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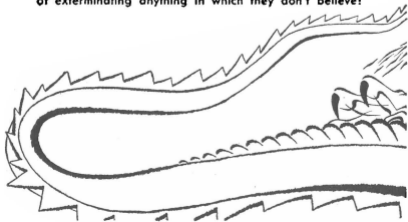


Dragonfires

BY STEVE FRAZEE

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

The dragons were desperate for fuel and considering their old enemies, who had a wonderful new substitute for charcoal. Unfortunately, men have a bad habit of exterminating anything in which they don't believe!





On their way to the emergency meeting of the Grand Dragonhood Council, Dithyram 14 gave his chum, Gorgobub, the old narrow eye. A deep green, steady eye it was, but it did not bother Gorgobub.

A fine young dragon Dithyram was, scarcely more than a thousand years old, broad in the shoulders, trim and powerful of tail. He said, "What's this big plot you're hinting at, and what makes you think Coober 13 is stoking up to burn my tail?"

He grunted when Gorgobub walked on three feet in order to brush the tiniest bit of Beowulf pollen from a gleaming scale. Gorgobub had always been a dandy, but now—what with Dragonvia in the fix it was, dragon fires at the lowest point in history, extinction staring every inhabitant right in the stomach . . .

Gorgobub gave the scale a final pat and grinned at Dithyram's irritation. "You can't tell what new young dragonettes may—"

"I asked a couple of questions!"

Gorgobub, who had a good thing as manager of the filtration plant, minced a little in avoiding a dust-laden Beowulf plant, named after a human being conquered by a famous dragon warrior some years be-

fore in honorable combat.

"You've been knocking yourself out for so many hundred years with your reforestration program that you don't know what's in the wind," Gorgobub said. "I'd better wise you up gradually by letting you *start* to answer the second question yourself."

Gorgobub was a sharp one. He knew the angles. However, it didn't require a great deal of sense to know that Coober 13, the biggest wholesale charcoal dealer in the country, had been chewing his fat tail ever since Dithyram took Francipip away from him at a charcoal burners' picnic during one of the rare occasions when Dithyram had got away from his tree planting.

The very thought of Francipip, only child of old Bellapop 48, Grand Master of the Grand Council, brought a sigh from Dithyram. He wished it could have been one of the pre-Move sighs that used to curl blue flame from both nostrils. Even a little green flame would have been something, but the way charcoal was rationed these days there was barely enough to keep the inner fires at minimum level for existence.

So Dithyram sighed air, only slightly warm from his meager ration of two days before. He sighed several times, thinking

about Francipip. She had the most luscious angles of any dragonette in the land, trim pear-shaped scales, a tapering little tail with the cutest spine projections—and when she looked at him with her soft lavender eyes . . .

Watching from the corner of his eye, Gorgobub smiled and stroked his burnished flame-testers, antennae that would have been mustaches on the old foe, man. "Not in the least discounting the charms of Francipip—If I were the roaring type I might do a little tail-whomping for her favor myself—"

"Let's hear about this awful plot," Dithyram said.

"I was merely trying to say that your thinking must extend beyond Francipip. Charming though she is, she is a relatively minor prize in the coup that Coober 13 is planning—"

"Be careful how you make accusations against a Numbered One," Dithyram warned.

"Nuts!" Gorgobub said. "This is no time for musty tradition. Let's face facts, Dithy: we're starving to death and you know it. Coober saw it coming three hundred years ago and he's been laying plans all that time."

Gorgobub definitely did not look starved. His scales were shiny, his nostrils had a hard,

gleaming sheen, and his well-groomed flame-testers had a used look. The managership of the filtration plant always carried with it a knockdown on charcoal consigned to the filter beds, which was just one of the lesser evils that had seeped into dragon ethics since the Move eight hundred years before.

"I'll give you credit, Dithyram. If the Council hadn't hamstrung you with half enough dragonpower for your long-term reforestation plan, we might have pulled through. But it's too late now. This emergency session today isn't going to be the usual *yak-yak* deal that winds up with every dragon grumbling and going home to listen to his stomach growling until the next session."

Gorgobub was so deadly serious his rough spine extensions were erect instead of flopping in their usual devil-may-care fashion. But he wasn't so serious that he forgot to let Dithyram go ahead to break trail through a mass of thorny Sigurd vines, named after a man whom Dithyram's father had bested in fair fight in pre-Move days.

The way cleared, Gorgobub resumed his place at Dithyram's shoulder. "At this meeting one of Coober's henchdragons, probably Bendar, is going to propose that we move away at once."

Dithyram ploughed to a stop and shook the earth with a tremendous tail whomp. Gorgobub leaped ahead lightly, one foot over his nose. "No use to get my scales all dusty," he complained. "Besides, my sinus has been bothering—"

"We can't move!" Dithyram bellowed. "Any direction is Outside. In the last eight hundred years men have got so they don't believe in us any more. This is our last refuge!"

Gorgobub blew dust off his left front foot and polished the claws against his stomach. "You think Coober doesn't know that?"

Dithyram snorted. Merely warm air again, although he felt like hurling flame ten dragon-lengths (approximately two hundred and fifty-two feet). "You talk in circles!"

"We try to move Outside," Gorgobub said. "You know what men do to things they don't believe in. How many of us would get back after man-trouble started?"

"Darned few!" Dithyram scowled.

"Guess who would be one?"

"You!"

Gorgobub blinked his scarlet eyes and then smiled. "That's not what I was getting at, but since you mentioned it in your tactful way, you're draggone

right I'd get back. I'll take care of Number One."

"You haven't any number. You lost it over that affair with the Fourth Councilor's wife."

"Are you going to be stuffy, as well as technical? And as stupid as you were when you let Coober nominate you for Grand Master of the Advance Detail During Moves?"

"That was four hundred years ago," Dithyram said. "I didn't even know Francipip then, and besides, the title is only an honorary one. I haven't even drawn the extra bit of charcoal it allows me."

"It was honorary then," Gorgobub said patiently. "But Coober was looking way ahead to this very deal he's about to pull right now. The fact that you took Francipip away from him only speeded up things a little bit." He looked at Dithyram keenly. Dithyram wasn't stupid, but he was so steeped in honor and tradition, and had been so absorbed in his futile efforts to produce trees faster than dragons needed charcoal that it took him a long time to get his thinking in gear.

"What will happen to the Advance Detail if we do try to move Outside?" Gorgobub asked.

Dithyram didn't like to dwell on that thought. He started down the tailway abruptly,

scowling all the way back to the second row of reinforced cervical scales on his neck. Gorgobub stood aside politely, not because Dithyram was a Numbered One, but because there would be more Sigurd vines ahead.

They clicked along rapidly. Now that Gorgobub had got a thought wound up he said nothing and let it tick.

It ticked a very unpleasant pattern in Dithyram's mind. If what Gorgobub had just said was true, the most terrible thing in dragon history was about to happen, worse than the time men had declared an all-out war on dragons after Dithyram's cousin (twice removed) had knocked off some character named St. Michael.

Coober was too smart, to think that dragons could exist Outside these days; but there was a bare chance, Dithyram thought, that Coober might master-mind a majority vote on a Move proposal. Hungry dragons were not thinking dragons, but by law a hundred million years old even those who opposed an issue were bound to abide by the decision of the majority.

Men would knock the very wattles right off the whole nation if they went Outside in force, and the Advance Detail would be the first to get it. As

Grand Master, Bellapop 48 could not retreat until the last dragon was safe. That would eliminate 14 and 48, and the next high number was 13, Coober's.

To Dithyram, numbering was a glorious part of dragon history. Every thousand years the oldest male member of a family could add one number to his title—if the family maintained a record unblemished by any violation of dragon ethics, such as losing one's temper and scorching another dragon's tail in a whomping match, or stealing, or cheating in any manner. Just one little fracture of ancient law by *any* member of a family and the number went *pf!* And then you had to start from scratch.

Since the Move, and then the charcoal shortage, numbers had fallen rapidly. The great gap between 14 and 48 indicated the terrible extent of wrecked honor caused by the pinch of hunger and a shocking moral laxity among members of the younger generation.

