

to warm his hands over the stove and trade greetings with Balko before setting out to locate a cup of coffee.

Raiella and Kira were sitting with their backs braced against the hull, idly chatting across the table. Belstan and Teelek were playing a board game that resembled checkers. Jeff watched fascinated as the board sailed back and forth on the swinging table. The players tracked the board with intent concentration, one or the other occasionally moving a piece at the top of the table's swing.

La'ani had decided to stay on board, and listened closely as Dophena described the desert portions of Zomar. Carl and Faana were nowhere to be seen. Given the most likely reason, Jeff thought it best not to ask. In the galley he decided on a hot cup of soup instead of coffee. Margithi, Sarri and Dooby greeted him before returning to a discussion of some obscure recipe from Chaldesia.

With hot soup in his stomach, Jeff did a rapid fade. Although exhausted, he felt a deep sense of satisfaction, even contentment. I think we're going to make it, he thought. If that Morlock wasn't confused enough, this last storm must have really done the trick. She'll never find us now.

Mumbling goodnights and kissing various upturned lips, he made his way to their stateroom. He was only vaguely aware when warm bodies settled down around him one by one.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *Morlock*

An inner sense triggered and Jeff's eyes snapped open. His mind automatically went into monitoring mode. Nothing seemed wrong. The Gilnora's motion was regular, indicating she was steady on course, and much smoother than the previous evening. He heard a few orders, yet there was no particular urgency to them, and no more than the usual

tramping of feet overhead. It might have been close to dawn.

That was too early and Jeff tried to doze off. He gave it up when he felt he couldn't lie still another second. Something was wrong. Before he could get up, the first job was to untangle himself from Kira.

Since joining with the family, Kira had become more confident in the sleep pile. On Tonupu she had accepted a position on the periphery without complaint. Now she usually managed to worm her way close to Jeff. That wasn't bad from Jeff's perspective. Kira's thermostat seemed to be set higher than anyone else's, including his own. When it comes to electric blankets, he had decided, you can't beat this one.

Carefully extricating himself, Jeff made it to the door without stepping on a head or more tender part. On his way out he lifted the holstered Ruger and belt from a peg without taking conscious note that he had. It was only while buckling on the pistol in the passageway that he realized what he was doing. Snugging the belt tight, Jeff stepped back into the stateroom long enough to pick up the spare magazine. Something was really wrong.

It was early enough that the cabin was dark, but the galley was in full swing and brightly lighted. He hurried into its humid warmth and wonderful smells. Accepting a mug of coffee from Dooby, Jeff tried to identify what it was that might be wrong. It wasn't the Gilnora—she was working like a well-oiled machine. Jeff patted the holster and shook his head. No, it certainly wasn't the Gilnora. But what?

Hurrying into oilskins, Jeff put a foot on the ladder to climb up. At that instant the Gilnora gave a tremendous lurch to port and the band-saw screaming of tortured wood pierced his heart like a knife.

Hot coffee splashed over his chest and he fell to the deck. Jeff jumped to his feet in a panic as another battering-ram blow shuddered through the Gilnora, lifting her straight up. Thrown to his knees, he dropped the mug and it shattered.

Beside himself with fear for the Gilnora, Jeff scrambled

up the ladder on all fours and fell onto the deck. There was no doubt in his mind that they had not hit a reef. By the time he gained his feet, crewmen were pouring onto deck like panic-driven burrowing animals. Jeff spun around looking for danger but saw nothing out of the ordinary. That made no impression at all.

“We're under attack! Battle stations!”

Hari suddenly appeared in front of him. His face was gray with fear. Jeff grabbed him by the shoulders.

“Get all the harpoons on deck! Half forward, the rest back aft! Send a crew into the bilge to see how badly she's hurt!”

Hari's expression abruptly transformed into that of abject terror, and he turned Jeff.

“Oh, gods save us all,” Jeff whispered.

Fully twelve feet long and eight wide, a gigantic head set on a thick neck reared out of the sea astern of the Gilnora. Deep corrugations and knobs seemed to entirely cover the head, but blood-red eyes overpowered every impression. In the brooding light of a gray dawn, the head looked like a demon rising from hell. Then its jaws opened and Jeff was immobilized by sheer terror as a grating scream blasted along the Gilnora's deck. Every member of the crew on deck except one stood frozen as well. Ripping out snarls, Balko tore by Jeff.

“Shit no, Balko! Don't!”

