

JOHN MORRESSY

FLOORED

WHEN GRUNJAK, LORD OF the Blighted Barrens, sent his first appeal for relief from a spell that had left him covered from head to foot with boils, Kedrigern read it with delight. "Couldn't happen to a more deserving man," he said.

Princess, who considered her husband to be a reasonably compassionate wizard, was surprised but withheld comment even when a second appeal left Kedrigern unmoved. "They'll improve his appearance," he said upon reading it, chuckling with malicious satisfaction.

This time she could not remain silent. "A fellow human being is suffering under a terrible spell. You owe it to the poor man to despell him."

"No one owes Grunjak anything, my dear," he replied, adding after a moment's thought, "Except perhaps a good thrashing."

"What has the man done?"

Kedrigern sat back in his comfortable chair, made a little tent of his fingertips, and said, "To me, personally, nothing. He lacks the temerity to injure a wizard. But to others...it would be easier to tell you what he hasn't done. Grunjak of the Blighted Barrens is known among those unfortunate enough to be his neighbors as Grunjak the Gross, the Greasy, the Grisly, the Grim, the Grungy, the Greedy, the Gruesome, and the Grotty, as well as numerous non-alliterative epithets I would not repeat in the presence of a lady. To describe him as a malevolent, vicious, brutal dolt, liar, coward, bully, and thief would be shameless flattery. A curse of boils is mild recompense for his misdeeds, and I see no reason to interfere with the course of justice."

Princess could read his moods. She said no more, but waited.

Grunjak's third appeal opened with the promise of a complete reformation. He swore by every saint that once cured, he would forsake barbarity and brutality, empty his dungeons and his coffers, abandon looting and lechery, and give up senseless violence, extortion, and cruelty. He would repent, he would make good, he would be a new and better man. Kedrigern paused in his reading to observe, "An easy promise to make. A new Grunjak could hardly be a worse one"

Princess was not of the same mind. "You can't shrug this off," she said. "The reformation of such an appalling man would be a great service to humanity. It has to be done, and no one else is even trying."

The latter observation was not quite true. Zealous clergy had made several attempts to bring the light to Grunjak, but every monk who set foot on his land had been so severely battered that he was incapable of anything but silent

prayer for months afterward. The neighboring landowners were aware of Grunjak's ways, but tolerant. "There he goes again," they would say at word of each new atrocity. "Grunjak will be Grunjak." No punitive expedition was ever mounted against him, or suggested. In all likelihood, the idea had never occurred to anyone. Grunjak was, after all, one of them. Besides, his kingdom was poor and his treasury, despite his rapacity, was trifling; there was nothing to be gained by such an action but the satisfaction of doing right, an inducement easily resisted by the local nobility.

Kedrigern looked up from the letter. "I don't want to try, either. Let him suffer. He deserves it."

"You must help him. It's your professional duty," Princess said.

"He's a thoroughly rotten, ugly, nasty man."

"You can't expect all your clients to be beautiful unfortunate princesses."

"And why not?"

"Don't be difficult. You're not required to admire your clients, only to help them."

"I prefer to let Grunjak help himself. He should be good at it -- he's been helping himself to other people's property for thirty years. And besides, he lives three days' ride from here in a particularly nasty stretch of country. You know how I feel about travel."

"We all have to make sacrifices now and then," she said. "If you despell him, he'll reform. He promised." "Grunjak is a notorious liar."

"Give him the benefit of the doubt. You owe it to society."

Kedrigern muttered something indistinct but unenthusiastic about society's claim on him, settled deeper into the cushions, and read on in silence, frowning. When he came to the end of the letter, he arose, tucked the missive into his tunic, and announced, "Grunjak is receiving his just desserts. But if it will make you happy, my dear..."

"It will."

"Then I'll go."

"That's very sweet of you," she said.

"Your happiness is my pleasure." He took her hand and raised it to his lips. He considered it unnecessary to mention the wording of the postscript initialed with an unsteady G: A fee of five crowns will be paid immediately upon cure.

Kedrigern left the next morning, alone, astride his great red-eyed, silver-homed

steed, an enchanted creature black as midnight, massive as an ox, and intimidating as a crouching panther. Intimidation seemed to him a wise policy when dealing with the likes of Grunjak.