Dithyram was carrying fourteen thousand years of family integrity, and he was proud of the heritage; but sometimes the honor rested heavily. He was obliged by the code not to believe anything wrong of any dragon until it was proved three times. In spite of his own thoughts engendered by what

Gorgobub had told him, he really ought not to believe Coober guilty of a vile plot.

But he did.

Come to think of it, Coober had been the one who had always blocked Dithyram's efforts to get more dragonpower for reforestation. And now he was sore about Francipip.

"Old Bellapop gone, you wiped out in the first brush, Coober taking a quick sneak back when the fighting starts, forcing Francipip to go with him . . ." Gorgobub let that picture sink in. "Maybe one-third of us will get back. Coober will be the Grand Master then because of Number Seniority. There's about enough trees here now to take care of one-third of the present population. Of course, Coober will really go to work on your reforestation program then, and in a few years time the lunkheads will say it was *his* idea in the first place."

"Shut up!" Dithyram said. Worst of all was thinking about Francipip in Coober's clutches.

Dithyram 14 clicked along rapidly. His scowl was terrible to see, more fierce than his grandfather's had been when the old warrior heard that some jerk of a man named St. George was making threats and boasting about what he was going to do

to all the dragon population.

The problem wasn't simple because the evidence of Coober's intentions was circumstantial. Charges against any dragon had to be presented before the Grand Council—and proved the first time by factual evidence before the Master-at-Arms could finish counting three hundred with his tail.

Coober's plot, if it really existed, seemed incredible to Dithyram, not because it didn't have a good chance of working, but because Dithyram couldn't understand how anyone could be so undragonly as to do a thing like that. Of course, Coober *was* a feculent-eyed character, and he'd been mighty close to losing his number in two or three brushes with the Council during a black-goods investigation.

Naturally, as the biggest charcoal dealer in the country he would be subject to attack as a black-goods operator. His name had been whispered over that latest crime, the theft of ten tons of food from a government stockpile less than two months ago. Of course, there hadn't been any evidence that he had been involved.

Dithyram began to wonder how Gorgobub knew so much. He studied his companion's condition carefully. Pretty good it was for just an average knock-

down of charcoal from the filtration plant; and nothing had been wrong with the water during Gorgobub's term of office.

"How come you know about this alleged plot?" Dithyram asked.

Gorgobub looked innocent. "A lot of things go through the water department—besides water. I have quite a Tristram vine of information."

Dithyram broke a dust-loaded Beowulf leaf from the stalk. "Did your Tristram vine ever give you any hint as to who swiped the ten tons of charcoal recently?"

Gorgobub shook his head. "Not a thing," he said guilelessly.

With a quick motion of his left foot Dithyram slapped the dusty leaf against Gorgobub's face. Gorgobub fell back on his tail. His scarlet eyes fluttered and his nose began to twitch. He seemed to swell and swell.

And then it came, a series of tremendous sneezes that caused his tail to thump the ground with each burst. Blue fire gushed from his nostrils. His flame-testers lit up green, additional proof that the fire was from charcoal.

"You don't know a thing about it, huh!" Dithyram bellowed. "You *couldn't* have knocked down enough charcoal from the plant to produce a flame like

that. Come clean Gorgobub!"

Gorgobub looked at his friend from streaming eyes. "I had nothing to do with stealing that stockpile."

"You've been buying on the black-goods market then!"

"No."

Dithyram turned sidewise and poised his tail. "I ought to whomp you until your legs stick out sidewise and you're flat on your belly!"

"Save your energy. You're going to need it for a bigger job than whomping a friend who's trying to help you."

And that was the truth, Dithyram began to realize after reaching the meeting grounds of the Grand Council. Not a councilor himself because he already held an important post as chief of the Reforestration Program, at every session during the last two centuries he had been so intent on securing larger appropriations of dragonpower for his own department that he hadn't observed what had been growing among the citizens.

He began to circulate, whomping aside a few immature dragons who were cavorting and biting each other's tails in the manner of adolescents. Now that his eyes were open it didn't take him long to observe an undercurrent of disrespect for the

High Councilors. There were a great many characters, well fueled in appearance, smooth in their manner, who were moving among the crowd and talking. They weren't loud but they were effective, leaving in their wake dragons who were beginning to chip their teeth and complain freely that the present High Council was the worst in history.

"How much longer is that doddering old fool of a Bellapop going to give us that things-will-improve line?"

"You can bet the councilors are getting theirs!"

"Something has got to be done."

"My stomach's been rolling something awful for a hundred and fifty years—ever since that last ration cut!"

"Look at Dithyram 14. Dithy is right! Reforestration, he's always yelling. By the time our inner fires are all out and we're dead he'll have four or five little meta-sequoias big enough to eat."

Then one of the shady, well fueled agents spoke a little too loudly. "I've always suspected that Dithyram was a tree-eater."

Dithyram shouldered his way through to the speaker. It was Bendar, one of Coober's key employees, whose exact duties with

the charcoal firm had never been quite clear to Dithyram—now that he gave the matter thought. He was a lumpy-tailed, dark-eyed dragon. He eyed Dithyram without fear.

"When you call me that, smile," Dithyram said coldly.

Bendar did smile, a sort of sneering grimace. "Start trouble, Big Shot. Go ahead, and see what happens to that wonderful number of yours!"

Dithyram was breathing hard, just warm air of course, and that added to his feeling of futility. One of the most stringent of dragon regulations was that unauthorized violence at the Council Grounds automatically stripped the belligerents of their numbers. And Bendar had no number.

Dithyram turned away.

"Tree-eater!" someone called after him.

"You see what I was getting at?" Gorgobub was at his shoulder. "That propoganda didn't spring up unaided."

"I'm beginning to see," Dithyram said bitterly. "While some of us have been wearing our tails down to the bone trying to help the country—" He saw Coober talking to Francipip a short distance ahead.

"Coober's got some kind of terrific surprise to swing the Move vote his way, and I'm try-

ing to find out exactly—"Gorgobub saw that Dithyram wasn't listening. "Don't lose your head—and your number. Play it smart, Dithy."

A young dragonette bumped against Gorgobub, and he turned his head quickly. "Well, strike me up a meta-sequoia tree!" he cried, stroking his flame-testers. "If it isn't gorgeous little Fifi-mum!"

And that took care of Gorgobub for the moment.

Coober tipped his head back and smiled when Dithyram came close. "Well, well! My old friend Dithyram." He stuck out his right foot like a councilor running for reelection. He was a big dragon, pale-eyed, heavy in the shoulders and perhaps a little too heavy in the tail; but he was fast and powerful.

"You're looking a little grim about something." Coober turned to Francipip. "Isn't he, Pippy?"

Francipip gave Dithyram an odd look and said that he *was* a bit harsh in the teeth.

She certainly was a beautiful dragonette, even when standing so close to a louse like Coober, Dithyram thought. He mumbled a greeting to both of them and let go of Coober's foot as soon as he could, but he didn't take his eyes from Coober's face.

"I detect a little discontent

among the citizens," Dithyram said.

Coober seemed concerned. He bit his lower lip and nodded. "I'm beginning to wonder just what's up. Frankly, I'm worried about what could happen if some idiot proposes that we move. What with the attitude you've mentioned, I shudder to think what might happen."

He shuddered all the way down to the three-pound diamond on the end of his tail. Dithyram could scarcely conceal his disgust. Legitimate shuddering was all right, say when talking or thinking about something horrible—like a man; but at other times shuddering was a trick of vain dragons, because all it did was stir up the fires and make the scales gleam brightly.

Francipip seemed impressed, and Coober pretended not to notice how she was admiring him.

"An attempt to move would result in national suicide," Dithyram said flatly.

"Why, of course!" Coober said. "We'll have to prevent it if we can . . . but of course, if the vote goes that way . . ."

"You seem to think the matter will come to a vote," Francipip said.

Coober laughed indulgently and put one foot around her shoulder. She didn't try to move

away, Dithyram noticed. "Now, now! Don't you worry, little draggy. Perhaps Dithyram and I are prone to take things too seriously." He patted her shoulder in a possessive sort of way. "A sweet little Tristram flower like you shouldn't bother her pretty head about matters of state."