Fear for Balko shattered the trance. Jeff jerked the Ruger free as he ran aft on the pitching deck. The crewman at the wheel was rigid in horror; his head twisted around and gaping as Jeff raced by. The sea was lumpy and confused; shattered clouds raced low overhead driven by a brisk wind.

Balko had his front legs over the taffrail, and was jumping up and down snarling a vicious challenge to battle. Cocking its giant head, the Morlock focused an eye on Balko and let out an answering challenge that threatened to implode Jeff's brain. As he raised the Ruger to fire, the Morlock surged forward and shot its head lower.

Aiming for a maw as big as a garage door and filled with double rows of serrated teeth, Jeff fired three times in quick succession. The Morlock didn't even flinch. The bullets seemed to have the opposite effect, and she put on a burst of speed. The giant head hit the Gilnora's stern with a splintering crash and jerked back. Balko would have gone overboard had not Jeff grabbed his hind legs and hauled him back from where the taffrail used to be.

The rest of the Morlock heaved above the surface, and Jeff's heart nearly failed him.

“Oh, God! It's bigger than the ship!”

Before he could find his feet, a tenor 'thrum' sounded directly behind him and a white harpoon seemed to miraculously appear in the Morlock's chest. Yet she was so huge that the six-foot harpoon looked like a broom bristle. A scream like an exploding steam boiler burst from the beast even as Jeff flipped over on his back and fired three more times into its head and neck. Bellowing fury, the Morlock abruptly submerged.

Jumping to his feet, Jeff gave Balko a push in the right direction. Passing the ballista, he saw that another harpoon was already in place. Kira's lips were pulled back from her teeth as she tracked the ballista back and forth searching for a target. Jeff thumped her on the back in passing and noted her two crewmen standing by ready to reload.

Forward, a number of crew milled around in a confused jumble and all were terrified. Jeff had to manhandle three of four to get their attention and pushed several more toward their battle stations. Torget and Saffik were doing the same. Hari ran up gasping for air.

“Got alla tha harpoons up, Cap'in. She's takin' water purty good, but think tha pumps kin handle it. Far 'es ah kin see, her back ain't broke. Mus'ta stove some planks in.”

“Just keep her afloat. Send Pilcher to take charge of that. I want you and Saffik ready to deal with busted rigging. That bastard isn't through with us yet.”

“Look out!”

Jeff dived to one side as he screamed the warning and sent Hari careening off to the other with a mighty shove. The Morlock’s head hit the railing where they had just been standing and burst through. She whipped her head right and left before jerking back, taking the fore backstay and part of the main port shrouding with her.

Again came the tenor 'thrum' and a harpoon from the forward emplacement streaked by to sink half its length in the Morlock’s chest. Seeming confused by the harpoons, the great form backed off roaring and hissing. The Gilnora surged ahead giving Kira a target, and another harpoon thudded home near its backbone.

Shrieking berserk rage, the Morlock rushed in to strike the Gilnora amidships with its chest. Another section of railing let go with a crash and the ship heeled far over to starboard. When it rolled back the Morlock lashed out and seized the mainmast. Locking its jaws, the Morlock shook its head in a frenzy of rage even as another harpoon blossomed in its neck.

Coils of line snaked to the deck and numerous blocks thundered down like hail. Its halyard severed, the mainsail raced down the mast with a screeching roar to crash onto the boom crutch. When it hit, the gaff spar seemed to explode and spewed giant splinters across the deck.

Kira picked herself up from the deck in a daze. She had nearly been brained by a section of spar. While her crew fought to clear away folds of canvas, Kira swiveled the aft ballista around with a shout of satisfaction. With the mainsail gone, her field of fire was nearly 360 degrees. The Morlock was thrashing her whole body, trying to shake the Gilnora like a terrier shakes a rat. Kira pulled the trigger and gave a battle cry when the harpoon streaked home, disappearing into the beast’s rib cage.

Running under the Morlock’s head, Jeff saw the harpoon strike as he raised the Ruger. Kneeling on the shuddering

deck, the Ruger bucked and roared in steady rhythm as Jeff emptied the magazine of its nine remaining rounds. Popping it out, he rammed in the spare. Carl was suddenly there and basso thunder rolled as the .357 opened up. The Morlock flinched as each round hit home, but continued wrenching the mast.

Jeff knew the multiple gunshots had to have an effect, especially the .357 rounds, but they only seemed to increase her fury. A double 'thrum' sounded and two harpoons hit home in her chest and neck at the same instant. Releasing her hold on the mast, the Morlock paused for an instant then suddenly rammed her head down onto the forward ballista with open jaws.

