"All four legs were aching, for this apprentice had been climbing since daylight. This apprentice had determined to be amongst meadow flowers no later than high-sun the next day. The Hunt Master and this apprentice had climbed to the meadow atop that mountain last hot season. He wished to know how the hunting would be after so many seasons; By command of the Elder Council the "taboo area" scent posts had been removed three sun-cycles before. The Hunt Master said they had been placed there while he was still in the egg, for reasons that the Elders would not reveal."

"The trek consumed two sun cycles, and when we stepped into the meadow,
we were astonished. The game was thicker than Wen birds on a ripe patch

of Marsh Berries. We saw many Three Horned Runners, a group of

Scurries, several flights of Green Fowl and two Dagger Beasts in the
time from high-sun till dark. That is why this apprentice had asked,

and been granted, the boon of making the Proving Hunt on the mountain."

"The Hunt Master and this apprentice had followed a ridge top on the

pervious trip, but both carry Slap-Stick Bush scars because of that

route. This apprentice had decided to try following a gully, the kind

shaped like a deep 'V', running straight down the mountain side."
"Both banks were covered in moss and the trees must have been 200 tails tall. The undergrowth consisted of a few patches of Pucker Brush and Devils Club plants; There is not enough sunshine through the trees to let anything else grow. The light that does make it gives everything a subdued green glow, as if it were filtered through an emerald. And the silence--after half a cycle in such a place the fall of a twig sounds as if the whole forest is falling."

"As this apprentice has said, all four legs were beginning to ache. A short rest in a sun-warmed spot would remove the ache and rebuild energy to continue the climb. A runner trail came into sight; It
started at the little stream in the gully and went up the bank and
disappeared at the crest. This apprentice decided there might be a gap
in the trees where the sun could shine through, and perhaps a fat
runner for a meal."

"As this apprentice followed the trail up the bank, no runner tracks
were sighted. You, as Elders, know that the earth on a runner trail
will stay loose from the runners' hooves cutting up the ground; This

trail was such, and there were tracks, but ones not made by a runner.

The animal that had made the tracks did not have the thrice split hoof

of a runner; The tracks were made by a solid hoofed animal."
"This apprentice followed the trail over the crest of the gully; The trail continued up the mountain on an angle. There was not a sunny spot within sight, so this apprentice continued following the trail tasting for scent every little while. The tracks must have been old, for no scent was present. After several hundred strides this apprentice glimpsed sun light reflected from a sheer rock wall up the mountain.

After leaving the trail, and climbing another sixty or seventy strides, this apprentice stepped out of the trees at the base of the wall."

"In one direction the wall reduced in size until it disappeared back into the trees, a hundred strides away. In the other direction the wall
curved and disappeared at a large stone protuberance, twenty strides distant. A flat area extended out from the wall, with a mixture of sandy patches and boulders covering it. This apprentice found a sand patch large enough, stretched out in the sun and relaxed. The sand was warm from the sun, and the ache in the legs began to ease."

"This apprentice fell asleep; When his eyes opened the sun had moved down behind the trees. There was little time before darkness came. A sleep area must be. . ."

"Apprentice," rumbled the youngest of the three Elders. His gold
colored hide the evidence of his comparative age.

"We are aware of how a sleeping area should be selected. Thou are a fool for napping so deeply on a Proving Hunt! Thou will proceed with the story, and be quick about the telling!"

"Yes Elder the story will be finished with dispatch. This apprentice was about to stand and proceed to the trail when a noise echoed from the trees. It was a series of creaks, like two trees rubbing together on a windy day. Then came a snort. The tales told to the young ones on the rookery sands came to mind: of demons, devils and dark shapeless things in the night. It almost caused this apprentice to high-tail down
the mountain, but shadows and children's tales should not frighten an

apprentice of the Hunt Master. This apprentice decided that his

imagination was making devils from shadows, having been alone in those

silent twilight woods most of the sun-cycle. Besides, by that time

curiosity had been aroused. This apprentice just had to know where the

noise was coming from."

"Sound echoes when thee are close to a rock face, echoes enough that it

is hard to tell from which direction it comes. The noise seemed to be

coming from behind the protuberance of rock along the wall. Stealth

being the best way to approach an unknown situation, this apprentice
slowly sneak-footed it along the wall to the outcropping. After taking

a few deep breaths, to calm the heart, this apprentice peeked around

the rock. All that was visible was a smooth section of the wall about

five lengths long with a cave opening in the centre. The trail this

apprentice had followed earlier ended at the cave mouth. This

apprentice could hear the sounds very clearly, but could see nothing

but the cave. The cave. . ."

With a hiss like steam escaping from a boiler, the middle age Elder

shifted his bronze bulk; his voice was like distant thunder when he

said, "We have other important business to consider. Thou have used the

allotted time. Please, come to the point of the story."
The apprentices' yellow hide paled. He lowered his long tapered snout in respect as he continued his story.