Dithyram wanted to whomp him right in the big, fat, syrupy mouth.

Up on the dais where Bellapop 48 and the council sat the Master-at-Arms began to pound his tail on a rock drum. The meeting came to order with a smoothness that seemed ominous to Dithyram. Winklecup 10, the chaplain, gave the customary prayer for the soul of Winklecup 9, a famous warrior who had gobbled up a weakling man named Tristram.

Stern and impressive with his gray flame-testers drooping below his mouth, Bellapop 48 explained that the session had been called to discuss the charcoal situation.

"What, again?" a heckler yelled. "Let's have less teething and more action!"

One of the Master-at-Arms contingent had the heckler by the tail in a flash; but he had to let him go, since the dragon had no number.

Old Bellapop's face was a sight

to see. "There was a day, not many thousand years ago, when such outrageous behavior was unheard of!" he bellowed angrily.

"There was a day when we had charcoal to burn too!" someone shouted.

From the first the trend was apparent to Dithyram. Coober's agents had been planted well, and they did their work well, inciting the crowd to shout insults and demand action instead of deliberation. The uproar was at a high point when Bendar introduced a proposal to migrate Outside.

That brought a quick hush over the crowd. Bellapop's flame-testers stood straight up for an instant and his eyes bulged. Coober looked at Dithyram. "Great dragonstars!" he said. "That was one of my employees who did that!" And then he added, "Was I correct. Bendar is no longer with me as of the time he made that idiotic motion."

Dithyram watched Coober and said nothing.

Someone seconded the motion. The stooges began to clamor and the matter had to go to discussion, which generated more heat than sanity. And then Bendar yelled, "Ask Coober about the Outside! He's been out there!"

Coober looked distressed and reluctant to speak.

"It's true, I've been Outside," Coober said. "But not very far. I wouldn't want to influence a decision on the meager basis of what—"

"Tell us what you saw!" a stooge demanded.

"Well . . . there were meta-sequoia trees higher than four long dragons, side by side over acre after acre, and—"

"They were that way here when we first came!" Dithyram shouted. "If I'd had any cooperation—"

"Silence!" Bellapop roared, looking curiously at Dithyram. "You, a 14 dragon, acting like any of these denumbered ruffians!" He nodded at Coober. "Proceed."

"As I said, I didn't get very far, so I can't say how safe it may be Outside," Coober said.

"But you saw tall trees!" someone yelled.

"Just think, trees as tall as four long dragons! Trees to make charcoal by the basket for everyone!" another stooge roared.

The crowd began to go wild at the thought of so much food just waiting to be reduced to edible condition. Even the Number Three Councilor was carried away. He forgot he was sitting on a stone seat instead of tradi-

tional dragon wood, and took a big bite out of the chair, chewing vigorously.

Even in the excitement some ancient thought about stone stirred in Dithyram's mind as he watched the councilor, but the impression didn't quite jell.

Someone demanded a vote on Bendar's motion. Dithyram got the floor and began to plead for a postponement of the vote, offering to lead a detail Outside to scout. The crowd listened but they were too excited to hear. He kept trying; he wanted time for that unformed hunch in his mind to come into the open, that thought about stone.

Dithyram was a strong believer in hunches, like his seafaring grandfather, who had got a hot flash about learning to strike with his feet just two days before going against St. George. The hunch had worked too, as dragon history proved, although men were said to have a different version.

Observing the reaction of his words on sober, reliable dragons, Dithyram began to hope he might get a postponement. He was vaguely disturbed when he saw that Francipip was watching him without expression. Coober was listening intently, nodding as if in complete agreement.

Even the shady, well fueled

characters quit heckling as Dithyram began to gain power with each new thought. He outlined the terrible dangers that lay Outside, quoting from the last quarterly report (every twenty-five years) of the Dragonfly Intelligence Bureau and Courier Service, which had stressed the fact that men had developed much better swords than the ones St. George and St. Michael had found so ineffective.

"We'll have to stay right here and develop new foods," he said. "With the cooperation of every able-bodied dragon we can avert starvation. To move would be sure death."

Old Bellapop was looking at Dithyram with pride.

They didn't cheer when the speech was over; they were too busy thinking. Hunger was a driving thing that robbed reason, but some details of the DIB's report had been pretty gruesome and shocking.

Bellapop 48 asked if there was anyone who cared for further discussion. For several moments no one raised his tail to get the floor. Dithyram began to hope that he might do better than secure a postponement; he might get a vote to defeat the Move proposal.

"Brother Grand Master . . ." Gorgobub was speaking. "This is

undeniably a weighty matter, not to be decided hastily. On the other hand, hunger is a weighty matter too, and some decision must be forthcoming." He went on and on with masterly double-talk from which little jets of wit sparkled brightly. The crowd began to chuckle deep in their fire-boxes, and soon they were forgetting the awesome things Dithyram had mentioned.

". . . reluctant as I know Coober 13 is to endanger this nation by giving further evidence that may cause us to embark on a course fraught with dangers and uncertainty, in my humble opinion as an unnumbered dragon—" Gorgobub gave them time to consider why he had no number. The Fourth Councilor, the cuckold in the case, turned crimson and studied his front claws. The crowd laughed, and Gorgobub raised his flame-testers in innocent surprise. ". . . In my humble opinion I think Coober should give us a demonstration of the new food he discovered while exploring outside."

"New food? What's this?" The crowd began to buzz. New food talk had been old hat for a half million years. Dithyram had just mentioned it, in an academic sort of way, but nothing ever had come of new food talk.

"Well, I hesitate . . ." Coober had to be ordered by Bellapop.

But watching closely, Dithyram saw how pleased Coober was, and how sure of himself he was.

Coober took his stance at the lower end of a wide lane cleared of dragons. A lumpy-tailed, fat-jowled dragon with a fatuous smirk suddenly appeared beside Coober carrying a stoppered length of Beowulf stalk. Coober removed the plug and drank from the hollow stem.

Dithyram frowned. What sort of trickery was this? That Beowulf stalk could only hold a small amount of anything, and *liquid* was no good for food, except to wet down the fires and make a little steam.

"Keep your eye on yonder Tristram plant, the one in full bloom," Coober said.

He gave a few preliminary bellows motions of his diaphragm and cut loose. The terrific gush of orange flame that he emitted was the likes of which no dragon ever had seen. A great many spectators crowding their heads into the lane to get a better view fell back on their tails clutching their big noses.

The Fourth Councilor went chin over tail off his stone seat. Bellapop's gray flame-testers stood straight up, the ends spinning in tight circles. He showed the reds of his underlids in pure amazement at the sight.

The full-blooming Tristram plant, at least the length of ten long dragons removed from Coober, was stripped of foliage. Nothing remained but smouldering fragments of the larger stems.

Choking from dense black smoke that had edged the blast, Dithyram clawed at his eyes and looked at Coober's flame-testers. They were glowing purple, a color no food ever had produced in any testers before.

"By the wattles of that old dragon of a mother-in-law of mine!" someone near Dithyram swore.

"By the beard of Typhon!" someone said. Typhon had created earthquakes all over the world, but nothing like this.

Coober smiled and wiped his chin. "I did this only because the Grand Master so ordered it," he said.

Bellapop reached up to steady his spinning flame-testers. "You found this food Outside, Coober 13?"

"Yes, but I didn't have time to make a complete survey. There may be no more—and of course, there may be a great deal more of it."

Sniffing hungrily at the delicious black smoke, the crowd went wild. "Vote! Vote!" hundreds shouted.

Dithyram knew defeat when

it scorched the end of his nose, but he tried to get the floor to propose that voting be deferred until he could lead a patrol Outside to make a complete investigation of the extent of Coober's find.

He didn't get the floor. Three to one they voted to migrate. Little dragons were already eating the blackened remains of the Tristram plant. An admiring crowd was clamoring around Coober, and Francipip was right at his side.

Dithyram looked toward old Bellapop, who had just got his flame-testers under control. They shook their heads sadly at each other.

