

AI-Generated Graded Readers

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Publication webpage:

https://www1.gifu-u.ac.jp/~masaru/a1/ai-generated_graded_readers.html

Publication date: March 3, 2026

About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice. The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

Source Text

Original work: A Princess of Mars

Author: Edgar Rice Burroughs

Source: Project Gutenberg

<https://www.gutenberg.org/>

Full text available at:

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Edgar Rice Burroughs, *A Princess of Mars* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

Part 1

I am a very old man. I do not know how old I am. I may be one hundred years old. I may be more. I cannot say. I have never grown old like other men. I do not remember being a child. As far as I can remember, I have always been a man about thirty years old. I look today as I did many years ago. But I feel that one day I will truly die. I have died before, yet I live. Still, I fear death. That fear is why I write this story now.

I will tell you about the strange time of my life and my death. I cannot explain everything. I am only a soldier, not a scientist. I will write only what happened to me during the ten years when my body lay in a cave in Arizona.

My name is John Carter. People once called me Captain Jack Carter of Virginia. When the Civil War ended, I had money that was no longer worth anything and a captain's rank in an army that no longer existed. I had no work and no home. I knew how to fight, and that was all. So I went west to look for gold.

I worked with another former officer, Captain James K. Powell. He was a good man and knew much about mining. We traveled for almost a year in the mountains of Arizona. Life was hard. We had little food and little rest. But late in the winter of 1865, we found a rich gold vein. Powell said it was worth more than a million dollars.

We had only simple tools. We could not work the mine properly alone. One of us had to go back to civilization to bring tools and men. Powell knew more about machines and the land, so he would go. I would stay and guard our claim.

On March 3, 1866, Powell packed food on two burros. He said goodbye and rode down the mountain. I watched him for hours as he moved across the valley below. The morning was clear and bright. My last sight of him was when he entered the shadow of the mountains far away.

Later that afternoon, I saw three small dark shapes near where I had last seen

him. At first I told myself they were animals. But I could not calm my heart. I began to worry.

We had not seen hostile Indians for months. We had grown careless. But I knew the danger of Apaches. Powell was brave and well armed, but one man alone could not fight many.

I could not wait any longer. I took my revolvers and rifle. I tied cartridge belts around my waist and rode down the mountain after him.

At dusk I found the place where other tracks joined his. They were pony tracks. Three ponies. They had been running fast.

I followed until darkness stopped me. When the moon rose, I continued. Around midnight I reached a water hole where Powell had planned to camp. There was no sign of him. The tracks continued past the water.

Then I heard two distant gunshots.

I pushed my horse faster. Soon I came out onto a small open area near the top of a pass. The sight before me froze my heart.

The open land was full of Indian tents. Hundreds of warriors stood around something in the center. They had not seen me yet.

Only later did I realize I could have turned back. But I did not think of that. I pulled my guns and rode straight at them, shouting and firing.

They scattered in surprise.

As they moved, I saw Powell lying on the ground. His body was covered in arrows. He was already dead.

I rode to him. I pulled him across my saddle. I would not leave him to be cut apart.

The Indians began to chase me. Arrows and bullets flew. By luck and speed, I reached the mountains again.

My horse chose a narrow path upward. Soon I heard the Indians moving away in another direction. They had taken the wrong trail.

As morning came, I found a cave high on a cliff. I placed Powell's body outside. I tried to bring him back to life, though I knew it was useless. After a long time, I stopped.

I entered the cave. It was large and empty. The air inside felt strange. I grew sleepy. Very sleepy.

I tried to go back outside, but my legs failed me. I fell to the ground. I could not move.

I was awake, but my body would not obey me. A faint mist filled the cave. I smelled something sharp in the air.

I heard horses outside. Indians were coming.

I lay there helpless. I saw painted faces appear at the cave entrance. They stared at me with wide eyes. They did not enter. They seemed afraid.

Then I heard a strange low moan from deep inside the cave.

The Indians screamed and ran away in terror.

The cave grew quiet again. I lay there unable to move. Fear filled me. I could hear soft sounds behind me in the darkness.

Night came. My horse wandered away.

At midnight, the terrible moan sounded again. Something moved in the dark.

I fought with my mind to move. I pushed with all my will.

Suddenly something snapped. I stood up.

And then I saw it.

My body lay on the cave floor.

I stood naked beside it.

I looked at my own face, my own clothes. I felt my heart beating. I breathed. I was alive — yet my body lay there lifeless.

I did not understand. Was this death? I felt solid. I could pinch myself. I was real.

The moan came again from deeper in the cave. Fear returned. I fled outside into the cold night air.

The sky was bright with stars. Below me lay the wide desert, silver under the moonlight.

I looked up.

There in the sky burned a red star.

Mars.

I had always loved that red planet. I felt drawn to it. I stretched out my arms toward it.

A strong force pulled me upward.

There was cold. There was darkness.

Then I opened my eyes.

I was lying on strange yellow ground beneath a different sky.

I knew at once.

I was on Mars.

Part 2

I lay still for some moments, trying to understand what had happened. The ground beneath me was soft and felt like thick moss. It stretched in every direction as far as I could see. Around me were low hills forming a great round basin. The sky above was pale, and the sun shone strongly upon my naked body. The heat was sharp but not worse than an Arizona desert at midday.

I sat up slowly. There was no water in sight. There were no trees, no grass like on Earth. Only that strange yellow moss covered the land. A short distance away I saw a low wall, about four feet high. It formed a square enclosure. It was the only sign of anything built by thinking creatures.

I decided to go toward it.

I rose to my feet — and at once I leaped high into the air. The simple act of standing carried me many feet upward. I came down softly, without pain. I tried to walk, but each step sent me hopping like a child at play. I could not control my movements. My muscles were used to the pull of Earth. Here the pull was weaker. I felt light — far too light.

I fell several times before I understood that I must move differently. Finally I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled. In this way I reached the low wall.

Carefully I stood and looked over.

Inside the enclosure was a roof of thick glass. Beneath it lay many large white eggs. They were round and each was almost three feet across. Some were broken

open. From them had come strange little creatures.

They were small compared to what I would soon see, yet they were still large by earthly measure. Their bodies were thin and long. They had six limbs — two legs, two arms, and another pair in the middle. Their heads were too large for their bodies. Their eyes were red and set far apart. Their skin was light green.

They blinked in the sunlight and made small sounds.

As I watched them, I felt both wonder and fear.

Suddenly I heard a metallic sound behind me.

I turned.

Not ten feet away stood a huge creature mounted on an even larger animal. The rider was green like the young ones in the enclosure — but far greater in size. He must have been fifteen feet tall. His body was strong and powerful. He had four arms. In his hands he held a long spear with a shining metal point.

Behind him stood nineteen others like him.

Their mounts were enormous beasts with many legs and wide jaws filled with teeth. They had no hair and moved silently on padded feet.

I had no weapon. I had no clothes. I had only my body.

The spear lowered toward my chest.

Without thinking, I leaped.

I flew through the air and landed far beyond the enclosure. I heard sounds of surprise from the warriors. They had not expected such a jump.

I landed safely and turned to face them.

They did not attack at once. Instead they spoke to one another in a strange language. Their eyes studied me. I saw rifles hanging at their sides. Even without knowing their power, I sensed danger in those weapons.

After a short time, the group rode away some distance, leaving only one warrior near the enclosure. He dismounted. He removed his weapons and placed them on the ground. Then he walked toward me, holding out a metal band in his hand.

