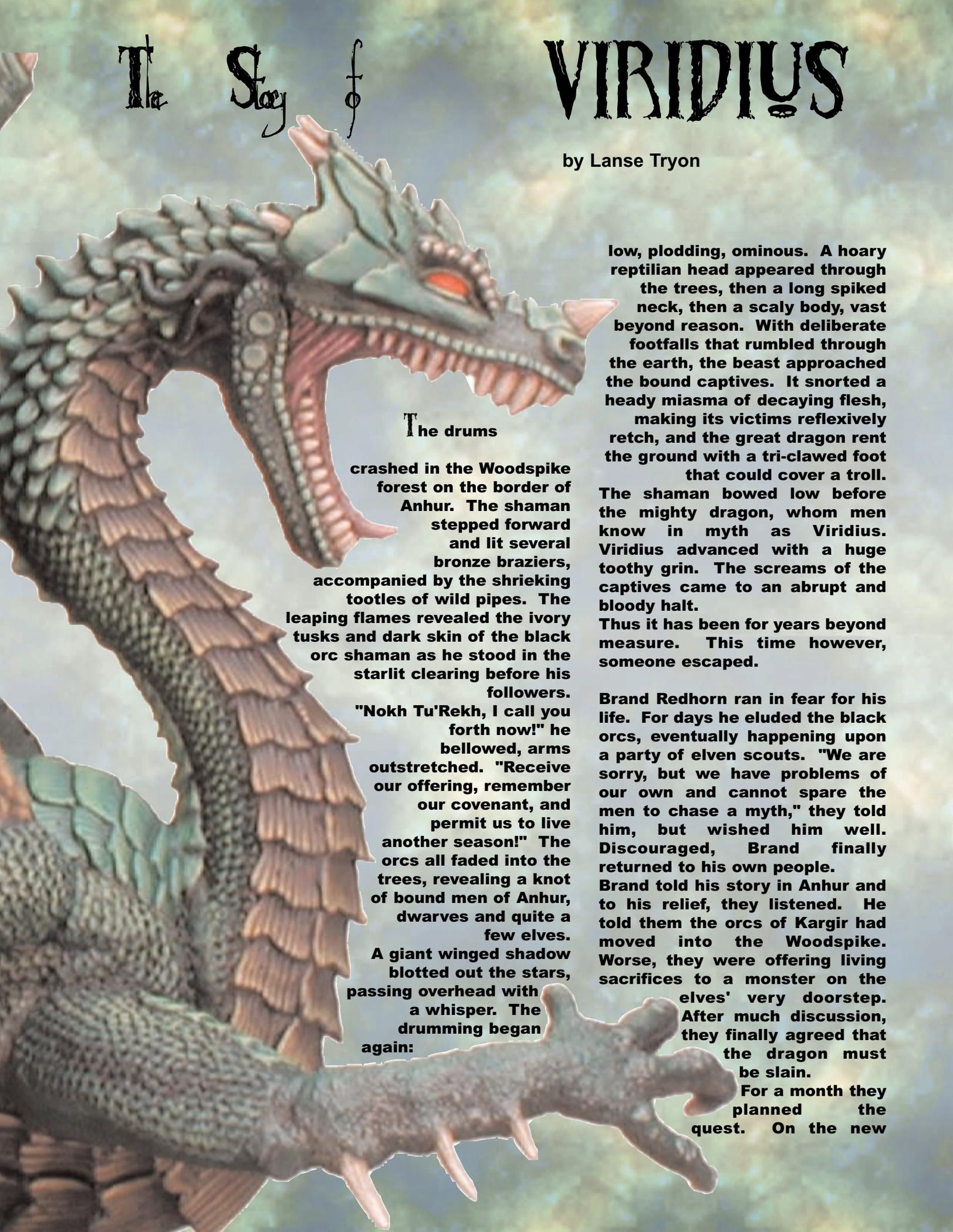


The Story of

VIRIDIUS

by Lanse Tryon



The drums

crashed in the Woodspike forest on the border of Anhur. The shaman stepped forward and lit several bronze braziers, accompanied by the shrieking tootles of wild pipes. The leaping flames revealed the ivory tusks and dark skin of the black orc shaman as he stood in the starlit clearing before his followers.

"Nokh Tu'Rekh, I call you forth now!" he bellowed, arms outstretched. "Receive our offering, remember our covenant, and permit us to live another season!" The orcs all faded into the trees, revealing a knot of bound men of Anhur, dwarves and quite a few elves.

A giant winged shadow blotted out the stars, passing overhead with a whisper. The drumming began again:

low, plodding, ominous. A hoary reptilian head appeared through the trees, then a long spiked neck, then a scaly body, vast beyond reason. With deliberate footfalls that rumbled through the earth, the beast approached the bound captives. It snorted a heady miasma of decaying flesh, making its victims reflexively retch, and the great dragon rent the ground with a tri-clawed foot that could cover a troll.