"This apprentice was trying to include all the information that might be important. This apprentice stood behind the rock for a while observing the cave. The sounds did not seem to be getting any louder. After a while when nothing happened, a closer inspection seemed in order."

"After rounding the outcropping and taking two strides, it happened. The ugliest thing ever, walked from the cave. Reddish brown in color,
covered with hair, it had four long legs ending in solid one piece hooves. The neck was long and tapered with an elongated head; a bulging eye protruded from each side. In its mouth it held a strap. The strap extended from both sides of its mouth, back along its neck, the ends were being held by a thing on its back."

"This second thing was like nothing this apprentice has ever seen before. It did not cling to the other creatures back with all four limbs, as is proper, but sat upright. The lower two limbs, hanging down the others sides, were long and ended in a large strange looking---"

The apprentice could not find a word to fit; instead he extended one
talon and scratched a rough outline on the ground.

"---hoof? The other two limbs were shorter, ending in five blunt looking, flexible talons. The head of the thing was round, like a melon; the eyes were in the front, but very small. The features were almost flat, no snout at all. The hide on the thing was very strange, wrinkled and of two different colours: night sky blue on the lower half and runner tan on the upper part."

"Hold!" roared the gold colored Elder. "You are trying our patience, we should end this interview before it becomes any more outlandish."
"Please, Elder, Please, allow this apprentice to finish. It is very important that you listen to the rest of the story. When this apprentice finishes the tale, three items will be offered as proof that the story is true."

After a quick mumbled conference between the three Elders the oldest turned his black, bronze tinted head, and in a low soft hiss addressed the apprentice, "You may proceed, but if the proof is not satisfactory we will be very, very dissppssed."

The apprentices' hide paled to hatchling white. "Aye, great Elder. When
this apprentice saw the thing, it shocked him numb. All this apprentice
could do was stand and stare at the apparition that had appeared. The
creature spotted this apprentice and stopped dead still. After a short
time of staring, this apprentice flicked his tongue to taste the scent

of the thing. At that moment the tall, skinny creature pointed a long
stick, roared, disgorging smoke and fire. At the same time it must have
thrown something, for it cut this groove", he used a talon to point out

a down the side of his neck," and broke a piece from the rock behind.

The larger four legged creature started jumping around, snorting and
squealing; The skinny one using all four limbs to hold to its back. It

was jumping and stomping so hard that some of the things on it started
flying off. After what seemed like a season, it plunged back into the

cave and disappeared."

"It was many heart beats before this apprentice calmed enough to be able
to move. About to high-tail for safety, this apprentice caught a glint

of sunlight reflected from pieces that had dropped from the monster.

Thinking that proof would be needed of the encounter, this apprentice

picked up several of those pieces. Here is the proof that this

apprentice has brought thee."

His three taloned paw held a Remington bolt action rifle, a set of

leather saddle bags and a stainless steel thermos bottle. The three
Elders that had been listening to him hissed in surprise. The tips of their long tails curled and twitched in a sign of agitation. The oldest Elder flicked his forked tongue out over his fangs, to taste the scent and said, "Apprentice, we were ready to deny thee the rank of Hunter and banish thee to the north land. We thought the demons had touched thee. The objects thou hold are proof that thou story is true. The scent upon them is that of a beast from our past; Those are implements of a dragon. The thing you saw was indeed two different beasts. The larger one, the one with the straps in its mouth, is a rather stupid beast of burden. The one sitting on its back was the dragon. The thing it pointed at you can kill with one blow. The thing that cut the grove
in your neck, had it hit thee square, would have made a hole straight through thee. Thou were very lucky, for they are a nasty vicious breed.

I hope this was an isolated incident."

"Two hundred seasons ago when I was not long out of the egg, the last dragon in our land was killed. During that battle four of our tribe fell mortally wounded and two were crippled. They are a fierce enemy and it saddens this Elder to know they have returned."

"Legend has it that they came down from the mountain; The same mountain where thou were hunting. Appearing one day in great numbers, they started killing our tribe by the score. It is said that they came from
a different world, how no one knew, with the intention of taking our
land."

"We lost over half our numbers before the last was hunted down. When the

Elders of that time were sure that all the dragons had been destroyed,

they ringed the mountain with "taboo" scent posts. They swore all the

remaining tribe to silence, to keep the next generation of hatchlings

from living in fear of these nasty beasts. That is why none of the

tribe hatched after the dragon wars, other than the Elders, knew why

the scent posts were there."
"For thy service thee have rendered our tribe, I grant thee status as a Hunter. This entitles thee to use thy name while speaking to others. In addition I grant thee the boon of using the formal "I" in place of "this apprentice".

"Tomorrow, Smerg, thee will lead a party to where this happened. We will set a watch on the cave, perhaps if they arrive again we can stop them before they enter our land. We will also ring the area with scent posts to warn all others of the danger. It has been many, many years since we have used this type of scent post:

BEYOND HERE THERE BE DRAGONS."