"Some blast, eh, Dithy?" Gorgobub had come up beside Dithyram.

"You traitorous sonofaman! You—!"

"Take it easy," Gorgobub said. "Don't burn the lining out of your nose. You don't think the Move proposal would have gone to vote before *someone* asked Coober to give that clinching demonstration, do you? It was bound to come, but now I'm still solid with Coober—I think."

"I'm wondering just *how* solid," Dithyram said suspiciously. "How did you know he had that new food?" He glared toward Coober, who was holding

Francipip's right foot and smiling graciously at the bedazzled lunkheads. "What *is* that strange liquid anyway?"

Gorgobub shrugged. "Beats me. Something he got Outside no doubt. I found that much out from Bendar," Gorgobub frowned slightly. "I got Bendar fooled, but I'm not so sure about Coober. He's a smooth one."

Dithyram took his eyes off Francipip and tried to forget her. "New food or not, we can't go Outside and face men and their new swords that don't break so easily as they used to."

"You know how long you've got to do something," Gorgobub said, referring to the ancient custom of allowing a three-day cooling period for every decision that affected the entire nation. Only once in all dragon history had a decision been changed by the necessary unanimous vote, rendered three times by secret ballot.

Dithyram stared thoughtfully at the stone seat the councilor had nipped. Bellapop was on the dais alone, all the other High Councilors having rushed over to Coober without even waiting for the formality of adjournment. The old Grand Master was staring sadly at his tail.

"Of course, there's still the *Challenge*," Gorgobub said.

Dithyram's spine projections

went rigid. The Challenge! He hated the very sound of the word. By law so ancient the history of it had been lost, any numbered dragon could challenge another in the presence of the Grand Council to fight to the death to prove which one was right. Dithyram was not afraid of Coober or any other dragon. What galled him was that the entire nation would be obliged by law to follow a decision established on the basis of brute force.

No dragon, not even old Bellapop, knew when the Challenge had last been used to replace reason; if there were any other way out Dithyram did not intend to fall back to methods a hundred million years old. He took another look at the nipped chair.

There might be another way to beat Coober.

"Of course, if you *want* me to take charge of the migration . . ." Coober was saying modestly as Dithyram passed on his way to have a talk with Bellapop 48. Francipip was still beside the Big Gush. She barely glanced at Dithyram when he went by. Well, if she were *that* kind of dragonette . . .

Two afternoons later, his tail aching, his feet worn down until they hurt at every step,

Dithyram was scrambling over rocks at the upper end of a little valley where even small meta-sequoias would not grow.

His teeth were sore and his jaws felt as if they couldn't crush another rock. For two days he'd tried them all, soft ones, hard ones, every color of stone in Dragonvia. He had a heavy feeling in his fire-box and a harsh taste in his mouth. He longed for even a few bites of charcoal to take the grit from his teeth and warm his stomach.

He stopped to rest a few minutes on an outcrop of blue shale, thinking bitterly that he was a fool. No other dragon was giving a hoot, besides Bellapop. They were all talking about moving, getting ready, and some elements were starting a campaign to make Coober a Strong Dragon and dispense with the Grand Council entirely. For a moment or two Dithyram was tempted to say to heck with the whole impossible quest he was on.

Tomorrow, after the vote was affirmed, a mere formality, he would take his place as Master of the Advance Detail and go forth to be killed. He didn't mind getting knocked off by men for the good of the nation, but he was quite sour about being chopped up for the good of Coober 13.

But unless he found what he

was after—or used the Challenge—death was sure, not only for him but for most of the nation. And still he couldn't bring himself to use the Challenge. Fourteen thousand years of honorable family history stood between him and wanton brute force.

He got up with a groan, the expelled air barely warmer than the temperature around him. Tail dragging wearily he went on, sampling rocks here and there. Each bite hurt his teeth and made his stomach more sour but he kept trying.

Coober had found a new food, and surely it couldn't have been that liquid that he pulled the mumbo-jumbo with. If there had been a new food close Outside why not also in Dragonvia? Bellapop 48 had said that Bellapop 45 once had talked of a sustaining food that served as emergency rations when a small party of raiding dragons from the old flying days had been grounded by bad weather on an island somewhere off the coast of Gaul. Bellapop said that his ancestor had brought home a few pieces of the rock as a curiosity. He thought it had been black, but he wasn't sure.

Dithyram tried another piece of shale. It was just like all the rest. A little later he tried another piece of obsidian. It was

shiny black and looked just like all the other pieces of obsidian he had eaten.

This one was no different. He ran his tongue along his aching teeth and rubbed one foot on his abused stomach.

At midnight, sore and weary, his quest still a failure, pulling his tail behind him like a dead thing, he followed the dragonstar back to his cavern shaded by Beowulf plants. On the way he passed through a little grove of trees his crews had planted a hundred years before. Some vandal had eaten three of them. Well, it didn't matter now.

Tree-eater was he? He remembered Bendar's jeering smile. Dithyram had never been a tree-eater, and even now when faint with hunger and nearly exhausted he wouldn't touch a tree. He dragged on. Well, maybe he *had* licked the pitch off a few trees, but that hadn't been much of a crime; and the time he and Gorgobub had got the fire-box ache from munching young trees was so long ago . . .

Tired as he was his flame-testers warned him with a gentle vibration when he approached his cavern. Someone was inside, waiting in the dark for him. Any dragon's home was free to another, but one who entered another's cavern during the

owner's absence was obliged to send a message to the owner immediately by dragonfly courier. No one had sent Dithyram a message, and he had seen any number of oriental dragonflies winging about on their night-shift duties.

Dithyram straightened his tired shoulders; he tipped first right and then left as he flexed the muscles of his front legs. And then he went straight for the door to confront the intruder. So intent was he that he did not hear the faint rustle in the Beowulf plants on his left.

The next instant his head was full of dragonstars. He heard a dragonette scream. He felt his legs going sidewise. His chin hit the ground with a thump. And then no more.

He came to on his own bed of shredded Beowulf leaves with a taste in his mouth like all the rocks he'd eaten for two days.

"Are you all right, Dithy? Are you all right?" The words came from a long distance away, threading their way through spinning stars and exploding spheres that gradually settled into the dim outlines of the cavern ceiling.

He tried to sit up and a cool claw pressed against his nose, forcing him back. "Drink this." Someone poured dew from a Beowulf cup into his mouth.

Dithyram blinked his eyes. "Francipip!" He tried again to sit up and fell back with a moan that knocked small chips from the ceiling.

"Easy, Dithy, dear. Your head isn't as thick as even I thought it was."

"Don't call me that silly name." Dithyram rested for several minutes, and then a new thought struck him. He sat up. "This is highly irregular!" he cried.

Francipip laughed a tinkling little sound that ran along the rock walls like music from a Siegmund vine flute. "Don't be stuffy," she said. "If my being here is irregular, so are the times." She took another curled leaf of dew from a stone table.

Dithyram drank and considered somewhat hazily. Being caught in such improper circumstances with Francipip would lose him and Bellapop their numbers; but all he could think of was what would happen to Francipip. He could see all the gimlet-eyed old unmarried dragonoras whispering behind their front claws.

Well, she was here.

"What hit me?" he asked.

"A rock. He was raising it in both front feet to let you have another when I yelled and threw your flame-tester brush at him and scared him off. From the

looks of your flame-testers I'd say breaking the brush on his head was no great loss."

"I haven't had time for primping," Dithyram said grumpily. "Who was raising a rock?" he added suddenly.

"Bendar. Everybody in Drag-onvia knows what you've been trying to do the last two days, including Coober."

Dithyram touched his aching head and stared at a large leaf basket on the floor. "What were *you* doing here?"

"Waiting to talk to you, when I heard you coming and looked out just in time to see Bendar crown you."

"Why didn't you send a dragonfly?"

"The courier division of the DIB has been corrupted by Coober for over a hundred years. Bellapop has been able to keep the intelligence division out of Coober's control only by a tough fight. I supposed you knew all that," she said.

There was a lot of things he hadn't paid much attention to, Dithyram thought. His next brain wrinkle was the one that finally cleared his head. "Did Bendar see *you*?"