The shaman bowed low before the mighty dragon, whom men know in myth as Viridius. Viridius advanced with a huge toothy grin. The screams of the captives came to an abrupt and bloody halt.

Thus it has been for years beyond measure. This time however, someone escaped.

Brand Redhorn ran in fear for his life. For days he eluded the black orcs, eventually happening upon a party of elven scouts. "We are sorry, but we have problems of our own and cannot spare the men to chase a myth," they told him, but wished him well. Discouraged, Brand finally returned to his own people.

Brand told his story in Anhur and to his relief, they listened. He told them the orcs of Kargir had moved into the Woodspike. Worse, they were offering living sacrifices to a monster on the elves' very doorstep. After much discussion, they finally agreed that the dragon must be slain.

For a month they planned the quest. On the new

moon, Brand Redhorn and a large force returned to the western edge of the Woodspike, even to the sacred Flute River and down to the Erlondil River. Finally they arrived during the full moon in the clearing where Brand Redhorn had seen the dragon.

No sooner had they entered the bone-strewn clearing when a massive shadow passed over the moon with a whisper. The shadow passed behind the trees and all was silent for a moment. With a mighty roar that panicked and bolted the horses, Viridius shot over the clearing at treetop level. As he flew he breathed a jet of green gas at the warriors. Many of them fell to the ground, choking and gagging on their own green vomit. Those few archers that managed to shoot saw their arrows bounce off his armored belly, and he was gone over the treetops.

Brand hid in the trees as the captain screamed orders. "Take cover! Take cover! Archers, make ready to volley! Pikemen form ranks!" The archers scrambled for the eaves of the forest.

In a heartbeat, Viridius shot back over the trees, furling his wings, and dove for the captain. The captain threw himself to the ground just in time, the dragon's tri-clawed forefoot scoring the ground inches from his head. The dragon reared on its hind legs again and roared, his outstretched wings nearly fifty yards across as he raised a foreclaw to strike the captain again.

The air suddenly filled with the shriek of arrows as all the archers let fly. Though most shafts broke against his scales, several found the softer skin of his wings. The dragon's roar of wrath changed to pain, and his tail felled several trees as he lashed it about.

"Charge, you fools!" screamed the captain at the pikemen. Viridius came back down on all fours and raked his claws across the captain, cutting him

to ribbons. The pikemen ran forward with a cry, but faltered in the face of the dragon's daunting glare. Viridius leaped into their midst, crushing many as he landed. Seizing man after man in his claws, he reared up and dashed them to the ground as the air filled once more with arrows.

The last pikeman fell, blood soaking from his broken body into the earth. Viridius roared again, and once more breathed a jet of choking green gas into the eaves of the clearing. The archers stopped firing, unable to breathe. Brand Redhorn pulled farther into the underbrush, praying to Aurellius for deliverance as man after man succumbed to the gas.

Viridius stopped breathing the gas as the last gagging cough rattled to silence. He reared up to his full awesome height and roared his victory to the heavens.

The gas found Brand as the echoes died away, and he coughed quietly. Like a striking snake, Viridius was on him and snatched him up. The dragon questioned Brand in a voice too terrible to describe, and the craven wretch told him everything.

Viridius roared again, and the message in the echo was clear: "This shall not go unpunished." The great dragon sped skyward with Brand still clutched in his claws. Flying west towards the beleaguered Anhurian strongholds, he cast Brand Redhorn to his death on a rocky slope.

Now three villages have been found destroyed, with nobody left to tell how. Each village was covered with tri-clawed prints the size of a man. All three are in a straight line to the strongholds on the Bay of Honor. Yet, Anhur has one hope remaining. The countryside is lush, and full of good hunting. Perhaps Viridius will eat his fill and forget the insult before he reaches Prince Nicholas and the surviving Anhurians.

From the ancient records of the Chroniclers of Bellarian:

"...few indeed are those who have ventured to his domain and returned alive, for Viridius is proud and selfish, suffering none to approach. Those who saw the dragon and lived have never been the same afterward. He is gigantic, with scales of adamantite, proof against any arrow. His wings when outstretched are larger than the sails of a great oceangoing man-of-war, and his body is of like vastness. Older than myth, he has prowled the forests, devouring all who crossed his path for ages without reckoning. His depredations were such that men eventually deserted that land, and so he wandered farther into the Woodspike. He breached the great Orc fortress Urgo'mesh and devoured all within, for none could withstand him, or even strike a blow fit to pierce his armor.

Now he sleeps complacent in the forest of the Woodspike, worshipped by those savages such as now live there, and grows fat upon their sacrifices. I fear for the land if they are ever interrupted..."