He spoke in a deep voice. I did not understand his words. But his actions were calm. Peaceful.

I placed my hand over my heart and bowed slightly. “I mean no harm,” I said

in English, though I knew he would not understand.

I stepped forward and took the metal band. I fastened it around my arm.

He made a sound that might have been approval. He placed one of his arms in mine, and we walked together toward his mount.

The others approached again but stopped at his signal.

I was lifted onto the back of one of the strange beasts. I held tightly to straps around the rider's body. Then we rode across the yellow plain toward distant hills.

We traveled many miles. The land slowly rose. At last we entered a valley surrounded by mountains. On a plateau ahead stood a great city.

As we approached, I saw tall buildings made of shining white stone. Many were broken or empty. They seemed very old. Yet they were beautiful.

We entered a large open square. Hundreds of green Martians were there. All were naked except for ornaments and weapons. The women were smaller than the men but still enormous. Their skin was lighter. The children looked much alike.

I was taken into a grand building decorated with gold and colored stones. Inside was a large hall filled with desks and chairs too small for the green giants. I realized then that this city had once belonged to another race.

At the center stood a great warrior richly decorated. He seemed to be the leader.

The warrior who had captured me spoke to him. I later learned his name was Tars Tarkas.

The leader then spoke to me. I answered in English. Neither of us understood the other.

The Martians gathered around me. They touched my arms and legs. They felt my skin. I felt like an animal being examined.

Then they led me outside again.

One of them made a great leap and said a word: "Sak."

He looked at me and repeated the word.

I understood. They wanted me to jump.

I bent my knees and leaped high and far across the square. The crowd made strange sounds. I returned with smaller jumps.

They wanted me to repeat it. But I was tired and hungry. I rubbed my stomach

and pointed to my mouth.

After some discussion, Tars Tarkas called to a young female. She was about eight feet tall and lighter in color. Her name, I later learned, was Sola.

She led me to a building. Inside was a room filled with furs and silk cloth.

She made a hissing sound. From another room came a strange creature.

It had ten short legs and a wide mouth filled with teeth. It was about the size of a small pony. It sat before Sola like a trained animal.

She spoke to it and pointed at me.

Then she left.

The beast walked to the doorway and lay across it.

I understood.

I was a prisoner.

Part 3

The strange beast lay across the doorway and watched me without moving. Its red eyes never left me. At first I feared it would attack. Yet it only guarded. When I moved, it lifted its head. When I stopped, it rested again. I soon understood that it had been ordered to protect me — and perhaps to prevent my escape.

While Sola was gone, I examined the chamber more carefully. The walls were covered with paintings of beautiful lands — rivers, trees, hills, and wide seas. The colors were rich, yet different from Earth. The plants were blue and violet instead of green. There were no pictures of people or animals. That struck me as strange.

The furniture was finely made but too small for the green giants. The floors were smooth stone. Everything suggested that another race had once lived here — a race closer to human size.

Sola returned carrying food and drink. She placed them near me and sat a short distance away, watching closely.

The food was a solid block, pale and firm, like cheese but almost without taste. The drink was a white liquid, slightly sour. I was very hungry and thirsty. I ate everything.

Later I learned that the drink was not from an animal but from a plant that grows without much water. The plant gives milk each day. This surprised me greatly, but on Mars many things are different.

After eating, I felt stronger. I lay down on the soft silks and quickly fell asleep.

When I woke, it was dark and cold. Mars grows cold very fast when the sun sets. I felt a heavy fur placed over me. Then another.

I realized Sola was caring for me.

I slept again.

When I woke in the morning, light filled the room. Five other females lay sleeping nearby. My watch beast still guarded the door. It had not moved.

I decided to test it.

Carefully I stood. The beast stood too. I moved toward the doorway. It stepped aside to let me pass.

I walked into the street. The beast followed ten steps behind.

I walked slowly through the empty city streets. No one stopped me.

When I reached the edge of the city, I stepped beyond the last building.

At once the beast sprang before me. It bared its long tusks and made a deep growling sound.

I rushed toward it and leaped over it, landing far away.

In an instant it turned and ran after me.

I had never seen such speed. Though it had short legs, it moved faster than any horse on Earth. I understood that escape by running was impossible.

I changed direction and leaped back toward the city. I reached a building wall and jumped for a high window. I caught the ledge and pulled myself inside.

I sat there, looking down at the beast below.

Suddenly a huge hand seized me from behind.

I was thrown onto the floor. Standing over me was a great white ape-like creature. It was ten or twelve feet tall, with strong arms and long teeth. It held me down with one foot while it shouted in a harsh voice.

Another of its kind entered carrying a heavy stone club. It raised the club to crush my head.

Before the blow fell, something struck the ape from the side.

It was my watch beast.

It hurled itself at the ape and sank its teeth deep into its chest. The ape screamed and tried to tear the beast away.

They rolled across the floor in terrible struggle.

The ape had four strong arms. It gripped the beast's throat and tried to break its neck. The beast held tight to the ape's chest, ripping flesh with its teeth.

Neither made a sound of pain. Blood covered the floor.

I stood frozen for a moment. Then I seized the fallen club.

I stepped forward and struck the ape on the head with all my strength.

The skull broke. The ape fell lifeless.

At that moment the second ape rushed toward me, roaring with rage.

I looked at the door. I could leap through the window and escape.

But my beast lay on the floor, badly hurt. Its great eyes looked at me.

It had saved my life.

I could not leave it.

I tightened my grip on the club and faced the charging ape.

It swung one great arm toward me. I jumped aside. The blow smashed into the wall and cracked stone.

I leaped high into the air and struck down upon its shoulder. The club hit hard, but the creature only roared louder.

It rushed again. This time it caught my leg and hurled me across the room. I struck the wall but rose at once.

Before it could reach me, I sprang upward and landed on its back. With both hands I lifted the club and brought it down upon its skull again and again.

At last it collapsed.

I rolled free as it fell.

The room was silent.

My beast lay still but breathing. Its throat was wounded, yet it lived.

I knelt beside it. "You brave fellow," I said softly, though it could not understand my words.

Soon I heard sounds outside — heavy steps.

Green Martians entered the room. Among them was Tars Tarkas.

They looked at the two dead apes. They looked at me. They looked at the wounded beast.

For a long moment no one spoke.

Then Tars Tarkas gave a loud cry.

The others answered.

They approached me slowly. Not as enemies — but as warriors who had seen courage.

Tars Tarkas placed one of his hands upon my shoulder.

In that moment, though I did not know their words, I understood something important.

I had won their respect.

Part 4

The green warriors stood around the bodies of the two white apes and spoke loudly to one another. Their voices were deep and harsh, yet I sensed excitement rather than anger. Several of them examined the crushed skulls of the apes. Others looked at me, then at the wounded beast lying beside me.

Tars Tarkas bent over my guardian. He touched the torn flesh of its throat and chest. The beast opened its eyes and looked at him, then at me. It did not try to rise.

Tars Tarkas spoke sharply. Two females came forward and carried the beast away. I watched anxiously, but Tars Tarkas made a short gesture toward me, one that seemed to mean reassurance.

He then pointed to the dead apes and spoke again, louder. The other warriors gave a strange cry — not of fear, but of approval.

I later learned that the great white apes of Mars are feared even by the green Martians. They are savage and powerful. To kill one is considered a worthy act. To kill two in a single fight is rare indeed.