He arrived late on the morning of his third day of travel. The trip was completed without incident, delay, or pleasure. Grunjak's ugly hulk of a castle, Ma Grossierete, rose from a low mound at the center of a desolate and windswept wasteland. Under a sky the color of ashes, flat soggy fields extended to the horizon, bare and lifeless save for a few feeble trees.

A trio of rancid-smelling brutes bade the wizard a sullen welcome and conducted him directly to their lord's chambers, where Grunjak awaited him in a slipper bath. Only Grunjak's head was visible, made even less attractive than usual by the superimposition of a score of blazing red spots each the size of a thumbnail.

Grunjak dismissed the guards. As soon as he and Kedrigern were alone, he moaned, "Help me, wizard!"

"That's why I'm here, Grunjak," said Kedrigern. "But first, I want your solemn word that you'll abandon your wicked ways if I despell you."

"Oh, I will, I will, I swear it. I've learned a bitter lesson, and I'll never forget it. May I suffer horrible torments if I go back on my word!"

"You will. Are the boils everywhere?" Grunjak groaned. "Even on the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet."

"That's a very thorough curse. Who placed it?"

"A nasty hateful old farmer. We had just finished driving off his livestock and loading up his grain, and were giving his serfs and children and grandchildren a good beating when he burst out of his hovel and put a curse on me. Me, his lord and master! We hadn't laid a finger on the old scoundrel. Hadn't even burned down his ham. There's no gratitude in peasants these days, wizard. No loyalty. No sense of duty. They're utterly selfish."

"There's to be no more of that once you're cured, Grunjak."

"There won't be. I had him hanged."

"You miss my point. I mean no more looting and beating and summary executions."

Grunjak gave a start, splashing water in all directions. His eyes widened in pained disbelief. "But that's what makes me a leader!"

"No, it's what makes you a monster whom people wish to see covered in boils. I should think you'd have grasped that fact. You must change your ways completely, Grunjak. You must repent and become a new man."

After a long meditative pause, Grunjak muttered, "All right. I'll change."

"Swear."

"I swear I'll change. The very minute the boils disappear."

"Very well. Get out of the bath."

Grunjak, dripping wet and naked, bespangled with boils and bedecked with the scars of past battles, was a sight to make even a hardened wizard wince. Averting his eyes, Kedrigern dropped the contents of three small vials into the slipper bath, recited the appropriate spell, and instructed Grunjak to immerse himself once more, completely, and stay under for a slow count of ten.

When Grunjak broke the surface, his battered face was free of boils. "They're gone! They're ail gone!" he spluttered.

"Of course they're gone. Didn't you believe I could manage it?"

"I did, I did, I never doubted you for a minute! You're a great wizard and I'll sing your praises everywhere I go."

"Gratitude, Grunjak?" said Kedrigern, surprised. "Your reformation is off to a good start. Just remember to stay reformed, or the boils will be back within the hour. And now I'll take my five crowns and go."

Grunjak rummaged through the clothing that lay in a heap beside the slipper bath and dug out a pouch. He handed it to the wizard. Kedrigern opened it and shook out three golden crowns. He studied them for a moment, then said, "Where's the rest?"

"You've got three crowns there."

"Three is not five."

"I can't give you any more, wizard. I swear it!"

"Men in my profession do not haggle, Grunjak. Your letter offered five. I accepted. The fee, therefore, is five."

"I've never had that much in the treasury."

"Then you were very foolish and wicked to have promised it."

"I promised it before I reformed. You shouldn't have believed me. You knew that I was wicked and deceitful."

"You were also covered with boils -- as you will be in a very short time unless I get my five crowns."

"Those three crowns have emptied my treasury and left me penniless! The only way I could manage five would be to go back to looting and plundering! You don't want that, do you?"

"You really should have thought of that earlier, Grunjak. This puts us both in an awkward position."

"I beg you, wizard, don't do anything in anger! Take the three crowns as part payment, and we'll look around the castle and see if there's anything I can give you to make up the balance. That's fair, isn't it?"

Kedrigern hesitated. In truth, five crowns was an enormous fee for a simple despelling; three was quite adequate. But he had not set the amount; Grunjak had offered it freely. Then again, a man covered with boils is hardly in a state of mind to bargain. He can easily be victimized. Here was an opportunity to be generous in a noble cause. A show of good will at the outset might do much to encourage Grunjak's reformation.

