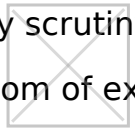
Chapter I - Thuvia - Maid of Mars

Chapter I begins within the verdant heart of Ptarth’s royal gardens, where Thuvia sat beneath the soft blossoms of a towering pimalia. Her stillness was deceiving, for inwardly she wrestled with the unwelcome persistence of Astok, Prince of Dusar. His declarations, wrapped in veiled arrogance and disregard for her will, only deepened her scorn. He misunderstood her civility as invitation, forgetting the restraint expected of Martian nobility. When his forwardness crossed the line, Carthoris of Helium arrived, his entrance both timely and firm. Without the need for elaborate exchange, a simple word and the tension in his posture silenced Astok’s boasts. Thuvia observed in silence, grateful yet composed, unwilling to show more than etiquette allowed. Before matters could erupt into open confrontation, her voice calmed the guards who arrived to intervene. She suggested a peaceful end to the matter, mindful of the sacredness of the garden and the political implications of violence.

Astok’s withdrawal was a show of empty politeness, hiding resentment behind practiced farewells. Thuvan Dihn’s response was equally formal but thinly concealed his disapproval. The prince’s conduct had brushed dangerously close to causing diplomatic fracture. With the threat averted, the moonlight offered a calmer stage for a conversation of more tender matters. Carthoris and Thuvia stood apart yet emotionally tethered, a bond neither fully acknowledged. He confessed his affection, words simple but weighty. Thuvia, ever dutiful to her people and promise, reminded him of her future with Kulan Tith. Her words were not cold but resolute. Carthoris respected her honesty and refrained from pressing further, choosing instead to hide his disappointment with the dignity befitting a prince of Helium. Their goodbye held more than either spoke aloud.

The evening air carried a strange stillness as Carthoris approached his flier. There was pride in the design, a craft equipped with innovations that could change air travel on

Barsoom. He explained the mechanisms to Thuvan Dihn—how the controls allowed for autonomous flight, avoiding obstacles while ensuring safe passage even without a pilot. The elder Jeddak listened with interest, impressed by the ingenuity but curious about its limits. One of the palace attendants, less formally trained yet keen-eyed, hinted at a potential weakness in the system. This observation was dismissed lightly, though Carthoris noted it with a mental bookmark, a reminder that even brilliance must be tested by scrutiny. That moment captured the essence of Mars—advancement meeting the wisdom of experience.



Back inside the palace, Thuvia wandered through thoughts heavier than armor. Her loyalty to Kulan Tith was not born of love, but of duty and alliance. Still, Carthoris's words lingered, a whisper that stirred conflict in her spirit. Love, on Barsoom, often collided with obligation. She admired Carthoris not just for his courage but for the restraint he had shown. In that brief moment, she had glimpsed a future different from the one promised to her. But Barsoom was a world of promises bound by power, not dreams. Her heart, though touched, remained restrained by the expectations placed upon her as a princess of Ptarth. Alone with the scent of pimalia still clinging to her, Thuvia contemplated what might have been.

Meanwhile, aboard his flier, Carthoris set the controls for Ptarth’s skies. The night winds whispered across the deck, carrying his thoughts back to the gardens. He did not regret speaking his heart, even if it brought him pain. Duty, again, took the reins of his choices, leading him back to Helium’s obligations and the tension of rising political stakes. Unknown to him, his invention, lauded for its autonomy, had been observed too closely by hands less noble. The idea that such a craft could be altered, misdirected, or stolen lingered unspoken but real. In a world where ambition often overshadowed honor, the very thing designed to protect him might soon be turned into a threat.

Though the chapter ends with partings, it plants the seeds for every thread that follows: the tug of love and loyalty, the pride of invention tempered by human error, and the shadows cast by political ambition. Through careful choices of words and

restraint, it becomes clear that what isn’t said often shapes destiny more than what is. Thuvia and Carthoris are bound by honor, separated by duty, and drawn together by something neither war nor tradition can silence.