Tars Tarkas motioned for me to follow him. We left the building and returned to the great plaza. Many Martians had gathered. Word of the fight had already spread.

The crowd parted as we crossed the square. Some pointed at me. Others made low sounds of surprise.

We entered the large hall once more. The chief sat upon his platform. Tars Tarkas spoke at length, gesturing toward me.

The chief listened carefully. His red eyes never left my face.

When Tars Tarkas finished, the chief stood. He came down from the platform and walked slowly around me, examining me as one might study a strange animal.

He stopped before me and spoke a single word.

I did not understand.

He spoke again, slower.

I repeated the sound as best I could.

A murmur passed through the hall.

The chief said another word and pointed at himself.

I repeated it.

He nodded slightly.

I realized that he was teaching me their language.

He spoke the word again and placed his hand upon his chest.

“Lorquas Ptomel,” he said.

I repeated, “Lorquas Ptomel.”

He pointed at me.

I understood. “John Carter,” I said.

They repeated my name several times in their strange voices.

After that, they spoke many words. I could not follow them, but I tried to listen carefully.

At last Tars Tarkas placed a hand upon my arm and led me from the hall.

Outside, Sola waited.

She motioned for me to follow her again to the chamber where I had slept.

As we walked, I saw that the wounded beast had been laid upon soft furs near

the entrance. Its breathing was heavy but steady. I knelt beside it.

It opened its eyes and made a low sound.

“You shall live,” I said quietly.

Sola watched me with an expression that seemed almost gentle.

That night I remained in the same chamber. Sola brought me more food. This time I watched her carefully as she spoke certain words and pointed to objects.

She touched the food. “Thoat,” she said.

I repeated it.

She shook her head and touched the beast outside. “Calot,” she said.

I understood that the word for the beast was calot.

She pointed to herself. “Sola.”

I said, “Sola.”

She seemed pleased.

She pointed to me.

I said slowly, “John Carter.”

She tried to form the sounds. “John... Kar-ter.”

We both smiled.

In this way the first steps of my education began.

During the next days, Sola spent many hours teaching me simple words. She was patient and calm. The other Martians rarely spoke to me except to give orders or watch my strange movements.

I learned that the green men do not show affection openly. They do not speak kindly. They do not form family bonds as humans do. Children are raised together. Mothers do not know which child is theirs.

Sola, however, seemed different. There was something in her eyes that suggested feeling deeper than the others.

My calot recovered slowly. Its wounds healed well. From that day forward it never left my side. If I walked, it followed. If I slept, it lay near me.

One morning Tars Tarkas entered the chamber and spoke firmly. Sola nodded and motioned for me to rise.

We went to the plaza.

A great number of warriors stood in lines. Before them were several tall creatures chained together.

At first I thought they were more white apes.

Then I saw that they were human.

But not green.

Their skin was red like copper.

They were beautiful — slender and graceful. They wore ornaments and cloth.

They were prisoners.

Among them stood one who drew my eyes at once.

She was taller than the others. Her skin was soft red-gold. Her face was proud and noble. Her dark hair fell over her shoulders.

Even in chains she stood straight.

She looked nothing like the green Martians.

My heart stirred.

I did not yet know her name.

But I would soon learn it.

Part 5

The red prisoners stood silently while the green warriors surrounded them. Their chains were light, for they showed no sign of weakness. They carried themselves with dignity, even in defeat.

My eyes remained fixed upon the tall woman among them. Her face was calm, yet I could see anger in her eyes. She did not look at the ground. She looked straight ahead, fearless.

One of the green warriors stepped forward and pulled her roughly by the arm. She did not cry out. She turned her head and spoke sharply in a language different from that of the green men.

I could not understand her words, but I knew they were proud words.

The green warrior raised his hand as if to strike her.

Without thinking, I stepped forward.

“Stop,” I said loudly.

The word meant nothing to them, yet my tone carried meaning.

Several green warriors turned toward me. Tars Tarkas moved quickly between me and the others.

He spoke in a firm voice. The warrior lowered his hand.

The tall red woman looked at me then — truly looked at me — for the first time. Our eyes met.

I cannot describe what I felt in that moment. I had been alone in a strange world, surrounded by beings who were not like me. Now, before me, stood someone who resembled humanity.

Though her skin was red-gold, her features were fine and graceful. She had two arms, two legs, and a face that could show expression in a way the green men never did.

She spoke again, this time directly toward Tars Tarkas. He listened.

After a moment he answered her. His voice was calmer than before.

The red woman then spoke a single word and pointed at me.

Tars Tarkas looked at me and spoke my name as best he could.

“John Carter.”

The red woman repeated it softly.

“John Carter.”

The sound of my name in her voice stirred me deeply.

Tars Tarkas then spoke to me and pointed at her.

“Dejah Thoris,” he said.

I repeated carefully, “Dejah Thoris.”

She inclined her head slightly.

I did not yet know who she was, but I felt at once that she was someone of importance.

The green warriors began to move the red prisoners away. Chains clinked softly as they were led across the plaza.

Dejah Thoris walked with steady steps.

I wished to follow, but Tars Tarkas held out his arm to block me. He spoke

briefly and pointed in another direction.

I understood that I must not interfere further.

Later that day Sola brought me to another part of the city. From a high terrace I could see the surrounding valley. In the distance were great dry sea bottoms stretching for miles. Mars, I learned, was a dying world. Water was scarce. Cities stood empty. Only scattered tribes and smaller nations remained.

Sola pointed to the sky and spoke the word for sun.

She pointed to the horizon and spoke the word for air.

Slowly I learned that Mars has little atmosphere. The air is thin. That is why I could leap so far. The lower gravity and thin air made my Earth muscles strong beyond anything the green Martians possessed.

This difference gave me advantage — and danger.

The green men are fierce and cruel in war, yet simple in thought. They respect strength above all things. My leap and my fight with the apes had gained me some position among them.

That evening, as darkness fell quickly and the two moons rose high in the sky, I sat near my calot and thought of Dejah Thoris.

Who was she? Why had she been taken? What would become of her?

Sola noticed my troubled expression.

She spoke slowly, choosing words she believed I might understand.

“Red woman,” she said, touching her chest and then pointing toward the place where the prisoners had been taken.

“Dejah Thoris,” I answered.

She nodded.

“Princess,” she said carefully.

I did not know that word yet. She tried again, placing her hand above her head like a crown.

I understood.

Dejah Thoris was a princess.

My heart grew heavy.

I had already seen enough of green Martian customs to know that prisoners

were not treated kindly.

That night I could not sleep easily.

I lay awake under the cold light of the moons, listening to the distant sounds of the city.

My calot rested beside me, breathing slowly.

I made a quiet promise in my heart.

Whatever this world might hold for me — whatever dangers might come — I would protect Dejah Thoris if I could.

I did not yet know how such a promise could be kept.

But from that moment, my path on Mars was no longer only my own.

Part 6

The next morning I was awakened before sunrise. On Mars there is almost no dawn. The light comes suddenly. One moment the world is dark beneath the pale moons, and the next it is bright beneath the sun.

Sola stood near me. She motioned that I should rise. My calot followed as always.

We went to the plaza. The red prisoners stood in a line. Chains still bound them, though loosely. Green warriors surrounded them on every side.

Dejah Thoris stood among the captives, her head held high. Though she was a prisoner, she did not appear broken.

