Vladimir (aka Count Toth). The latter comes in person to welcome Jero to the family and give Jero a treasured ring from his namesake grandfather.

At the end of *Part Two: A Brother's Defense*, Mauro takes Jero to the cliffs at the old inn and tells him the story about what happened the day Mauro witnessed their brother, Mateo, drown in the sea. Sharing this secret lifts some burden from Mauro, but the pain is so deep it continues to haunt him.

Patrik insists Ruby must still leave for home for her arranged marriage, but Jero will now travel with her to ask her parents if he can marry her instead of the local man, Nikko. Patrik, Salar Nassim, Soren, and Bem have decided to call it quits with the mercenary soldiering and will escort Jero and Ruby to Thessaloniki. The three plan to help Bem find clues as to what happened to his kidnapped wife, Fatina, before going their separate ways and enjoying their hard-won gold as men of leisure.

The Barics' world is back in order, and Mauro and Resi couldn't be happier with each other as they await the arrival of their baby. They plan to attend all the upcoming weddings in Venice in September. Jero and Ruby will be back from Thessaloniki to join them—unless something happens to ruin their idyllic plans. The story continues in *Part Three: Widows and Weddings*.