Turning in what seemed slow motion, Jeff saw Raiella and Faana dive away. An eye blink later the Morlock's jaws swallowed the ballista whole and ripped it bodily from the deck with a snap of its neck. For one eternal instant, Jeff was eyeball to eyeball with the Morlock. He nearly cringed away at the malice and rage, but pulled the trigger and blasted two shots into a leering red eye that was bigger than his head.

What had gone before faded to nothing. Trumpeting anguish, the Morlock convulsed her entire body and rammed the Gilnora over and over, trying to squash it like a bug. The ship shook and quivered like a living thing, and more rigging bounced off deck planking. Something hit Jeff a tremendous blow on the shoulders and he sprawled to the deck. Writhing with pain, coils of line hissed down on top of him.

Again came the tenor 'thrum' and another harpoon thudded home. Frantically kicking his way out from under the line, Jeff found he could stand up and tracked the Morlock's head. The urge to fire was overwhelming, but he was determined to find a sure target for his last four bullets. Somewhere farther aft the .357 began its steady booming again. Carl had reloaded and was back in action.

The Morlock suddenly lunged aft seeking the source of her pain. Jeff hobbled after it as fast as he could, but froze in

horror when the creature shot its head down to sweep the aft ballista away like a toy car. A slender body sailed slowly into the air. It tumbled and turned like a limp dishrag before disappearing into the ocean.

Jeff was gathering himself to follow when a tall figure flew over the rail like a thrown lance, blond crest streaming in the wind. And La'ani was gone.

Jeff screamed in anguish, "God damn you!"

A new shot of adrenaline sent him racing aft of the wheel where he slid to a halt near Carl. Tears of helpless fury blurring his vision, Jeff fired his last rounds in measured cadence. Carl also fired methodically until the hammer clicked on an empty cylinder.

Stumbling backwards, Carl snapped open the cylinder and desperately started to reload as the Morlock eased closer. She seemed to know they were defenseless. A part of Jeff's mind coolly recorded the rivers of blood that flowed from the creature's head, neck and chest. Red tears oozed from a flat eye-socket, and a thicket of harpoons bristled from every part of her body.

Snatching a loose harpoon, Jeff leaped backward to stand by Carl. Still very slowly, perhaps in a puzzled fashion, the giant head eased over the stern. Bracing the harpoon, Jeff heard Carl snap the cylinder shut.

As Jeff drew his arm back to throw, a four-legged missile shot by and leaped. Balko's jaws locked onto the Morlock's neck just below the head. The Morlock was ten times bigger than the Skirling, but size meant nothing to Balko. He had his death grip and would never let go.

Rearing up and back in sudden alarm, the Morlock let out a startled hiss and violently shook its head in an effort to dislodge Balko. Carl aimed at the Morlock's chest well below Balko's thrashing body and fired as quickly as he could thumb the hammer back.

"God damn it! That's all! I'm out!"

Drawing his arm back once again, Jeff checked his throw

at the last instant when two huge, ovoid bodies burst through the surface. One crashed onto the Morlock's back to lock its jaws near the juncture of neck and chest, the other found a grip higher up. Two more plesiosaurs surfaced at high speed and raced in to strike at the Morlock's spine. With a bleating scream filled with fear, she gave her neck one tremendous fling and Balko went flying in lazy summersaults.

For a few seconds, Jeff was frozen to immobility by the scale of the battle. Five gigantic bodies beat the ocean into a foaming cauldron tinged with red as they fought to gain the final grip with their jaws. Time and again one body or the other struck the Gilnora, sending her stern to the right or left in great jerks.

Getting a grip, Jeff stripped off his boots and staggered to a gaping hole in the rail. Diving over the side, he plunged straight down for many feet in an effort to avoid the multi-ton battle. Swimming hard, he shot back to the surface well away from the Gilnora.

*"Wolf-brother! Attend me!"*

*"I live!"*

Jeff zeroed in on Balko's thought, and raced through the water with a ferocious overhand stroke. He found the young wolf feebly paddling in circles. The sight of Balko's furry head slowly forging through the water nearly overwhelmed Jeff with relief. Turning over on his back, he helped Balko's front legs and chest up on his own and towed him toward the Gilnora's starboard side. Then it hit him. The sounds of battle were gone. All he heard was the wind and shouting from the ship's deck.

It took some time to fashion a sling for Balko. Every piece of equipment the crew attempted to use turned out to be destroyed or broke when they touched it. In the end, they jury rigged a whip to the foresail boom and hoisted Balko onboard.

Jeff cautiously swam around aft again, but the ocean