Lorquas Ptomel, the chieftain, stood before them. He spoke loudly. His voice carried across the square.

I could not yet understand all his words, but I caught certain sounds I had learned. I heard “war,” “city,” and another word I would soon know well — “Zodanga.”

When he finished, Dejah Thoris stepped forward and answered him boldly. Her voice was clear and strong. She did not beg. She argued.

The green warriors listened without emotion. They do not show anger or sympathy easily.

At last Lorquas Ptomel turned away. The decision was made.

The red prisoners were to be kept alive.

I felt relief, though I did not yet know the reason for this choice. Later I would learn that Dejah Thoris was not an ordinary woman. She was a princess of Helium, one of the great cities of the red Martians. She had been taken during battle with the rival city of Zodanga.

The green Martians cared little for the wars of red men. They fight only for plunder. They had taken prisoners because prisoners can be traded, questioned, or used.

After the meeting, Tars Tarkas approached me. He spoke several words slowly, repeating them until I could follow.

He pointed to Dejah Thoris and then to me. He made a gesture of watching.

I understood. I was to help guard her.

This surprised me greatly. Perhaps he believed that because I was not green, I might better understand the red prisoners. Or perhaps he wished to test my loyalty.

Whatever his reason, I followed as Dejah Thoris and several other captives were led to a large building.

Inside were chambers similar to my own, though better furnished. The chains were removed once they entered. Green guards remained outside.

Dejah Thoris turned and saw me in the doorway.

“John Carter,” she said clearly in my own language.

I was astonished.

“You speak English?” I asked quickly.

She looked confused.

Then I understood. It was not English. It was the language of the red Martians — and somehow I understood it.

Just as I had known I was on Mars when I arrived, I now found that her words carried meaning. Perhaps it was the strange force that had brought me here. Perhaps it was something in the air or in my mind. I cannot explain it.

“I am Dejah Thoris of Helium,” she said proudly. “Who are you, stranger?”

“I am John Carter of Virginia,” I answered. “I come from another world.”

She studied me carefully.

“Your form is that of a red man,” she said slowly, “yet your skin is lighter. You are not green. You are not of Zodanga. You are not of Helium.”

“I am of Earth,” I replied.

She frowned slightly. “Earth?”

“Another planet,” I said. “The small one near your sun.”

She was silent for a moment.

“Your words are strange,” she said at last. “But you fought the white apes. You spoke against the green warrior who would strike me. For that, I thank you.”

She inclined her head.

I felt a warmth in my chest I had not known since leaving my own world.

“I will protect you if I can,” I said firmly.

She gave a faint smile.

“Then you must first protect yourself,” she replied. “The green men are dangerous allies.”

Over the following days, I spent many hours near the chamber where the red prisoners were kept. Dejah Thoris spoke with me often. She explained much about Mars.

The planet, she told me, was ancient. Once it had oceans and wide lands. Now the seas were dry. Water was carried through great canals from the polar ice caps. Without these canals, life would end.

The red Martians were a civilized race. They built cities, flew airships, studied science, and understood many things.

The green Martians, in contrast, were nomads. They roamed the dead sea bottoms and lived by war and hunting.

“They are cruel,” she said once, her eyes hard. “They feel little. They know no love.”

I thought of Sola.

“Not all are without feeling,” I answered quietly.

Dejah Thoris looked at me with curiosity.

“Perhaps you are right,” she said.

Meanwhile, I continued to learn the language. My strength amazed the green warriors. They would sometimes command me to leap for their amusement. I obeyed only when I wished. They respected my courage too much to force me harshly.

My calot recovered fully and remained ever at my side.

Yet beneath the surface of this uneasy peace, I sensed tension.

The green Martians were preparing to move.

They spoke often of Zodanga.

And when green men speak often of a city, it usually means war.

I began to fear what that war might mean for Dejah Thoris.

For if the green horde attacked her enemies, they might also bargain with her life.

And I knew that whatever happened, I would not stand aside.

Part 7

The camp grew restless during the following days. The green warriors sharpened their weapons and examined their rifles. The great thoats — the eight-legged mounts — were exercised across the dry sea bottom. Even the calots seemed more alert, as if they sensed approaching battle.

Dejah Thoris told me that the green horde rarely remained long in one place. They were always moving, always seeking plunder. Now they planned to march toward Zodanga.

“Zodanga is an enemy of Helium,” she explained. “But if the green men attack them, it will not be for justice. It will be for loot.”

“Will they take you with them?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I am valuable.”

Her calm tone could not hide the danger in her words.

I found Tars Tarkas later that day. He stood watching warriors drill in the plaza.

“Tars Tarkas,” I said carefully, using the language I had learned, “what will become of Dejah Thoris?”

He regarded me steadily.

“She is red,” he said. “Red are enemies. But she is also prize. Prize has value.”

“And if Helium offers trade?” I pressed.

He shrugged slightly. “Perhaps.”

The green Martians do not lie easily, but neither do they reveal more than they wish.

That night I spoke again with Dejah Thoris.

“If we march toward Zodanga,” she said, “there may be battle in the air. My people will fight.”

“Air?” I asked.

She smiled faintly. “You have not yet seen our ships.”

The next morning I understood her meaning.

As the horde prepared to depart, a distant sound reached us. It was a deep humming, growing louder.

Warriors pointed toward the sky.

From the horizon came several large shapes moving through the air.

Airships.

They were long and graceful, with shining metal sides and wide decks. Sunlight flashed from their surfaces.

“Helium,” Dejah Thoris whispered.

The green warriors shouted and ran to their mounts. Rifles were lifted.

The ships moved swiftly overhead. Small objects dropped from them — bright flashes followed.

Explosions shook the plaza. Stone shattered. Warriors fell.

The green horde scattered in confusion.

I saw Dejah Thoris step forward to the doorway of her chamber. She watched the battle above with fierce pride.

“My people have come,” she said.

But the green Martians were not helpless.

Tars Tarkas mounted his thout and gave sharp commands. Warriors spread out across the open ground.

Their rifles were raised.
I saw one aim high into the sky. There was a faint crack.
Moments later, one of the airships shuddered. Smoke rose from its side.
The Martian rifles were deadly at great distances.
More shots rang out.
Another ship dipped sharply.
The battle in the air turned desperate.
A damaged vessel began to descend, unable to maintain height. It drifted toward the valley beyond the city.
“They are falling,” Dejah Thoris cried.
Without thinking, I ran toward the open ground beyond the buildings.
“John Carter!” she called after me.
But I could not remain still.
If Helium’s warriors had fallen, I would reach them first.
I leaped across the dry sea bottom with great bounds. The damaged airship came down in the distance, striking the ground with a crash.
Smoke rose into the thin air.
Green warriors raced toward it from every direction.
I reached the wreck before many of them. The hull was torn open. Inside I saw red warriors struggling to free themselves.
I lifted heavy metal beams as if they were light wood. My Earth strength, doubled by Martian gravity, gave me power beyond belief.
I pulled one red soldier free. Then another.
Green warriors were close now.
I stood before the broken ship, club in hand.
“Back!” I shouted.
They hesitated.
Tars Tarkas rode forward.
He looked at the wounded red men. He looked at me.
“They are prisoners,” he said.
“They are warriors,” I answered.