Francipip nodded. "I'm afraid so. That sort of complicates things, doesn't it?"

"I'll tail-whomp him into a

pulp. I'll annihilate him!"

Francipip watched him calmly. "My Pop always says, 'When making charcoal, don't bother with the small limbs.'"

"But there's no evidence against Coober!"

"Not Grand Council evidence, no; but why do you think I've been shining up to the loathsome brute?"

In spite of his throbbing head and the rock-heavy feeling in his stomach, Dithyram felt his heart give a great leap. He felt strong enough to rush out immediately and resume his search for the black food. Not only that, he had a hot flash about finding it.

He stood up. And then he fell flat on his chin with a crash that knocked more chips of rock off the ceiling.

"Poor dear, you're famished." Francipip began to open the leaf basket. It was filled to the brim with choice charcoal, the smell of which was enough to get Dithyram's chin off the floor a little.

"Not—not black-goods?" he muttered.

"Of course not. It's rations from a good many honest dragons who know what you're trying to do. Gorgobub contributed a triple ration."

That last would be black-goods stuff for sure, Dithyram

thought. "I couldn't touch a bite of it."

When the basket was half gone and his rising fires were making him feel like a new dragon, Dithyram asked through a mouthful of food, "What kind of rock did Bendar hit me with?"

"Not a black one like you're trying to find. I tested it myself." Francipip's lavender eyes were soft and luminous in the dusk. "Dithy, dear, do you think there's a possible chance of finding a new food before we have to move?"

Dithyram took another mouthful of charcoal. "If I only knew exactly what it was that Coober had—"

"It was good-smelling water in a funny container made of something tougher than a rock, although it bent easily. In a weak moment Coober told me it fell from a huge, huge dragonfly like none he'd ever seen. The big dragonfly seemed to be having trouble, Coober said; its wings wouldn't move. And then it dropped the funny container full of good-smelling water."

Dithyram munched thoughtfully. Water had made that amazing fiery gush from Coober? It seemed incredible and yet it must be so. If he had some of the GS water he could have Gorgobub check it, since Gorgo-

bub knew water if anyone did. Maybe there was more of it in Dragonvia, dropped by big dragonflies.

"Coober left it open for the citizens to think that the woods Outside are full of water food like that," Francipip said. "But they aren't. I checked that myself."

"You went Outside!" Dithyram almost strangled on the last mouthful of charcoal.

"I had to know," Francipip said. "You were busy, and Gorgobub was the only other one I could trust, but he was afraid to go Outside." She leaned close to Dithyram, her soft eyes full of fear. "Dithyram, there's men not two hundred dragon-lengths from where the GS water was. If we have to move you'll be the first to run into them. I know you're strong and brave, but . . . but . . . I just couldn't stand it without you, Dithy."

Dithyram did the only thing he could. His fires glowing from the basketful of food, he put his face close to hers and warmed her with a sigh that curled wonderful blue flame over both their heads.

"Oh, Dithy!" she murmured.

Shamelessly he shuddered a little to make his scales gleam brightly.

In a few moments she pushed

him away with one dainty foot. "Coober thinks I'm going to scam back here with him as soon as the men-fighting starts. He's got it all worked out so that he and his gang will form the rear guard. They're not only going to run out but they're not going to let more than one-fourth of the population back into Dragonvia."

Dithyram paced around the room, rapping the walls with savage thumps of his tail.

"Dithy, you've simply got to find that black food. It's the only thing that will reverse the vote when it comes up for final approval tomorrow."

"By the tail of Typhon the Quake-maker, I'll find it!" And then a long heritage of behavior that scorned boasting asserted itself. "If it's here. If I can. I'll do my best."

No honorable dragon could have promised more.

Dawn was breaking when Dithyram came wearily up the dragway toward the water filtration plant. He'd looked half the night for the container of GS water. He'd covered every claw-length of the territory Outside that Francipip had described. But the GS water was gone.

Discouragement rode heavily on his spine extensions, making them wag limply. He had about a half day to find the wonderful

black rock that old Bellapop's gramps had mentioned. If it were black . . . if the story hadn't been just another dragontale.

He stopped to drink below the lower filtration pond. The water was very good, although it didn't carry the tiny bits of charcoal from the filter beds like it used to. Probably Gorgobub had been cutting down on charcoal all the time, selling it on the BG market or eating most of it himself.

Well, that didn't matter much now.

Gorgobub was Gorgobub, honest as long as it served his ends, a strong friend when he had nothing to lose. He'd always been that way, a likeable dragon in spite of his faults. Dithyram would never forget the time when they were quite young and out on a prowling expedition near a colony of blue-winged dragons, the females of which . . .

Dithyram smiled a little at the memory.

He was surprised to find Gorgobub at this early hour pacing on the dam at the upper pond. His flame-testers were uncombed and he had an untidy look about him, but it was the depth of brooding sadness in Gorgobub's scarlet eyes that struck Dithyram hardest.

"Gooddragonmorn," Gorgobub

said breezily. "Any luck?"

Dithyram shook his head.

Gorgobub flipped a pebble toward the gleaming surface of the pond. "I'm going with you and the Advance Detail this afternoon," he said gloomily.

"What!"

"Oh, I know it sounds heroic—shady but charming pal repents and goes out to die with his dragonhood chum in final, glorious combat. I'd like to believe that myself, only it isn't so."

"Then why—"

"Simple, Dithy. Coober suspects I tipped you off. Last night he sent one of his plug-uglies here to give me the works, but I was a little too fast. I busted the character's tail and sent him back to his boss."

Dithyram considered. After all, if Gorgobub were as selfish as he tried to make out, and as most dragons believed him to be, he never would have warned Dithyram in the first place, for he knew how foully the cards had been stacked. Dithyram realized he had been neglecting one of the important obligations of a Numbered One: to search deeply at all times for the best in any dragon.

The thought went a great deal further than that. Sure as he was of Coober's evil plans, he had no moral right to believe

him guilty. And yet he knew that Coober was guilty.

"Bub—" Using a nickname was considered beneath the dignity of a numbered adult male, but Dithyram didn't care now. "I wasn't quite so fast myself when Bendar gave me a lump." He told Gorgobub all about it.

"How do you like that!" Gorgobub shook his head. "You can't get at Coober by having Francipip testify that Bendar attacked you, because the fact that she was at your house alone is enough to denumber Bellapop and you—and that would leave Coober right smack in the GM's seat." He stared at his tail. "Well, the way it stacks he's going to get there anyway. I can't think of a thing to stop him besides the Challenge. I even went Outside last night and got that new food of his in the hope—"

"You got the GS water!"

"Well, I sent a foredragon from the plant, a gee named Grafto."

"Let's have a look at this new food!" Dithyram cried. "Maybe we can find more like it right here in Dragonvia."

Gorgobub shook his head. "Not a chance, brother. I know water and I can say for sure there's nothing in the country like this GS stuff."

In Gorgobub's quarters Dithy-

ram examined the container curiously. It was made of a hard, though yielding material that defied description. The smell of the contents made him drool.

"Easy!" Gorgobub warned. "A very little swallow is about all you can handle. I took two big drinks and like to blew my teeth out when I belched—just a normal belch, mind you, not a genuine fire-box blast."

Dithyram took a tiny swallow. Immediately he felt his fires surging hotter than they ever had before from such a small amount of food. Walking over to the dam he trained toward a distant flock of archaeopteryx birds on the water. He let go. The recoil knocked him back against Gorgobub. Orange flame and black smoke shot across the pond. His flame-testers turned deep purple.

The archaeopteryx birds rose squawking, their tail feathers scorched to a crisp.

"By Typhon!" Dithyram said, looking sidewise at his quivering flame-testers.

"It's powerful," Gorgobub said. "But outside of a few small shots that I suspect Coober has, there isn't any more besides what we have here."

Dithyram tried another blast. It just wouldn't come. "Doesn't stick to your fire-box very well, does it? Not like charcoal."

Gorgobub shook his head. "No, it'll take something more sustaining than GS water to save the country."

Gorgobub was thinking in broader terms than himself now, Dithyram thought.

