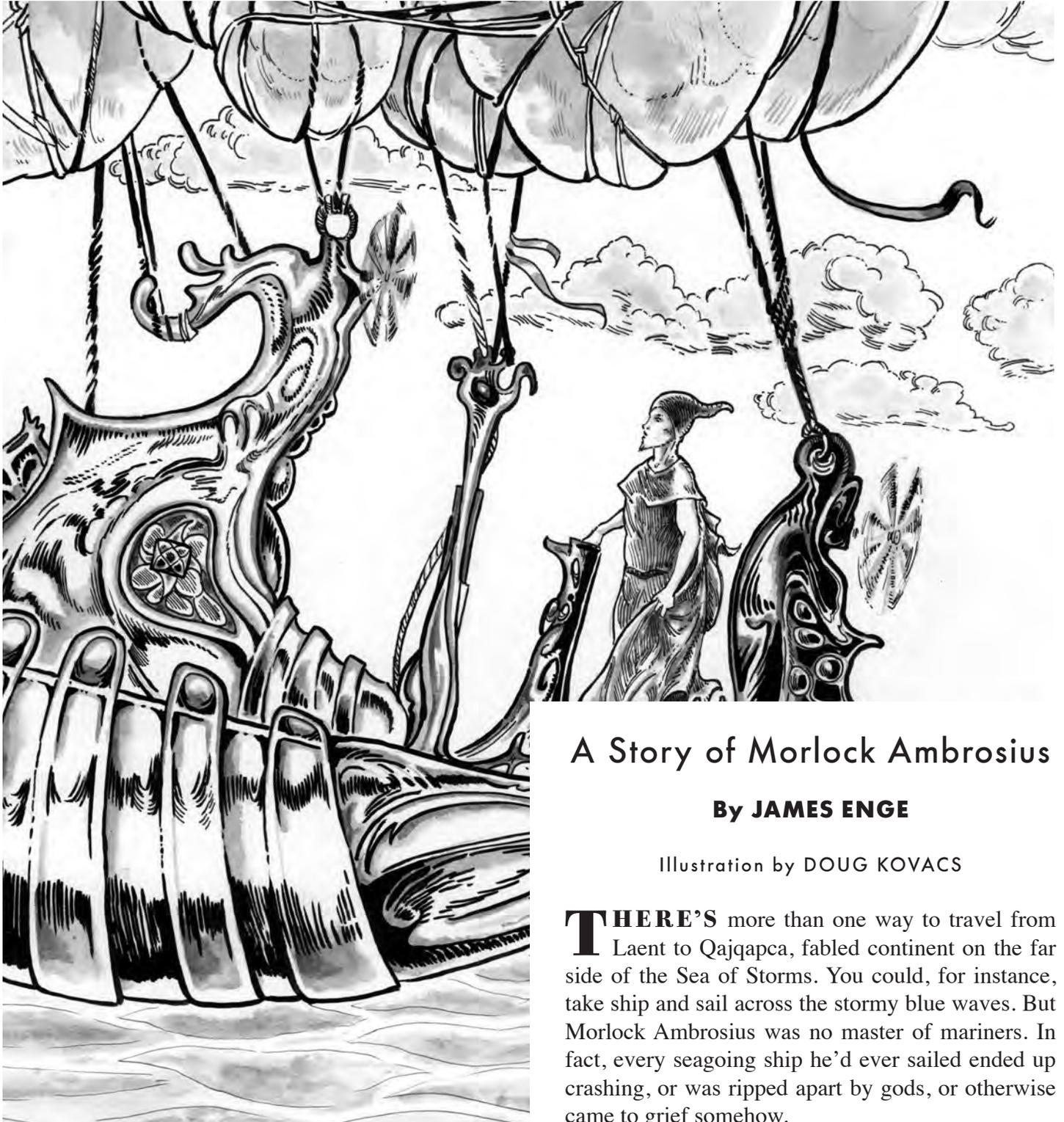


SKY PIRATES OF T



THE SAVAGE CLOUDS



A Story of Morlock Ambrosius

By **JAMES ENGE**

Illustration by **DOUG KOVACS**

THERE'S more than one way to travel from Laent to Qajqapca, fabled continent on the far side of the Sea of Storms. You could, for instance, take ship and sail across the stormy blue waves. But Morlock Ambrosius was no master of mariners. In fact, every seagoing ship he'd ever sailed ended up crashing, or was ripped apart by gods, or otherwise came to grief somehow.