He studied me for a long moment.
Then he spoke sharply to his men.
The red soldiers were bound but not killed.
I felt both relief and anger. They would live — for now.
When we returned to the city, Dejah Thoris met us at the entrance.
Her eyes searched the faces of the prisoners.
“Are they of Helium?” she asked urgently.
“Yes,” I said. “They live.”
She closed her eyes briefly in gratitude.
The airships that remained unhurt had retreated. The sky was clear once more.
The green horde had proven its strength.
Yet I knew this was only the beginning.
War on Mars is not finished in a single clash.
And I, John Carter of Earth, was now bound to it.

Part 8

After the air battle, the green horde wasted no time. The fallen red warriors were chained and placed under guard. The damaged airship was stripped of useful metal and parts. Nothing of value was left behind.

Dejah Thoris watched all this with quiet sorrow.

“Zodanga will learn of this,” she said to me. “Helium will answer. There will be greater war.”

“Then I must learn to fight as your people fight,” I replied.

She regarded me thoughtfully. “You already fight with strength no Martian has known.”

That afternoon Tars Tarkas ordered me to join the warriors in practice. Though I was still considered a prisoner, I was no longer treated as helpless. They handed me a long sword and a small shield.

The sword felt light in my hand. The shield was metal and curved.

A large green warrior stepped forward to test me. He swung his blade heavily.

I leaped aside with ease. My lightness gave me speed beyond theirs.

I struck his weapon with mine. The force of my blow surprised him. His sword dropped from his hand.

Murmurs rose from the watching warriors.

Another stepped forward. Then another.

I learned quickly. Their size gave them reach, but my speed and agility allowed me to close the distance. Soon several warriors lay disarmed on the ground.

Tars Tarkas himself approached.

He was stronger and more skilled than the others. His four arms moved with careful control.

We circled each other.

He attacked swiftly. I parried and leaped behind him. He turned at once and struck again.

For many moments we fought without pause.

At last I saw an opening. I sprang high into the air and came down behind him, pressing my blade gently against his neck.

Silence filled the plaza.

Tars Tarkas lowered his weapons.

He did not look angry.

He looked satisfied.

“John Carter,” he said slowly, “you are great warrior.”

The words, though simple, carried weight.

From that day forward I was treated not as a captive, but as a member of the horde — though still watched closely.

Sola smiled when she heard of the contest. “You are strange man,” she said softly.

“Strange world,” I answered.

My calot remained faithful always. It followed me into practice, into council, even near the chambers of the red prisoners.

Dejah Thoris and I spoke often.

She told me of Helium — a twin city with great towers and beautiful gardens.

She described flying fleets and scientists who studied the canals that carried water across the dying planet.

“Mars once had oceans,” she said one evening as we stood beneath the twin moons. “Now we live between desert and death. Only the canals keep us alive.”

“On Earth we have many oceans,” I said.

She looked at me with wonder.

“Your world must be rich beyond measure.”

I thought of Arizona’s dry hills and smiled faintly. “It depends where one stands.”

She laughed lightly — a sound far gentler than the harsh laughter of the green men.

Days later the horde began its march.

Hundreds of green warriors mounted their thoats. Calots ran beside them. The red prisoners, including Dejah Thoris, were placed under heavy guard.

I rode near Tars Tarkas.

The land stretched endlessly — dry sea bottoms, scattered ruins of ancient cities, long canal lines visible in the distance like dark threads across the desert.

At night we camped beneath the moons. The air grew bitterly cold. Fires burned low, for fuel was scarce.

On the third day, scouts returned with urgent news.

Zodangan forces were near.

The horde prepared for battle.

Warriors spread across the plain in wide formation. Rifles were checked. Swords were drawn.

In the distance I saw dust rising.

Zodanga approached.

Dejah Thoris stood near her guards, watching.

“This is not my war,” she whispered, “yet it may decide my fate.”

I looked toward the coming enemy.

“Then it decides mine as well,” I said.

The two armies closed.

The air filled with rifle cracks and distant explosions. Thoats charged across the plain. Warriors shouted.

I leaped from my mount and ran forward on foot, moving faster than any thout could carry a rider.

My sword flashed.

Zodangan warriors were red like Dejah Thoris, but their armor marked them as enemies of Helium.

I struck and parried, moving with speed that none could match.

A Zodangan soldier aimed a pistol at Dejah Thoris from afar.

I saw the danger.

With one great leap I crossed the distance and struck his arm aside. The shot went wide.

He turned to face me. Our blades met.

He was skilled, but slower.

In moments he lay defeated.

Dejah Thoris looked at me, her eyes bright.

“You move like no man of Mars,” she said.

“Because I am not of Mars,” I answered.

The battle raged until sunset.

At last Zodanga retreated.

The green horde howled in triumph.

Yet victory brought no peace.

For in the confusion, Dejah Thoris had been separated from her guards.

And when I searched for her in the fading light —

She was gone.

Part 9

At first I told myself she must still be near. The battle had scattered warriors in every direction. Dust hung in the thin air. Cries of the wounded rose across the plain.

I ran through the fading light, calling her name.

“Dejah Thoris!”

No answer came.

I questioned green warriors. Most only shook their heads. They had been too busy fighting to notice a single red prisoner.

My heart pounded with rising fear.

At last I found Sola. She stood near a group of mounted warriors.

“Have you seen her?” I demanded.

Sola looked troubled. “In battle,” she said slowly, “Zodanga ship came low. I saw red men seize prisoner.”

“They took her?” I asked.

She nodded once.

I looked toward the sky.

In the distance I could see a small airship moving away, growing smaller with each moment.

Rage filled me.

I turned at once toward Tars Tarkas.

He listened without interruption as I spoke.

“Zodanga has taken Dejah Thoris,” I finished. “We must follow.”

He regarded me calmly.

“Green men have no love for red princess,” he said. “Zodanga is enemy. Helium is enemy. It matters little.”

“It matters to me,” I answered.

There was silence between us.

Finally he spoke again. “John Carter is great warrior. John Carter may go.”

He gestured toward the plain. “But green horde does not chase for red woman.”

I understood. I would not have the support of the horde.

Yet as I turned to leave, Sola stepped forward.

“I go,” she said quietly.

Tars Tarkas looked at her sharply.

“Sola is of my household,” he said.

“Sola has debt,” she answered, glancing toward my calot, who stood beside me. Tars Tarkas was silent for a long moment.

At last he nodded slightly.

“Go,” he said.

Within an hour we were mounted — Sola, myself, and my faithful calot running at our side.

We rode through the night, guided by the faint shape of the retreating airship against the stars.

Mars’ nearer moon sped quickly overhead, casting shifting light across the dry sea bottom.

“Zodanga lies many miles ahead,” Sola said. “If they reach city, Dejah Thoris will be held strong.”

“Then we must reach her before they do,” I replied.

I urged the thout forward, though the beast was not swift compared to my leaps.

At dawn we saw the airship descending far ahead.

It came down near a small ruined city at the edge of an old canal.

“They rest,” Sola said. “Perhaps to repair ship.”

We slowed and approached carefully.

From a low ridge we could see the camp below. Zodangan warriors moved about the grounded vessel. Guards stood near a central tent.

“She is there,” I said.

Sola nodded.

“Too many to fight openly,” she warned.

“Then we do not fight openly,” I answered.

We waited until full darkness returned.

When both moons were low and shadows deep, I crept toward the camp alone. My calot moved silently beside me.

I circled the outer guards, using my leaps to pass from ruin to ruin without sound.

At last I reached the tent.

Two guards stood before it.

