

1112

A big valley spread out in front of them, running between two mountains. Lots of flat ground, maybe a half kilometer wide, and a dozen long. Instead of sharp drops, the mountains smoothed out where they met it, almost inviting people to walk down the easier path into its embrace.

So of course they didn't do that. They stuck to one mountainside and walked a flat-ish path high up on the angled surface. One wrong step and she'd roll down the hill, break every bone in her body, and slide into the valley for the hellbeasts to eat. And there were a lot of them in the valley.

"What kind of hellbeast is that?" she asked.

"Goorts," Adron said. He walked beside her on Diogo's orders to catch her if she fell. She was happy he did.

"Goorts. Like, the goort leather I keep hearing about?"

He nodded, and plucked at one of the leather straps binding a slab of bent black metal to his bicep. It was dark red brown, leathery, but also dull to the point it was almost gray.

The creatures down below moved as a pack, maybe a hundred of them, distant enough they weren't much more than blurs. But as Mia walked the edge of the path, nothing but a slope to her right, the path reached out to the side, and become a sharp cliff. And from its edge, she managed to spot a few of the goorts close enough she could make out their shapes.

Horses, with horns. First thought, unicorn, except they had two black horns that curled back from their heads like ram horns. So, big rams, except with the leanness and muscularity of horses. Big, strong horses, like cart horses.

"What do they eat?" she asked.

"Mostly humans," Hannah said, a few feet behind her. "They'll eat anything alive, though, even other hellbeasts."

"They... eat human hearts?" Imagining a huge, muscular horse with giant ram horns, munching on human flesh with sharp teeth, was all sorts of freaky.

Adron shook his head. "They do, but they don't survive on resonance. They eat essence, the same way you and Hannah do." That explained why they'd eat other hellbeasts then.
www.N(e)reW0rm.co(m)

"Really? I'm the same as a hellbeast?"

He laughed. "Nah. Hellbeasts don't have resonance."

"Oh. No resonance. Does... Does that mean surface animals don't have resonance, either? Only humans?"

"How would we know? You see any surface animals around here?"

"No, I guess I don't." Was resonance required for animals to go to the afterlife? Did all dogs... not go to Heaven? Perish the thought. "Goorts. You kill them for their leather?"

"Yeap. Half the time it's in self defense, since they have a nasty habit of raging and attacking anything nearby that isn't another goort. But sometimes, if you're lucky, you can raise one."
www.n0re1(w)@Rm.co.m

"Raise?"

"Find a goort egg, raise it, and you've got yourself a nice batch of leather, once you kill and skin it. Or a powerful mount, if you're lucky enough it doesn't try and eat you."

At first that put a frown on Mia's face, and then a smile. It was a nice image, strange as it was, hatching a horse from an egg and raising it to be a pet and mount. A future goal, maybe? It'd certainly be easier to find David if she had a mount to ride. Assuming it wouldn't grow up to eat her.
Ww.n0re1(w)@Rm.co.m

"Why an egg?" she asked.

"Why not?"

"I mean, uh... you know, mammals don't normally lay eggs? Some exceptions aside?"

Adron grinned down at her. "No one down here is a mammal. No one down here is giving birth, anyway."

"Really? I... what?"

"Zel will show you, if you ask her nicely, and she's willing to play your questions game."

"I—"

Pebbles rolled down the hill, from above. Adron shoved her against the wall, away from the valley, and the world went white. Thunk, head, stone. She sat down on the ground of the path, leaned back against the wall, and clutched her head as she looked up.

Adron wasn't there anymore.

"Shit!" Hannah looked down over the path edge, and the drop to the slope below of the mountain. The slope that led into the valley of goorts
www.n0Vw@w@rm.co.m

Mia put a hand against the wall and forced herself up. Pain, but not major pain, sharp and surface level only.

"What happened?"

"A fucking basilisk!"

"W-What?" Once the world stopped turning, Mia walked up to Hannah's side, and looked down the slope.

Adron half rolled, half ran, falling to his back every so often before gravity yanked his feet back down, and he managed another thirty or forty feet of running down the slope before falling again. He probably could have run down the slope, recovered, and climbed back up it, but something else was on top of him, rolling with him. Something long, huge, and reptile-like.

"Shit shit shit." Hannah rubbed her hands together, and stared down the slope, dread etched in her face. "Diogo! Scilra!"

Down the path, the rest of the demons had already stopped, and everyone looked down the cliff edge to the slope, and the demon and monster currently rolling down it, toward the huge herd of goorts. Closer and closer, until the slope eventually evened out, and only a few hundred feet separated Adron and the herd.

And, as much as Mia hoped otherwise, Diogo and the other demons didn't rush down to help their own. They didn't move on, but they didn't rush down to help, either. They just stood there, watching.

"We're not going to help?" Mia asked.

Diogo snorted, and didn't so much as peek her way. He watched, arms folded across his chest and the small amount of armor he wore.

"If we go down there, we risk the herd rushing us," Scilra said, prowling over to Mia on all fours, head pointed down the slope.

Mia frowned down at the huge tiger woman. "Is that the only reason?" She regretted it the moment she said it. It came out with venom, and rage, and those two things were going to get her killed down here.

Scilra snorted, same as Diogo, but said nothing. Right, of course. Much as it was risky to go down and help Adron, it also straight up made no sense for them to help him anyway. As David would say, it didn't compute for them. Demons could be colossal assholes.