

# Pollard



*“A distant storm is brewing on the horizon.”* Thoril Half-Hand’s words resonated in Pollard’s head as he watched the waves; a prophetic warning not to be taken lightly. If the son of Thoril the Kraidic Crusher foresaw disaster in the not too distant future, his son, Pollard, would do everything in his power to see to it that those he loved and protected were safe.

Being part giant, whenever Pollard set his mind to something, it was done quickly and efficiently. Fortifying the garrison of Songsbirth against the imminent threat required new recruits, but not just anyone would do. They

had to be cut from a different cloth—endowed with the spirit of the ancient warriors who had fought and died for Zephyr in centuries past. Back to the Age of Saints and beyond.

The people Pollard searched for were more often than not outcasts from society. In his years of experience, peculiar quirks and eccentric mannerisms differentiated those who professed the desire to do the right thing and those who were bereft of the common sense that prevented them from placing themselves in the life or death situations his garrison required if the ideals of Zephyr's regime were to survive the imminent cataclysm his father predicted.

The southern ports of Apexceal and Ember Breath had netted Pollard's expedition fifteen promising trainees. Of those, he projected that less than half would prove worthy enough to become a Songsbirthian Guard. Of this fact he made no bones about hiding from the recruits. He allayed their apprehension by assuring them that any who failed to make the cut would be sent to join the Royal Guard in the king's city of Carillon.

Pollard's family's flagship, the *Crusher*, sailed clear of the Undying Wall's western isthmus jutting leagues into the heavy seas of the Niad Ocean. Three tall masts bulging with sailcloth carried the sleek, black warship over the water's rough surface—its bow plunging into deep troughs and cutting the backside of the next wave.

A cold spray washed down the main deck; its mist rarely reaching Pollard where he stood high atop the quarterdeck. He leaned on the port rail, studying the lofty heights of two volcanoes that dominated the eastern horizon, farther out to sea. Ghost Island. He had never set foot on its mist shrouded shores, but from what he had heard of its inhospitable climate, the large island was aptly named.

“All clear!” Came the call from high atop the mainmast crow’s nest.

Safely through the treacherous strait separating the outer reaches of the Undying Wall and the lava reefs surrounding Ghost Island, the captain of the *Crusher* left his place beside the helmsman and joined Pollard. “Quite a spectacular sight, eh Master Banebridge?”

“Aye.” Pollard flexed his back muscles—the ship’s railing was not built for someone of his size. “You think anyone lives out there?”

The captain pulled on his short, pepper-grey beard. “Tough to say. Doubt it. Never seen any sign of life when sailing this way. I’ve always wanted to put in a lander and check out the island, but I’ve never gotten around to it.”

“Someday, perhaps.” Pollard leaned on the railing and smiled. Captain Bennek Crow had been sailing his father’s ships for as long as Pollard remembered. Bennek had been a wiry, shrewd young sailor while Pollard had grown up in Storms End. The man hadn’t spared much time for the son of Thoril Half-Hand, although Bennek had never been anything but fair during Pollard’s youth. If anything, the good captain had hardened Pollard about the unforgiving ways of the sea—his teachings enlightening Pollard of the inherent dangers of the ocean and the men who sailed it.

“Aye.” Bennek’s gruff voice bore no trace of humour. “Perhaps the crew will bury me there when the time comes.”

Pollard nodded. “Certainly a peaceful spot to spend out your days.”

Bennek reached up to pat Pollard on the shoulder. “Get some rest, Master Banebridge. Judging by the rising seas, we’ve a hard trip ahead.”

“Thanks, Cap. I’ll head below shortly.”

Bennek held his gaze for a moment, as if wanting to say something else. He flashed a quick smile and walked away—his sailor’s swagger absorbing the roll of the ship.

Pollard watched the captain’s progress as he disappeared down the steep steps emptying onto the main deck. Settling his elbows on the railing, he stared at the distant volcano—his mind hundreds of leagues north of their present position.

He had sent his most trusted advisor ahead on the *Half-Hand*—named after his father—the second of three warships in his family’s possession. If anyone could ascertain the truth about the rogue thief preying upon the more affluent residents of Storms End, Lozen was the one for the job.

Lozen, a proud warrior from the Altirius Mountains, had agreed to take leave of her tribe to help Pollard train selected members of the Splendor Catacombs Guard in the way of her native people. She did this to honour the memory of Pollard’s grandfather. Her way of paying homage to Thoril the Kraidic Crusher for his role in keeping her peoples free.

With the exception of his father, Pollard valued Lozen’s counsel above all others. She possessed an uncanny knack of seeing past a person’s persona to discover their true spirit. To Pollard, Lozen was much more than a medicine woman and warrior to her people. Lozen was a dear friend.

Pollard grunted. As conscientious as he was about morality and scruples, his gruff personality didn’t lend itself to making friends easily. It took something special for someone to be the recipient of his friendship, but once earned, he would fight to the death to defend them.

The mission he had sent Lozen on left him reeling with mixed emotions. To quell an unfounded fear, he may have inadvertently placed her in danger. Should the Storms End Watch become suspicious of her true intentions, the captain

of the Watch, Danth Emerald, wouldn't hesitate to kill her for her deception.

Pollard's father had messaged him through Master Pul of the Songsbirth Council, bringing to his attention a young woman who might prove to be a real boon to the Catacombs Guard. He had called her the Storms End Lightning Bolt—a person who had eluded Danth Emerald and his lackeys for years.

The Storms End Watch had placed the Lightning Bolt high on their wanted list. Though a thief by interpretation of the law, Thoril had insisted there was something special about the rogue lock pick; claiming he had it on good authority that she was merely doing what the city council would not. Looking after its vulnerable citizens.

Thoril feared that one day soon, the upstart woman would slip up. When she did, Danth's vigilante sense of justice would spell her untimely death.

Pollard bit his lower lip. He had purposely put his most faithful friend in harm's way in hopes of keeping a lawbreaker from being captured. Until he could return to Storms End, Lozen would have to find a way to cope on her own.

His distant gaze took in the receding volcanic peaks of Ghost Island as he reflected on his father's prophecy. If Thoril's words were true, the coming storm would fall upon Zephyr's people with the fiery fury of an erupting volcano.