I leaped high above them and landed silently behind.
Before they could turn, my blade struck swiftly. Both fell without cry.
I lifted the tent flap.
Inside, bound but unbroken, stood Dejah Thoris.
Her eyes widened as she saw me.
“John Carter!” she whispered.
I cut her bonds.
“We must move quickly,” I said.
“I knew you would come,” she replied softly.
There was no time for more.
We slipped from the tent and ran toward the ruins where Sola waited.
A shout rose behind us.
We had been seen.
Zodangan warriors rushed after us. Rifles fired. Shots cracked against stone.
I lifted Dejah Thoris in my arms and leaped across a wide broken street.
Bullets struck the ground behind us.
Sola mounted her thopter and extended a hand.
I placed Dejah Thoris behind her and leaped onto my own mount.
We raced into the darkness.
The Zodangans pursued, but their mounts were slower. My leaps allowed me
to confuse their aim.
At last the sounds of pursuit faded.
We did not slow until sunrise.
When we finally halted beside an ancient canal bed, Dejah Thoris looked at me
with deep emotion.
“Twice you have saved me,” she said.
“As many times as needed,” I answered.
She lowered her eyes briefly.
“Helium will honor you,” she said.
“It is not for honor,” I replied.
She looked at me then — and this time there was no doubt in her expression.

“I know,” she said quietly.

Sola watched us both with thoughtful silence.

The journey ahead would not be easy. We were far from Helium, far from safety.

But Dejah Thoris was free.

And as long as I could leap and fight, no force on Mars would take her from me again.

Part 10

We rested only a short while beside the dry canal. The sun rose quickly, and with it came heat. The land around us was open and dangerous. Any passing scout could discover us.

“We must reach Helium,” Dejah Thoris said. “There we will have protection.”

“How far?” I asked.

“Many days’ travel,” she replied. “If we avoid Zodanga patrols.”

Sola studied the horizon. “Green horde will move elsewhere,” she said. “They do not chase long.”

I knew she was right. The green Martians were fierce in battle but careless in pursuit unless plunder called them forward.

We mounted again and rode eastward, keeping to broken ground and ruins for cover.

As we traveled, Dejah Thoris spoke more of her world.

She explained the canals — vast waterways cut across the planet, carrying melted ice from the poles to the dying cities. Without them, all life would end.

“The atmosphere grows thin,” she said. “Our scientists labor constantly to maintain it.”

“Maintain it?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “There are great factories that produce air.”

The idea amazed me.

“Without them,” she continued, “Mars would suffocate.”

I understood then how fragile this world truly was.

Near midday we saw movement ahead.

I signaled for silence.

From behind a ridge emerged several mounted figures.

Zodangan scouts.

There were six of them.

They had seen us.

“Ride!” I shouted.

We spurred our thoats forward. Shots rang out. One bullet struck the ground near Sola’s mount.

I turned in my saddle and fired a captured pistol. One scout fell.

The others spread out to surround us.

“They are faster than before,” Sola warned.

I looked ahead. The ground sloped upward toward a narrow rocky pass.

“There,” I said. “We take the high ground.”

We drove our mounts hard toward the rocks.

Two scouts gained on us.

I leaped from my thoot and landed between them and the women.

One charged with spear lowered.

I sprang straight up and came down upon him, wrenching the spear from his hands. He fell beneath his mount’s hooves.

The second raised his rifle.

Before he could fire, my calot leaped at his throat. The beast dragged him from the saddle.

The remaining scouts hesitated.

In that moment Sola and Dejah Thoris reached the narrow pass.

I bounded after them.

The path was too tight for mounted pursuit.

The Zodangans circled below but did not follow.

We pressed through the rocky corridor until we reached open ground beyond.

When at last we stopped, Dejah Thoris looked back toward the ridge.

“You fight for Helium as if born to it,” she said.

“I fight for you,” I answered simply.

She held my gaze for a long moment.

“John Carter,” she said softly, “you are unlike any man of Mars.”

The sun began to fall once more, and with it came cold.

We found shelter within the ruins of a small ancient city. Its towers were broken, its streets silent. Once, perhaps, people like Dejah Thoris had lived there.

Now only wind moved through the empty halls.

That night, as the twin moons crossed the sky, Dejah Thoris stood beside me upon a crumbled wall.

“If we reach Helium,” she said, “you will be honored among my people.”

“I seek no honor,” I replied. “Only your safety.”

She turned toward me.

“And if I am safe?”

The question hung between us.

I did not answer at once.

“Then I shall remain,” I said finally, “if you would have me.”

Her expression softened.

“Helium would be stronger with you,” she said. “And so would I.”

Below us, my calot slept, ever watchful.

Sola rested quietly near a broken column, her eyes reflecting moonlight.

We were still far from Helium. Zodanga would not forget. The green horde wandered somewhere across the dry seas.

Mars remained a world of danger and war.

Yet as I stood beside Dejah Thoris beneath the alien sky, I knew with certainty that my fate was now bound to this red planet.

Whatever trials lay ahead — battle, capture, or death — I would meet them as I had met all else.

As John Carter of Earth.

Part 11

At dawn we left the ruined city and continued eastward. The land slowly changed. The dry sea bottom gave way to narrow strips of cultivated ground along a distant canal. I could see faint lines of green cutting across the desert.

“The canals of Helium,” Dejah Thoris said, pointing ahead.

My heart lifted.

But hope on Mars is never simple.

As we neared the canal, we saw dark shapes moving along its banks.

“Warships,” Dejah Thoris whispered.

Not the small scouts we had faced before. These were large vessels, long and armed with heavy guns.

“Zodanga,” Sola said grimly.

The ships floated above the canal, guarding it.

“They mean to block Helium’s water,” Dejah Thoris said. “If they hold the canal, the city weakens.”

“Then we must pass unseen,” I said.

We left the open ground and moved through low hills running parallel to the canal. From a height I could see the water glistening faintly in the thin air.

The canal was wide, cut straight across the land like a giant wound.

Several Zodangan patrols rode along its edge.

“There,” I said quietly, pointing toward a narrow bridge of stone that crossed the canal some distance ahead.

It was unguarded for the moment.

We rode hard toward it.

As we reached the bridge, a shout rose behind us.

We had been spotted.

I turned and saw a patrol of five Zodangans charging toward us.

“Go!” I called to Dejah Thoris and Sola. “Cross!”

They urged their mounts forward across the narrow stone span.

I wheeled my thout and faced the pursuers.

My calot stood beside me, teeth bared.

The first Zodangan lowered his spear.

I leaped high and came down directly before him, striking the spear aside and dragging him from his saddle.

The second fired his pistol.

The shot grazed my shoulder. Pain burned, but I did not fall.

I sprang forward and struck him with the flat of my blade. He tumbled backward.

The remaining three slowed.

In that instant Dejah Thoris called from across the canal, “John Carter!”

I leaped across the remaining distance of the bridge and rejoined them.

Behind us, more Zodangan riders appeared.

We raced onward along the canal’s far bank.

Soon the land ahead opened into a wide plain.

And beyond that plain —

Towers.

Great towers rising high into the sky.

“Helium,” Dejah Thoris breathed.

The twin cities stood like shining jewels in the distance. Slender spires and broad domes reflected the sunlight.

My heart filled with awe.

But the Zodangans were not finished.

From behind us came the deep hum of engines.

Airships lifted from the canal and rose into the sky.

“They pursue,” Sola said.