"Very well, Grunjak. Dry yourself off and get dressed. I'm sure we can find something."

For a time, it seemed likely that they would not. Grunjak's was a poor land; his taste was execrable and his booty was scanty and in very poor condition: dented cooking pots, cracked dishes, dirty old clothes, bent and rusty weapons and farm implements, unsteady tables and uncomfortable chairs. Most of it looked to have been taken not for any intrinsic value, but merely for the pleasure of looting.

As they picked through Grunjak's meager treasury, Kedrigern's hopes waned. His thoughts turned to the futility of worldly greed. In a lifetime of remorseless looting and plundering, Grunjak had accumulated a midden of rubbish. Taken all together, it was not worth a tenth of a crown.

Grunjak's gravelly voice broke into his musings. "How about a carpet? A wizard can always use a nice carpet. I bought this one from a knight --"

"You bought it? Paid for it?" Kedrigern asked, startled.

Drawing himself up indignantly, Grunjak said, "Of course I paid for it. I never took advantage of my peers, only the weak and defenseless. It was so much easier. But that's all behind me now."

"Good. About the carpet...."

"This knight had picked it up somewhere in the East. He said it was very valuable, but I had problems with it, so I used it to plug a hole in the wall," he said, pointing to the wall where what appeared to be a wad of rags was stuffed into a hole, held in place by a board nailed over it.

Kedrigern went to the carpet and laid a hand on it. He felt the tingle of magic. It was so faint as to be almost imperceptible, but it was unmistakably present.

"What sort of problems did you have?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing serious. Nothing that would trouble a wizard. It used to move around, that's all."

"Move around?"

"Every night I'd set it by the door, and every morning I'd find it lying in front of the fireplace. The wind blew it about. This castle gets pretty breezy in winter."

"Let's have a look at that carpet."

Grunjak jerked the board free with one violent yank, pulled out the carpet, and spread it on the treasury floor. It was dirty and rumpled, but the colors had held up well, and the design was quite attractive.

"That would go for three crowns in any market I know," Grunjak said with the air of a connoisseur.

"Not without a good cleaning and major repairs. Look at the condition of the tassels."

"Who notices tassels?"

"I do. And what about those holes?"

"I tried nailing it down, but it kept moving around anyway. Even if you knock off a crown for the holes, it's still worth two."

Kedrigern was silent, calculating. The carpet definitely possessed some kind of magic. It was prudent to make sure that magical objects were in the proper hands, and there were no hands more proper than a wizard's. If the magic were benevolent, it would be put to good use; if it proved nasty, the thing could be despelled and cleaned up. And if the magic were exhausted, or nearly so, this carpet would fit nicely in the great room before the hearth.

"Done, Grunjak," he announced.

By early afternoon he was on his way, the carpet rolled up and tied behind him. His horse showed interest, but no discomfort. Kedrigern took this as a good sign: enchanted things should be at ease with one another.

He arrived home in the early afternoon of a clear bright day. With the assistance of his house-troll he unrolled the carpet on the lawn before the cottage for a close inspection. Experience had taught him that it was wise to determine the exact properties of magic objects before introducing them into his household.

Princess flew out to greet him with a kiss and a fond embrace. At sight of the carpet she gave him a puzzled look. "Wherever did you get that?" she asked.

"Part of my fee. It has some kind of magic."

"What kind?"

"I don't know yet."

She circled it once, slowly, examining it from a safe distance. "It certainly isn't self-cleaning magic. Or look-your-best magic. The thing's a mess."

"Everything in Grunjak's castle is a mess. This is just a bit worse than most. It was stuffed into a hole in the wall."

"What did he do to the tassels? A carpet looks so pathetic without proper tassels," Princess said.

The carpet had apparently once possessed an impressive tassel of gold and silver threads at each corner, but only vestiges of these splendid adornments remained. Two had been badly burned, another neatly sheared off, and of the fourth only a few strands survived.

"It's all ripped and bitten, too," said Princess with a shudder of distaste. "Grunjak's palace must be overran with rats."

"It is, but they didn't make the holes. Those are nail holes. Grunjak nailed it down. He said it used to move around."

