



Gravel crunched beneath his well-worn boots as Masshawus marched up the main street of a village which had once stood at the base of the mountain range which spread across the great expanse of Pangea. He knew that south of the great range were the forests and jungles, followed by the deadly and arid lands of the Great Desert. The buildings, once busy and cheerful, decorated with flowers, lay in smoking ruins. His sharp eyes caught sight of a hand poking out of one of the piles. He turned his eyes away from the grisly scene and studied his second in command. Olson, his face a mask of grime and sorrow, stared back at his friend, and they shared a knowing look.

“I would like this done today,” growled Masshawus grimly, wiping the sweat from his grubby forehead, “this cannot continue; we must gain access to the mountains.”

Olson found that he could not answer his friend; he gazed beyond the town’s limits towards the towering mountains and shuddered... how many mornings had he heard his determined friend uttering those words? They had been stuck within the town for several weeks, locked in a terrible battle with Satanicus’s new army. The losses on both sides had been terrible, and it had become a nightly routine to take the time to bury their dead, knowing that those who had fought for The Sanctuary and Pangea would have no hope of being laid to rest amongst the lupin fields back home. He sighed; he did not even know the name of the town, which had been their uncomfortable home for all of that time. It was one of the last towns before the mountains and, therefore, a very busy place for trade. A large host of Santanicus’s army had come upon the town and sacked it, not one of the residents had been left alive, and that had included the children. It had been sheer good timing that Masshawus and his own large

host of Hera's Gift and come upon the creatures who were gorging upon anything good that remained about the place. The first battle had been brutal but victorious for the Sanctarians and they had been able to push the enemy out of the city and into the mountains. This had not been the end of it. The enemy's leader, Godlen, had regrouped and then ordered merciless raids upon the Sanctarian army, never fully committing every one of his soldiers at one time. Small raiders would surge into the town, taking out as many of the Sanctarians as they could before they were either killed or escaped back to their master. It was an attritional form of combat and, Olson knew, was having a terrible impact upon the morale of the Sanctarians. There had been many occasions when Olson had counselled his friend to withdraw, to leave what was left of that town to the enemy, but time and time again, Masshawus had batted his friend's advice to one side.

"If we allow the enemy beyond these mountains, then we open the gates for them, and they will march upon central and northern Pangea at will. We must stand firm."

That was Masshawus's almost daily retort, and he would repeat this to his captains so that it could be fed to the rest of the troops. Olson did not want to point out to Masshawus that the entrance points to central and northern Pangea ran all the way to the east and that they represented a mere speck upon the great landmass. Who knew how many other armies from the Great Desert were attempting to break beyond the vast natural wall of the mountains?

"I sense a change," whispered Masshawus, his keen white eyes glaring up at the mountains, "they will launch their final assault upon us today."

"How do you know this?" asked Olson, surprised at the change of Masshawus's choice of words.

"Do you not feel it?" asked Masshawus, smiling at his friend, his fingertips brushing the handle of his great sword still within its sheath, "I hear it on the winds, Olson, they mean to end this, their patience is waning and their supplies are dwindling," he paused and nodded his head as if agreeing to an internal monologue no one else was privy to, "aye, it will be today and it comes as a relief, if I'm honest," he smiled sadly at his friend. Olson bowed his head.