We could not outrun ships in open land.

“We must reach the city gates,” Dejah Thoris urged.

We drove our mounts to their limit.

The airships gained quickly. Shadows passed over us.

A warning shout rang from the walls of Helium.

I saw shapes rising from the city — Helium’s own fleet.

Warships burst into the sky to meet the enemy.

The air above us filled with vessels.

Guns flashed. Explosions shook the air.

One Zodangan ship descended lower, perhaps hoping to seize us before Helium could respond.

It swept toward the ground.

I lifted Dejah Thoris from her saddle and held her tightly.

“Hold fast,” I said.

As the ship came low, I leaped.

With a single bound I landed upon its deck.

Dejah Thoris clung to me.

Zodangan warriors rushed forward in shock.

I struck left and right with my sword.

My calot, having leaped after me, tore into their ranks.

Sola’s thout remained below, riderless but waiting.

The ship lurched under attack from above. Helium vessels had reached us.

In the chaos, I cut through the last defender and seized control of the steering lever.

I did not know its workings, but I forced the ship downward.

It struck the plain near the city gates.

Helium warriors rushed out to meet us.

Dejah Thoris stood tall upon the deck as her people recognized her.

A great cry rose from the ground.

“Dejah Thoris! Princess of Helium!”

Red warriors surrounded us, driving back the remaining Zodangans.

I descended from the deck and helped her to the ground.

She turned to me before her people.

“This is John Carter,” she said clearly. “He has saved me from the green horde and from Zodanga. He has fought for Helium.”

The red warriors looked at me with surprise and respect.

A tall man stepped forward, richly dressed.

“I am Mors Kajak, Jeddak of Helium,” he said.

His gaze was sharp but not unkind.

“You are welcome within our walls.”

The gates of Helium opened.

As we entered, I looked once more at the sky where ships still battled.

My journey from a cave in Arizona had brought me to the heart of a dying world’s greatest city.

And I knew that my trials were not yet over.

For Zodanga still lived.

And Mars was not a world that granted peace for long.

Part 12

The gates of Helium closed behind us with a deep sound that echoed through the great court. Red warriors hurried to the walls while others formed ranks in the open square. Above, the battle in the sky still raged, ships turning and firing in swift motion.

Dejah Thoris stood beside me, her head high, her face bright with fierce pride. The people of Helium looked at her as though life itself had returned.

Mors Kajak, the Jeddak, studied me carefully.

“You are not of Zodanga,” he said slowly. “You are not of Helium. Yet you stand beside my daughter.”

“I am of another world,” I replied. “I serve no city here. I serve only her safety.”

A murmur passed through the gathered nobles.

“You speak plainly,” Mors Kajak said. “That is well.”

Another man stepped forward. He was younger, tall, with eyes like Dejah Thoris.

“I am Tardos Mors,” he said. “Prince of Helium.”

He looked at me with both caution and respect.

“My sister speaks highly of your courage.”

Dejah Thoris turned to him. “Without John Carter, I would be dead or captive in Zodanga.”

The prince nodded once.

“Then Helium owes you much.”

A messenger rushed forward, saluting quickly.

“The Zodangan fleet retreats!” he cried. “They fall back toward the western canal.”

A cheer rose from the court.

The battle was won — for now.

Dejah Thoris turned to me once more.

“You are safe within Helium,” she said softly.

I looked around at the towering walls and shining spires.

“Then this is your home,” I answered.

She smiled faintly. “It is.”

I was given chambers within the palace. They were richly furnished, filled with soft fabrics and light from tall windows. For the first time since arriving on Mars, I slept in true comfort.

Yet my rest was not peaceful.

I dreamed of the cave in Arizona, of my lifeless body upon the stone floor. I dreamed of Mars fading into darkness.

When I woke, the twin moons were setting beyond the towers of Helium.

In the days that followed, I learned much.

Helium was one of the greatest cities remaining on Mars. It was in truth two cities joined together — Greater and Lesser Helium. Between them lay open ground used for gatherings and defense.

Their ships were swift and strong. Their warriors were disciplined. Their scientists worked constantly to maintain the atmosphere factory that provided air for much of the planet.

I was shown these great works. Deep within vast structures, engines hummed and turned, producing the very air that filled our lungs.

“If this factory were destroyed,” Dejah Thoris said gravely, “all life would perish.”

“Then it must never fall,” I replied.

Yet even as I spoke, I knew that Zodanga would not forget its defeat.

One evening I stood upon a high balcony with Dejah Thoris. The sky burned red beneath sunset.

“Zodanga will strike again,” she said quietly.

“Then I will stand with Helium,” I answered.

She turned toward me.

“You owe Helium nothing,” she said.

“I owe you,” I replied.

Her eyes held mine for a long moment.

“John Carter,” she said softly, “there are laws upon Mars. Customs. Alliances.”

“I know little of them,” I admitted.

“Yet you must understand this,” she continued. “If Helium and Zodanga make peace, I may be bound by treaty.”

“Bound?” I asked.

“Marriage,” she said calmly.

The word struck me harder than any blade.

“To whom?” I demanded.

“Perhaps to Sab Than,” she said. “Prince of Zodanga.”

I felt anger rise within me.

“You would accept such a fate?”

She met my gaze without fear.

“I would accept what is required of a princess,” she said. “For my people.”

Silence stood between us.

At last I spoke.

“I will not see you given to your enemy.”

A faint smile touched her lips.

“Then you must defeat Zodanga,” she said.

That night I went to Mors Kajak.

“Teach me,” I said simply.

“Teach you what?” he asked.

“To command ships. To lead men. To fight as a Martian warrior.”

He studied me carefully.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because Zodanga will return,” I said. “And when it does, I will stand in its path.”

The Jeddak nodded slowly.

“Very well,” he said. “Let us see what an Earthman can learn.”

And so began my training among the red warriors of Helium.

I learned the controls of airships, the signals of fleet command, the science of Martian weapons.

My Earth strength and agility gave me advantage in personal combat. My mind, shaped by a different world, gave me unusual insight into tactics.

Months passed.

Zodanga rebuilt its fleet.

And at last, the day came when its banners were once again seen on the horizon.

This time, the battle would not be in the open desert.

It would be for the fate of Helium itself.

Part 13

The warning came at dawn.

Scouts from the western horizon rode hard into the city, their mounts covered in dust.

“Zodanga advances!” they cried. “A full fleet in the sky and an army on the ground!”

The great horns of Helium sounded. Warriors rushed to their stations. Ships rose from their towers like flocks of metal birds.

I stood beside Tardos Mors upon the highest platform of the palace.

“This is the hour,” he said quietly.

“It is,” I answered.

Below us, Dejah Thoris moved among the people, giving calm words where fear had begun to spread. She wore light armor now, though she would not fight in the first ranks.

I mounted my assigned vessel. It was sleek and powerful, armed with long-range guns and swift steering wings.

The fleet of Helium rose to meet the enemy.

Zodanga's ships filled the western sky — dark shapes against the rising sun.

“Hold formation,” Tardos Mors commanded through signal flags and light codes.

The two fleets closed.

The first volleys exploded in brilliant flashes.

Ships shook under impact. Metal tore. Smoke drifted in the thin air.

I guided my vessel upward, using speed to flank the enemy's line.

A Zodangan cruiser turned toward me, guns blazing.

I dove sharply, then rose beneath it, firing at its under-hull.

A direct hit.