"Maybe if we took the GS water before the Council and demonstrated that it's no more than flash-in-the-fire-box stuff, very delicious, but just fluff..." Gorgobub said.

"That one gush Coober showed has got everybody dazzled. Then there's the trees he described outside. No, Gorgobub, I've got to find a new food - -and fast."

"There's just one other way - the Challenge. You give it to Coober and if the scrap starts to go against you, I'll be standing by with a load of GS water and burn his tail off," Gorgobub suggested.

Dithyram shook his head slowly.

"The trouble with me," Gorgobub said, "is that I can't think in honorable terms."

Dithyram started off to resume his hopeless search. "You'd better dump that GS water before it gets you into trouble."

"Before you go—" Gorgobub seemed oddly hesitant. "Well, I may not have another chance to talk to you alone before the

Move, and I just want you to know that I had nothing to do with swiping that ten tons of charcoal from the government stockpile. Coober and Bendar did that."

Dithyram came back. "How do you know?"

"Grafto, my foredragon, saw them."

"Why didn't you say so before? That's enough evidence right there to take care of Coober. Grafto can testify before the Grand Council this afternoon."

Gorgobub looked down at his tail. "He can't."

"Why not? An eye witness to the crime—"

"You may as well know," Gorgobub said. "I haven't used any charcoal in the filter beds for almost two hundred years. Grafto and I have been eating all the charcoal consigned to the plant—and Coober knows it." He shrugged. "You can see what kind of a mess it would be, all us crooks trying to testify against each other before the Grand Council."

"Yeah. I can see. A little knockdown on charcoal was to be expected, but to endanger the health of the whole nation—"

"That's where you're wrong," Gorgobub said. "The inspectors have been passing the water as

pure all the time, so the black rock we've been substituting in the filter beds must have been—"

"Black rock?" Dithyram cried. "Soft, black rock?"

"Sure. Breaks up easily. Sometimes you can see where fern leaves have been in it. Grafto and I—"

"Did you ever eat any of this black rock?"

"Are you nuts? Hey! Quit shaking me!" When Dithyram let go Gorgobub said, "With plenty of high-class charcoal around we should be eating black rock?"

Dithyram grabbed Gorgobub by the front legs and hurled him into the pond. Then he jumped in after him.

Later, when there were two large baskets of soft black rock on the dam, and both dragons were covered with mud and sand, Gorgobub grinned and said. "You might at least have said what you were after. I could have opened the valves and drained the pond."

"Watch!" Dithyram's fire-box was beautifully aglow, maybe not with the sudden, intense heat of GS water, but with a solid and wonderful feeling. He pumped his diaphragm and sent a burst of red flame and dense black smoke across the pond. He did it again and again. His

flame-testers turned bright blue and twanged loudly.

"That black rock sticks with you!" he bellowed happily.

"A trifle smoky," Gorgobub said.

"Complete mastication will result in better carburetion." Dithyram pounded Gorgobub on the shoulder. "Dragon alive! You did it! You found the new food!"

"Speak for yourself, Dithy," Gorgobub said modestly.

"Now you're sure about the extent of it?"

Gorgobub was sure. "A whole swamp of it and a mountain behind. We'll have to dig a little but my conservative estimate is that there's enough to supply the country for three or four hundred thousand years."

"By that time I'll have my reforestation program so well in hand that you won't be able to move for trees. I'll have metasequoias higher than a dragonfly can go! I'll—"

They grinned and beat each other on the back until they both fell into the pond. Dithyram scrambled out first. "Come on! We've got a big job ahead."

It was then he saw Bendar peering at him from the edge of a Beowulf patch on the hillside. Even while he was setting himself for a charge, Dithyram

heard Gorgobub yell, "Run, Bendar! Run for your tail! He sees you!"

Gorgobub reached up and got Dithyram by the left rear leg and dragged him into the pond. They struggled fiercely, sending great geysers of sand and water into the air, breathing fire into each other's teeth.

When Dithyram broke free Bendar was gone.

Heaving with rage Dithyram poised his tail for a whomp to knock Gorgobub clear into the Outside.

"Hold it!" Gorgobub said. "You manhead, you! I thought all the time you were hep to the act." He rubbed his neck. "Who ever heard of a quadruple-nelson before? That is before I realized you weren't kidding and my back was nearly broken."

He rose, hunching his shoulders and making a wry face. "Didn't you see him talking to the dragonflies just before you got ready to blow your top?"

Dithyram didn't whomp, but he held his tail ready.

"Those dragonflies will be telling Coober all about what we've found in less time than it would have taken for you to catch Bendar." Gorgobub brushed sand off his stomach. "On top of that Bendar is no Tristram flower. Even if you *had* caught him you would have had

a terrible time of it—and you, my glowering friend, need your energy for Coober.”

Gorgobub still didn't relax.

“Maybe I have preserved my in with Coober, or at least Bender, and that may prove very useful,” Gorgobub said. “You know, of course, you *forced* me to help look for black rock.”

Dithyram's tail was still poised. “You're overlooking the character you sent back to Coober with a busted tail.”

Gorgobub sighed. “So I am. I told you that before I began to come clean. The truth is I didn't bust his tail. I broke his head and had Grafto dispose of the body. And now, even if Coober doesn't trust me, I may still gain some advantage from Bender, who may.”

Such devious thinking left Dithyram confused. He relaxed slowly. “You could save yourself lots of trouble if you'd tell the truth the first time.”

Gorgobub sighed. “I know. I used to try it, but I just never had any fun that way.”

“Let's get busy,” Dithyram said. “The worst is ahead.”

They loaded all the black food they could into First Move surplus knapsacks, and roused out Grafto to do the same. Grafto was not in very good condition, having tried three large swallows of GS water the night be-

fore. The resultant blast had given him a bad shaking up and some scale separation and it was evident that he wouldn't be able to keep up with them on the march to the Grand Council place. Gorgobub insisted on taking along a Beowulf leaf canteen of GS water.

Grafto fell behind from the first. He was far behind when Gorgobub and Dithyram got warning of an ambush. Dithyram's flame-testers, although covered with a black deposit from the new food, seemed extra sensitive. They twanged a warning when he and Gorgobub were still some distance from a very narrow place where the tailway ran between cliffs.

As much as he disliked the loss of time necessary to scale the cliff on one side and come in behind the spot where his flame-testers warned him three dragons were waiting above the tailway, Dithyram knew they had to do it. They couldn't take a chance on the narrow place. Too much depended on their getting before the Grand Council in time to avert the Move.

It took them a great deal longer than they had expected to climb the cliff on their left. Halfway up a sharp rock tore a hole in Dithyram's knapsack and his precious burden of black

food went spilling down the cliff. More misfortune struck a few minutes later. Gorgobub slipped and almost tumbled from the heights. In bracing against him to keep him from falling, Dithyram ripped a gash in the second knapsack. They lost almost half of it.

They reached the top of the cliff with their fires low, and held a brief consultation. In order to properly blast the three lying in ambush and still have enough fuel to make up for the time lost they would have to eat what was left of Gorgobub's cargo.

They ate it, telling each other that Grafto would arrive at the meeting with his food in time to show it around. And they both knew that Grafto, as slow as he had been when they left him, would be lucky if he got to the meeting place at all.

They came in above and behind three of the worst-looking plug-uglies in all Dragonvia. Dithyram scorched the tails of two and Gorgobub got the other, using just one tiny swallow of GS water. "It's a crime," he said, "that this stuff has no more body to it than it does. We wouldn't have had to use all our black food."

Gorgobub wanted to finish off the three. Groaning and in great pain as they wrapped their tails

in healing Beowulf leaves, the trio admitted readily that Coober had sent them.

"And a lot of good it's going to do you to know that!" one of them snarled. "There's nothing you can do to stop the Move plans now."

"We should have scorched their tails off," Gorgobub said. He tapped the canteen and said to Dithyram. "Let me work that pock-marked, push-faced one over with a little of this."

"We haven't time."

They swung down toward the tailway, Dithyram fretting at the fearful loss of time, even more than at the loss of black food.