A man might walk, if he could find a way to breathe under the waves. Morlock seriously considered it. He had walked the length and breadth of Laent in his time, so why not walk for a while under the water? Fish breathe in water, as do many of the folk who live in Southhold, beyond the forbidden walls in the west where he could never return. What they could do, he could do; so Morlock reasoned.

But he was travelling with a phoenix, a creature of light and fire and air. He saw no way to persuade the bird into taking the dark road under the sea.

That left the sky. Morlock set about making a skyship.

The last skyship he'd made had also crashed, but this time, he hoped, it would be different. There was no point in not hoping.

You don't have all day, so I won't bog you down with details. Anyway, some of you are probably making your own skyships, and care only for your own designs, whereas others prefer to fly only in skyships approved by the Interplenary College of Aeronautics, and some aren't interested in flying at all, and so would fail to appreciate the long and difficult process by which Morlock acquired acres of silk, then sewed it up in air-tight bags, then inflated the bags with self-heating air, trapped the air-bags in a net of ropes, and anchored the ropes to a glass gondola fitted with impulse-driven propellers.

Everything had to be dephlogisticated, of course, to prevent the phoenix from setting the ship ablaze, but Morlock was already in the habit of dephlogisticating most things he came in contact with. His blood was a fiery brew and, for one reason or another, people were constantly trying to shed it.

That fire in Morlock's veins may have been the reason why he got along so well with the fiery phoenix, in spite of the fact that they didn't share a spoken language and couldn't have anything like a conversation. (Actually, that may have been another reason they got along: conversations with Morlock could be a little irritating, or so his ex-wife had often told him.)

The phoenix watched every stage of the construction with intelligent interest. The bird was about a cubit shorter than Morlock, with a proud red head and crest, gold eyes, and wings of reddish purple fringed with gold. Fire trailed from between its wing-feathers, like golden letters drifting in the air and then dissipating. It stood on two feet, clawed with sharp purple talons. It had died and been reborn as recently as the previous autumn, but it was already taller than it had been before, and seemed likely to grow even larger.

It was not just an animal. It walked curiously around the gondola as Morlock put the thing together out of wood and woven glass. Once it understood the large amounts of sand Morlock needed to make glass for the gondola, it devised a kind of bucket out of seaweed and driftwood and fetched bucketful after bucketful of sand up from the green-gold beaches fringing the peninsula of Myrlannwr. It helped Morlock stretch and wind the network of ropes needed to attach the gondola to the airbags that would provide the airship's lift. When the time came to cast off, it hopped without any prompting onto the perch Morlock had made for it behind the prow of the gondola, and glanced with a golden eye over its shoulder, waiting for the moment of departure.

Morlock hesitated after he mounted into the gondola's stern. The airship was, so far, unnamed. He'd heard it was bad luck to

travel in a nameless ship. He didn't necessarily believe in luck, but he was sure that any ship he travelled in would need all the luck it could get.

He looked at the golden glass gondola, ringed at intervals with woven wood impulse collectors. It looked a little bit like the body of a bee. The impulse collectors even hummed a bit. He thought of bees he had known.

"All right, airship," he said. "I'm calling you *Zirruck*. Let's take flight."

He cast off the cables anchoring them to the ground and the *Zirruck* rose swiftly to the middle air.