The cruiser shuddered and began to fall.

Cheers sounded from nearby Helium ships.

The battle intensified.

Below, the ground army of Zodanga approached the city walls. Green banners mixed among them — mercenaries and hired warriors.

“They bring the green hordes,” I muttered.

A signal flashed from Tardos Mors.

The city gates would open.

Helium's ground forces would charge.

I made a decision without waiting for command.

I turned my vessel downward toward the plain outside the walls.

The gates burst open.

Red warriors poured forth in disciplined ranks.

Zodanga's army met them with force.

I brought my ship low and leaped from the deck into the midst of battle.

The shock of landing knocked two enemy soldiers aside.

My blade flashed.

I moved faster than any Martian could follow. I leaped above spears and struck

from behind shields.

Green warriors rushed at me with heavy weapons. I bounded high, came down upon one, and hurled him into another.

The ground battle swirled in chaos.

Above us, ships continued to fight.

Suddenly a terrible explosion shook the sky.

I looked up.

One of Helium's largest vessels had taken a direct hit.

It burned and began to descend toward the city.

"Clear the square!" someone shouted.

I saw where it would fall.

It was heading toward the palace.

Toward Dejah Thoris.

Without thought for my own life, I leaped toward the palace gates, bounding across the field in enormous strides.

Warriors stared as I passed above their heads.

The burning ship roared downward.

I reached the courtyard just as Dejah Thoris looked up in horror.

I seized her around the waist and leaped clear as the great vessel crashed behind us.

Stone shattered. Fire burst outward.

We landed hard but safely beyond the falling wreckage.

She clung to me for a moment, breathless.

"You would defy death itself," she whispered.

"If it stands between you and harm," I answered.

The battle raged on.

Smoke filled the sky. The Zodangan line wavered.

Tardos Mors signaled for final assault.

Helium's remaining ships dove together in a unified charge.

Their guns struck the center of Zodanga's formation.

The enemy fleet broke.

On the ground, their army faltered as word of retreat spread.
Within an hour, Zodanga's banners turned westward.
They fled.
A roar of triumph rose from Helium's warriors.
The city was saved.
As the last enemy ships vanished into the distance, silence slowly returned.
I stood in the courtyard beside Dejah Thoris, smoke drifting around us.
Mors Kajak approached, his face grave but proud.
"Helium stands because of courage," he said. "And much of that courage was yours."
Tardos Mors stepped forward.
"John Carter of Earth," he declared, "you have fought for Helium as one of our own."
The gathered warriors raised their weapons in salute.
Dejah Thoris turned toward her father.
"He has earned more than praise," she said.
The Jeddak regarded us both carefully.
"There are laws," he began.
My heart tightened.
"But there are also deeds," he continued. "And no man who has saved Helium and my daughter shall be denied honor."
He stepped closer.
"If Dejah Thoris chooses, and if you choose, the union shall be yours."
The words struck me with force.
I looked at Dejah Thoris.
She did not hesitate.
"I choose," she said.
I bowed my head.
"As do I."
A cheer rose from the court.
In that moment, beneath the alien sky of Mars, I knew that the strange force

which had drawn me from Arizona had not done so without purpose.

I had found not only battle and danger —

But love.

Part 14

The days that followed were filled with celebration. Helium repaired its damaged towers and ships, and the people spoke of the victory over Zodanga with pride. Yet beneath the joy there remained a quiet awareness that Mars was never free from danger.

My union with Dejah Thoris was declared before the assembled citizens of Greater and Lesser Helium. The great court was filled with nobles, warriors, scientists, and citizens from every quarter of the twin cities.

Mors Kajak stood upon the high dais, and beside him stood Tardos Mors and Dejah Thoris.

I walked forward alone.

Though I wore armor of Helium, I felt in that moment like the soldier who had once stood alone in an Arizona cave.

Dejah Thoris stepped toward me. She wore light garments of shining silk, and her dark hair fell over her shoulders. There was strength in her face, not only beauty.

“John Carter of Earth,” Mors Kajak proclaimed, “has fought for Helium with valor beyond measure. He has defended our city and our princess. Let it be known that he stands as Prince of Helium.”

A roar of approval rose from the gathered people.

I looked at Dejah Thoris. She smiled — not as a princess to a subject, but as a woman to the man she had chosen.

We joined hands.

“Where you stand, I stand,” she said quietly.

“Where you go, I go,” I replied.

The ceremony was simple, yet it bound me to Mars as surely as any chain.

In the months that followed, I learned to live not as a stranger but as one of Helium. I commanded ships in patrol across the canals. I trained with warriors in the open plains. My strength remained unmatched, and my leaps continued to astonish even those who had seen them many times.

Yet there were quiet moments too.

Often I stood beside Dejah Thoris upon the high balconies of the palace, looking out across the fading lands of Mars.

“Your world calls to you still,” she said one evening.

I had been gazing at the red horizon.

“Sometimes,” I admitted. “But less each day.”

She placed her hand upon mine.

“Mars is harsh,” she said. “Yet it is home.”

“And so are you,” I answered.

Years passed in relative peace.

Zodanga, weakened by defeat, withdrew from open war. The green hordes roamed elsewhere. Helium prospered for a time.

Yet Mars was a dying world.

One day, deep within the atmosphere factory, alarms began to sound.

I was in the palace when the message reached us.

“The air engines falter,” a messenger cried. “Pressure falls!”

Dejah Thoris turned pale.

“If the factory fails,” she whispered, “all Mars will suffocate.”

I did not hesitate.

“Where is it?” I demanded.

“Beyond the southern desert,” Tardos Mors answered. “Many miles.”

“Then I go,” I said.

“You cannot go alone,” Dejah Thoris protested.

“I must,” I replied. “Speed matters more than numbers.”

I took a fast scout ship and drove it southward at full power.

The land below blurred beneath me.

At last I saw the massive structure of the atmosphere factory rising from the

desert.

Smoke poured from its upper vents.

Ships circled helplessly around it.

I landed near the main entrance and ran inside.

Engineers lay unconscious upon the floor.

The air grew thin. Each breath was harder than the last.

I forced my way toward the central chamber.

A great door stood closed — sealed from within.

I beat upon it, shouting, but no answer came.

I remembered the code Dejah Thoris had once described — the emergency sequence to open the control panel.

My vision darkened as the air thinned further.

With trembling hands I worked the controls.

At last the heavy door slid open.

Inside, machinery lay silent.

I saw the master lever.

With the last of my strength, I pulled it.

Engines roared back to life.

Air rushed through the chamber.

I staggered backward.

Then darkness closed over me.

When I opened my eyes again, I was no longer in the factory.

I lay upon stone.

Cold stone.

Above me was darkness.

I sat up slowly.

The cave.

The Arizona cave.

My body lay before me, lifeless, just as it had on that distant night.

I rose to my feet.

My Earth body stirred.

I gasped and drew breath.
The spirit that had lived on Mars returned to its original form.
I stood once more as John Carter of Virginia.
Mars had vanished.
Dejah Thoris had vanished.
The red sky, the towers of Helium, the twin moons — gone.
I was alone in the cave.
Years had passed upon Earth, though I had not aged.
I do not know by what power I traveled between worlds. I do not know why I
was sent or why I was returned.
I only know this:
Somewhere beneath the red sky of Mars, Dejah Thoris lives.
And one day, when the red star burns bright upon the horizon, I shall stretch
out my arms once more —
And return.