All the dragons in the land were gathered at the meeting place when Gorgobub and Dithyram arrived. Some of the older females were weeping quietly into Beowulf leaf handkerchiefs; Numbered Ones and other responsible citizens stood in small groups, talking little. But like the rest they had their knapsacks on, their flame-tester combs tied to their left ears in the traditional manner for Moves.

Only once in history had a decision been reversed; there was no reason to believe this one would be changed.

"I'll see you later," Gorgobub said. "I'm going to circulate."

Coober came pushing toward Dithyram, who thought sourly that Coober must have done a full hour of shuddering to put his scales in such gleaming condition.

"Didn't I say he'd be here?" Coober asked the crowd loudly. "Good old Dithyram, Master of the Advance Detail. I'd give my right front leg to be with you today, but I must guard the rear." In a low voice he said, "Some of them thought you were going to take a run out, old friend."

"I'll be here from start to finish," Dithyram said.

"Ah, yes . . ." Coober smiled. He stood on his tail and waved his front legs at the crowd. "Well, I guess there's nothing to hold us up. The sooner—"

"We haven't gone through the ceremony of final consideration!" Bellapop 48 roared.

"Formality, formality," Coober muttered under his breath. "My apologies, Grand Master!" he shouted.

While the Master-at-Arms was beating his tail for order, someone rubbed against Dithyram. It was the little flippertygibbet Fifimum. Dithyram moved aside as far as he could, one eye on Francipip, who was watching from near the dais.

"Gorgobub sent me to tell you

that you-know-who has bribed the Clerk of the Muster to show five dragons as scouting the border where we're to cross. Grafto is one of them," Fifimum whispered.

Coober was playing it very tight, Dithyram thought. Four of the names entered falsely on the rolls would belong to the dragon Gorgobub had killed, and to the three with burnt tails. It would be almost impossible to delay the Move by proving that five men were improperly accounted for.

Dithyram saw Coober watching with an amused smile. Then he looked above bobbing flame-temper combs and saw Gorgobub talking and laughing beside Bendar.

The Master-at-Arms finally gained order. Winklecup 10 gave the customary prayer for the soul of Winklecup 9; the clerk began to read in a rapid mumble the matter that needed final consideration. Then Bellapop rose and intoned the familiar words: "Three days have fled and each and every dragon here assembled has had time to weigh, to consider, and to reflect upon the decision here rendered by the democratic processes of free dragons in free voting."

"Final vote! Let's get to voting!" Gorgobub made the demand. The others nodded.

Bellapop looked sad and majestic as he raised both front feet. "If there be among us one with conclusive evidence that we have made a wrong decision, let him speak now or forevermore . . ."

Dithyram didn't hear the rest. He was standing in a cold sweat and Coober was grinning at him evilly. Three large, powerful dragons had Dithyram by the tail, not biting, just holding firmly and ready to ruin him. Their treacherous act was concealed by others of Coober's gang standing solidly around them. Coober had edged back toward Dithyram's left shoulder, out of line of a direct blast.

"One little peep," he said softly, "and you get the works."

"You *are* guilty, you scummy sonofaman!" Dithyram tried to move and the three large dragons clamped down hard enough to make him wince.

"Honorable sucker!" Coober jeered. "Keep your big yap shut and I'll give you the honor of dying at the head of the Advance Detail." He laughed softly. "I'll even see that a grove of trees is dedicated to your memory as a hero—after Francipip and I return. Make one little protest—" He smiled and clicked his big teeth twice.

". . . Then, since no dragon

has raised his voice—" Bellapop looked in appeal toward the part of the crowd where he had been able to see Dithyram a few moments before "—to introduce factual evidence . . . I hereby declare that the decision of three days now past is sust—"

Bellows of pain broke out behind Dithyram. He felt his tail released. Dust rose from an earth-shaking scramble and the roaring of outraged dragons was terrible. Dithyram did something most unorthodox. He swung a left hook smack under Coober's ear, and then a right hook to the nose as Coober was sagging. Coober went flat on his belly, shaking his head weakly.

Then Dithyram had time to look around.

Francipip was standing behind him. He saw her emit a little dragonette-like jet of orange flame that seared the tail of one of the outlaws who had been holding Dithyram. The character already had a scorched tail tip, but in his eagerness to escape he had let all four feet fly sidewise and was momentarily helpless on his belly. But he sure could bellow.

The gangsters who had been screening were trying to get away fast. One was tangled up in the crowd and an old dragon-ora was belaboring him with a Beowulf leaf umbrella, having

mistaken his frenzied bumping against her for something other than a desire to escape.

Francipip emitted another tiny jet at a tail sticking out of a tangle of legs and other tails. A dragonette yelled shrilly and Fifimum disengaged herself from the mass.

"Ooops!" Francipip said. "I mistook you for a dragon."

"Like fun you did!" Fifimum rubbed her tail.

"Order! Order! Master-at-Arms!" Bellapop was bellowing like sixty. "What's going on over there?"

"I protest the decision!" Dithyram yelled. "I have evidence!"

Coober staggered up, recovering fast. "I have evidence that he attacked me foully and without provocation!"

"Shut up, you!" Francipip tried another little blast but her fuel was gone. "Gorgobub should have given me more GS water," she said to Dithyram. "He saw what was happening and knew he couldn't get past that bunch of plug-uglies."

"Address the chair!" Bellapop shouted.

It took sometime to restore order, and then Dithyram began to tell what he had found. At the moment he had no time to accuse Coober, because the im-

portant thing was to convince the assembly that there actually was a new food right in Drag-onvia.

Coober got the floor while Dithyram was taking a deep breath. "Where is this new food? Let him demonstrate this black stuff he talks about!"

"Watch it, Dithy," Francipip said. "He wants you to use up all your fires and then he'll throw the Challenge."

Dithyram had been thinking the same thing. He looked over in appeal to Gorgobub, still standing beside Bendar. But Gorgobub shook his head. Apparently he was still trying to deceive Bendar.

Gorgobub's complicated behavior had better start paying off soon, Dithyram thought grimly.

"Make Dithyram 14 demonstrate this imaginary food—if he can!" Coober shouted.

The last thing Dithyram wanted to do was run his fires so low he wouldn't be at top strength for whatever was to come. The Challenge was imminent, he was sure. He looked toward the tailway down which he hoped weakly to see Grafto coming with his burden of black food. No Grafto. He glanced at Gorgobub again. No dice.

Dithyram demonstrated. He gave blast after blast of red

flame and black smoke, and they shouted for him to continue until he could throw a flame no longer than a small dragon-length.

"By ancient law I Challenge Dithyram 14!" Coober roared.

A stunned silence smote the crowd. It was law, but no dragon could remember the last time anyone had fallen so low as to invoke it.

Bellapop choked a little when he said. "It is law. It is so. Prepare to observe the ancient law and abide by the outcome of the Challenge."

That an issue of life or death for an entire nation depended on the outcome of brute force hurt Dithyram to the soul. But he was a Numbered One and had to fight. At least *he* hadn't invoked the stupid law.

Strangely he didn't feel as hungry as he had expected to be after demonstrating. He knew he couldn't throw much of a flame, but even so, his fire-box had a comfortable feeling. The black food was really something.

The nation fell back in an immense circle and the contestants were made ready. Their flame-testers were tied back; their claws examined; their tails were inspected; and seconds looked each over to see if sharp rocks had been wedged between spine extensions. They were clean.

Dithyram's second, a Seven dragon appointed by Bellapop, came back from Coober's corner with a worried look. "I'm morally certain that Bendar slipped him a drink of that strange water food just before I got there," he said.

The contestants came out of their corners, Coober rolling from side to side in a confident swagger. Dithyram smelled GS water on his breath while the referee was giving instructions. Coober's big diamond was still on the end of his tail, but since he had worn it for more than two hundred years it was considered legal equipment, and the Seven dragon second had been unable to make him remove it.

"Anything goes except tail burning," the referee said.

He wasn't quite out of the way when Coober reached across him and knocked Dithyram flat with a short chop to the base of the brain. Sliding back to let his head clear, Dithyram reflected that Coober might prove more than somewhat handy with his front feet—and here Dithyram had been thinking that *he* had discovered the left hook.