Morlock had bought a map of the world's air from a scholar of clouds and rain. If his map of the sky was correct, there should be a current of cool air running south toward the hot edge of the world, pressed down on by a current of hot air running north. He wanted the cool air and he soon found it. He set his impulse collectors on gather, and turned to watching the sea and sky.

Blue on blue in all directions — that was the first day: sea-blue mirroring sky-blue. When the sun had set in the east, the view was more marvellous still. It was the month of Harps and no moon was aloft, only stars spinning serenely in the sky, facing bright shattered reflections on the rough surface of the sea below.

The next few days were much like the first. Morlock and the phoenix ate and drank sparingly, and spoke not at all.

The next day, at dawn, they faced clouds coming up from the south. They sailed into them around noon, and were enveloped in cold, bright mist.

Then they ran aground in the sky.

At first Morlock didn't believe what he heard and felt: a coarse grating on the prow of the unkeeled gondola. He couldn't see what reef in the sky they had run into, but there was no denying that they were blocked from further movement forward.

He climbed up into the net containing the airbags. These each had an impulse collector at the closure point, to maintain the temperature of the air within. He cranked up the temperature for each airbag, hoping they could lift off the obstruction. The bedraggled phoenix looked up at him as he crawled from balloon to balloon in the net and shook its wet wings irritably.

Presently they began to lift, but the front of the gondola kept bumping into something, some sky-cliff indistinguishable from the clouds.

They came out into a blaze of sunlight reflected from the upper surface of the clouds. Cloud-colored lines flew up from the surface, trapping the gondola from rising further. They were being attacked. Morlock slashed many of the lines with Tyrfin, his accursed sword, but they were landing faster than he could keep up.

He looked outboard of the gondola to see where the lines were coming from. A crowd of glassy figures stood (?) atop the nearby clouds and hurled the lines that were trapping *Zirruck*.

Morlock had not anticipated having to fend off attackers in the sky. But the glassy, near-invisible hooks at the ends of their lines could be repurposed into throwing weapons. He set about collecting these and, when it saw what he was doing, the phoenix followed suit.

Morlock was just about to send a glass star spinning into the crowd of glassy figures when someone near at hand called out in Wardic, "Are you a pirate?"

“No,” Morlock said. “How is it you speak one of my native languages?”

“I am the *zhneeduff mrrkwane* — or you might say, the Sophist of Tongues. You have the *griiviyat grelm* that we associate with these words. Is it a correctness?”

“More or less,” Morlock said. “Since I am not a pirate, will you let me go?” He kept his hands busy making glassy hooks into throwing weapons as he spoke. He thought he saw the speaker, a glassy, blue-veined figure somewhat separated from the line-throwing crowd.

“*Mrrzfii ipskroon*,” the Sophist of Tongues said apologetically. “We must know why you pass through our space.”

“Your space is between where I was and where I wish to go.”

“Just so. Just so. It is a *fyrnsprinetz*, to be sure.”

“I will brook no further delay. Free my ship or prepare to fight.”

“We are a peaceful people.”

“We aren’t,” Morlock observed. The phoenix screeched defiantly in agreement.

After conferring with someone in the crowd of cloud people, the Sophist of Tongues said, “We will release you, since *flendulrrk kwahl*. Be wary as you fly south. The savage clouds are full of pirates.”

The glassy, blue-veined people on the cloud began to whistle. One by one, the pale lines evaporated into threads of mist; the glassy hooks melted like bits of ice.

“And your clouds aren’t savage?” Morlock asked.

“They grow more so daily, because of *shazzarnerluin*. When they are imminent to savagery, we depart for calmer clouds.”

“What is *shazzarnerluin*?” Morlock asked.

The Sophist of Tongues was silent for a moment, then said, “There is a fire in the deep sky, where the stars walk.”

“We call it aether. It falls to earth sometimes as lightning.”

“*Ushmirrrva!*” the Sophist of Tongues cried. “This fire — this aether — this *shazzar* — it seeds the clouds with life and power. It is in the crops we grow, in the beasts that feed on them, in our bright blue blood. But when there is too much *shazzar* in a cloud, it becomes savage. The fire breaks free; the cloud dissolves in rain; it is no longer safe to be. Then we flee to more peaceful clouds. The pirates come behind and prey on our migration, like the *kluckspuin* they are.”

The lines were gone; *Zirruck* was rising into the wind. “Peace to you and your peaceful people, Sophist of Tongues,” Morlock called.

“*Shazzar ym thressnir!*” came the incomprehensible reply, fading in the distance.

They were caught in the world’s wind again; it hurled them southwards. In the sky ahead, thunderheads loomed: the savage clouds and the reckless pirates who dwelled among them.

Morlock hadn’t planned on steering much, once he was launched into the sky. But he set about activating the impellers on the port side of the ship without activating those on the starboard side. His plan was to steer around the thunderheads. It was complicated, time-consuming, and completely pointless. As soon as the pirates saw *Zirruck* they came out after her, riding on narrow blue schooners with no sails or visible impellers. They went directly against the wind and they moved more than twice as fast as poor old *Zirruck*.

“Ware boarders!” Morlock called to the phoenix, who screamed defiantly in reply.

Morlock drew Tyrfing and waited. That was the worst part of a fight, in Morlock’s experience. Staying in a place, waiting for the enemy to strike. He always preferred to rush in when he could.

The pirates were barely visible. They looked like glass vessels full of water: light bent around them and through them, but did not truly reveal them. Only their bright blue veins were clear in his eye. They carried spears the color of lightning, and their voices (as they grew nearer) sounded like glass chimes.

Now there was a ring of schooners all around *Zirruck*. Some of the pirates were slashing with their bright spears at the net containing the airbags; two of those burst in misty clouds of hot air and fell into the gondola, others floated free, and *Zirruck* slumped in the sky.

“Abandon ship!” shouted Morlock, and leapt into a nearby schooner. Eye-searing spearpoints of light bristled at him. He gripped Tyrfing with two hands and hewed at them, as if they were a field of wheat. They clashed together discordantly, like an ill-tuned glass harmonica, and Morlock felt the gush of something hot and wet on his hand. He had drawn blood or ... or something.

But there were more of them than there were of him, and they were terribly strong. They struck at him again and again with the blunt end of their spears. He saw his bright blood fall to the surface of the blue schooner and set it afire. It was the last thing he saw for some time.

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MORLOCK returned to himself in a kind of jail. He’d been in a lot of jails in his long life and hated them all. This looked to be one of the worst, though. The floor and ceiling were made of some sort of translucent substance — aethrium, he thought. So were the bars but, as he groggily rose to his feet and stumbled over to them, he knew that wasn’t all they were. There was some kind of quick fluid moving underneath the crystalline surface. Pure aether, he guessed. That’s why his thinking was so fuzzy, his insight blocked. It was like having glass spikes jammed constantly in his brain (an experience Morlock had actually undergone and was not eager to repeat).

The jail itself was in a greater chamber the color of clouds. It was hard to say how large it was. The air was cold and clammy. It was lit by the fiery blue blood of a crowd of cloud people, and the dimmer light of their aethrium spears. He was a prisoner of the sky pirates, no doubt. A deep rumble churned endlessly, deep in the walls and floor of the chamber: the lightning in the cloud’s secret heart, making the cloud wilder, more savage, nearing the outbreak of the storm.

“*Igruik klishma maryn?*” said someone beyond the bars — one of the glass-skinned, blue-blooded cloud people, Morlock saw hazily.

“Is there a Sophist of Tongues among your people?” asked Morlock hopelessly.

“No!” said the other triumphantly in Wardic. “I was such a thing at one time, but fled the sheeple of the calmer clouds to become a Sophist of Fire among these pirates!”