For all his heavy tail, Coober was fast. He pivoted so quickly that Dithyram barely had time to slide back another fifteen feet to avoid having his teeth

knocked out from a smoking tail-whomp just a foot or two above the ground.

They grappled in the center of the ring, and Dithyram knew he was facing the most powerful dragon in the land when he failed to budge Coober. He shifted tactics. Two quick left hooks to the nose and then Dithyram leaped on Coober's back while the latter's eyes were watering.

He tried the quadruple-Nelson he'd used on Gorgobub. Down, down, closer to the ground went Coober's ugly face, his thick neck bowing. Coober relaxed suddenly, arching his back, curling his tail under him for added power.

Too late Dithyram felt his feet slipping. He was thrown into the air. Coober caught him two solid, jarring tail-whomps in the long ribs while he was coming down. He lit heavily and Coober kicked him in the head with both hind feet. Quick as a dragonfly Dithyram went under his heavier adversary, raking his rough spine extensions across Coober's belly.

It was an ancient trick, familiar to even very young dragons. Coober bellowed mightily in pain and snapped an instant too late at Dithyram's tail.

They squared off and sparred in the center of the ring, taking a little breather. Then they

mixed head-on in a teeth-jarring collision that made the earth tremble. For several moments they stood up and slugged it out tail to tail, their clenched claws rattling like thunder on each other's body.

If he hadn't known Coober was a dirty fighter Dithyram soon found out. Coober jabbed his claws into Dithyram's eyes; he kneed with one hind foot in a clinch; he brought up the heel of his right front foot in an uppercut that made Dithyram's teeth click shut. And then he breathed fire in Dithyram's eyes. Ordinary flame wouldn't have bothered, but this GS water stung like the very devil.

Blind for an instant Dithyram backed off and hooked futilely with both front feet. Coober laughed and swung the three-pound diamond on his tail. It knocked sparks off Dithyram's head and knocked him flat on his belly. The diamond shattered and flew through the air in a thousand flashing arcs.

Spectators snapped greedily at the pieces, for it was elementary that diamonds were somehow related to charcoal.

Coober paused an instant too long as he poised his tail for a killing blow. Groggy as he was, Dithyram went under Coober and raked his spine extensions

the whole length of the lump-tailed dragon's body. In going out he hooked one front leg around Coober's left hind leg and spilled Coober right on his nose.

Then they started to fight.

Side by side they stood, slugging it out with their tails. For a while Coober's heavier tail had the advantage in the thunderous exchange; but Dithyram, lean though his rations had been for several hundred years, had hardened his tail by patting the earth around newly planted trees. Little by little he gained the upper tail.

And then he was meeting Coober's blows halfway, getting in one himself, and instead of bracing for the return, sending a smoking one right back to block Coober's tail in mid-stroke.

Restrained by law from cheering, spectators began to express their appreciation by vibrating their flame-testers. The air was filled with twanging and the awful sounds of Dithyram whomping Coober limp.

But the pace was telling. Giving all the blows was wearing Dithyram down fast. Coober knew that, and for some time had been covering up and saving himself, for all the fearful beating he was absorbing.

Suddenly he pivoted away, timing the move just as Dithy-

ram swung a terrific whomp. Dithyram went off balance, fell on his side. Before he could recover Coober was on him, all four feet clamped tight. His breath was hot on Dithyram's tail, and the tell-tale sounds of diaphragm pumping came loudly.

Coober was going to use GS water to burn the very tail right off Dithyram.

Dithyram did something no dragon ever had done before. He put everything he had into a rear-foot left hook. It exploded against Coober's nose and knocked him sliding on his belly fifteen feet away.

The twanging of flame-testers was the loudest ever heard in dragon history.

Dithyram staggered up. For a moment his tail was broadside to Coober. The evil, enraged face was trained squarely on it, and Coober was repumping his diaphragm.

Dithyram risked all in feinting a charge. Then he threw himself sidewise.

The terrific gush of flame that spouted from Coober missed Dithyram's tail just by the length of a baby dragon's flame-testers. Coober tried again, but GS water could produce only one enormous blast like that. He had shot his bolt. He knew it. Death was the penalty for breaking the

no-scorching code in the Challenge.

Coober broke as Dithyram charged. With remarkable speed the villain galloped for the hills that bordered the Outside. Tired as he was Dithyram could not overtake him. Then the Master-at-Arms and his assistants passed Dithyram, thundering fiercely after Coober.

Suddenly they ploughed to a stop and scattered. When he caught up Dithyram saw that Coober had gained the edge of a Siegmund vine thicket and was facing toward his pursuers defiantly, sides heaving. Beside him was Bendar, and Bendar was loaded for dragons.

His dark eyes were glinting with murderous lights; little puffs of smoke and flame came from his nostrils, and his sides were glowing. He held aloft the canteen Gorgobub had carried from the filtration plant. "Stand back!" he roared. "I'm loaded with the new food Coober found Outside. The first dragon to make a move will get his old tail blasted to a crisp!"

The Master-at-Arms and his assistants were brave dragons, but they had seen a demonstration of the GS water. They didn't look at each other as they began to move back, especially back from Dithyram, who soon

was facing the murderous pair alone.

"We're going Outside!" Bendar yelled. "We'll sign an appeasement pact with men, and when we come back we'll see who runs this country!"

Bendar and Coober wouldn't come back, Dithyram knew; but men would, after they had disposed of the pair . . . and men, not believing even when they saw the inhabitants of Dragonvia . . .

Coober snatched the canteen from Bendar and took a big drink. He pumped his diaphragm and smiled evilly, his pale eyes looking directly at Dithyram's tail. Dithyram couldn't retreat. His code, his numbered heritage would not let him.

He charged.

He hadn't gone more than two leaps when someone tackled him from behind. "Down!" came Gorgobub's voice. "Hug the ground!"

Too long Coober savored the revenge he was about to take. The tick of time passed. There came a terrible explosion. The ground bumped hard against Dithyram's chin. He saw parts of Coober and Bendar floating high above the Siegmund vines and heard Gorgobub laugh.

"I conned Bendar into drinking almost a whole canteen of GS water. Dragon plumbing just

wasn't built for a charge like that!"

On a hillside above a swamp Dithyram stood two days later, holding Francipip's little right foot. Below, under the harsh drive of Grafto's voice (the itching from his scale separation had made him very mean), the survivors of Coober's gang were doing the dirty work of removing the mucky overburden from a thick blanket vein of black food.

Just one little item was bothering Dithyram. During the explanations before the Grand Council Gorgobub had said that he and Grafto had saved ten tons of charcoal from the filtration plant by substituting the black food—and that they had intended to turn it over to the proper authorities.

Bellapop had swallowed that story and had made the rest of the Council swallow it. Dithyram looked at the dragons Grafto was directing below. They wouldn't talk—even if they knew where that ten tons of charcoal had really come from. They had been very lucky to get off with ten thousand year sentences to the black food mines.

Still Dithyram was troubled. As a Numbered One it was his duty to tell the truth. But he didn't want to do it. Francipip

knew the truth, and she had told Dithyram to keep his mouth shut, or else she would make his life miserable after they were married next week. Still . . . he was a Numbered One . . .

"What would you say was the most remarkable thing of all that's happened in the last few days?" Bellapop asked Gorgobub. "Excepting, of course, that story you told about filtration charcoal."

Dithyram swung around. Old Bellapop 48 was grinning from ear to ear. He winked at Dithyram, then cleared his throat and said, "Shall we take a closer look at operations below, Gorgobub 5?"

Gorgobub 5! Of course the Grand Council could, in most extraordinary cases, restore five thousand years to a denumbered dragon, but Dithyram hadn't heard a thing about the action.

"By all means, let's stroll down, Bellapop 48," Gorgobub said blandly.

Francipip and Dithyram watched them go. Then Dithyram sighed. Francipip sighed. Jowl to jowl they sighed. Rich red fire curled around them and a wonderfully scented cloud of black smoke rose above them.

"Oh, Dithy 14!" Francipip murmured.

"Pippy!" Dithyram said, a silly look on his face.