"Maybe it's a scatter rug."

Kedrigern drew out his medallion. He raised it to his eye and studied the carpet through the small hole at its center. Princess waited patiently for a time, and finally asked, "Do you see anything?"

"It's definitely magical. The magic is very weak, though. Hardly perceptible, even through the Aperture of True Vision." He tucked away the medallion, rubbed his eye, then folded his arms and looked down on the carpet, speculating.

Princess tapped his shoulder. "Have you had lunch?"

"Only a bit of bread and an apple along the way."

"Before you get too deeply absorbed in this carpet, you ought to have lunch," she said. "I'll just fly in and have Spot prepare something."

"Of course! That's it, my dear!"

"There, you see? You were hungrier than you thought."

"No, no, no, I mean flight! Flying! This is a flying carpet!"

She looked at the carpet, then at him, then back at the carpet. "It's not flying anywhere now," she said.

"It's very low on magic. Mistreatment and neglect will do that sometimes. Yes, of course, a flying carpet. That would explain why it kept moving around Grunjak's castle."

"From what you said of Grunjak, I should think a flying carpet would fly away from him as soon as possible."

"It wasn't free to fly off. He acquired it legally, actually paid for it, so the carpet was his."

Princess's interest was stirred. "If this is really a flying carpet it would be a great convenience. It would have to be cleaned and patched up before I'd be seen on it, but just think of the time and trouble it would save us. You might even change your attitude about travel if you could just sit on a carpet and go."

"I might indeed. Yes, it would be convenient. And comfortable. Plenty of room to stretch out."

"There's even room for guests."

"And space for luggage. It has definite possibilities."

"Before we explore them further, let's have lunch," Princess said, taking his hand and drawing him inside.

They enjoyed an unhurried meal, he describing the journey and the sights along the way, embellishing freely since it had been fairly dull and uneventful overall, she filling him in on her progress in spelling. Conversation soon turned to the possibilities of their new acquisition. They knew of no spells for cleaning, patching holes, and restoring tassels; but Spot had become quite accomplished at household chores, and they felt secure entrusting the problem to him, provided he was carefully instructed and closely supervised.

After a second mug of cider, they strolled out to examine the carpet's magical properties in more detail. To their surprise, it was gone.

"Could it have blown away?" Princess asked.

"There's no wind at all. Hardly a breeze."

"Flown away?"

"That usually requires a verbal command."

"Do you think Spot might have eaten it?"

"I heard him in the kitchen all the time we were having lunch."

"Then where --"

"There!" Kedrigern cried, pointing to the lawn beneath the pair of great oaks that stood near the cottage.

They hurried to where the carpet lay tidily spread out in the shade. Neither of them spoke. They were too puzzled even to speculate on how it had changed locations.

"This is fascinating," said Kedrigern. "It couldn't have blown here, no one gave it a command and no one moved it .... I wonder ...." He cleared his throat and in his most commanding voice said, "Carpet, if you have the power to speak, speak to me!"

The carpet did not utter a word.

"I've never heard of a talking carpet. Not even a magic one," said Princess.

"Neither have I, but it doesn't hurt to try." Kedrigern thought for a time, then said, "If you have a means of communicating, carpet, please employ it now."

Nothing happened at first; then, after a tense interval, the threads of the sole surviving tassel gave a single feeble twitch.

"It's trying to express itself," Kedrigern whispered.

"It doesn't seem to have much to say," Princess replied.

"Well, if you'd been stuffed in a hole in the wall for heaven only knows how many years and lost your tassels -- look! It's twitching again!"

"It can't tell us much by twitching."

But the frayed and enfeebled tassel was clearly limbering up. After a few more tentative twitches, it curled itself around a twig and began to make scratching motions in the soil. Kedrigern rushed into the cottage, emerging moments later with a pen, an inkwell, and a sheet of parchment. He laid the pen close by the tassel.

At once the emaciated tassel tossed the twig aside and coiled about the pen. The wizard then placed the remaining writing implements in easy reach, stepped back, and said, "Did you move yourself here?"

The carpet dipped the pen in the inkwell, shook off a few excess drops, and wrote in shaky script, Yes, Master. Sorry.

"Why?"

I feared I would fade in the sunlight, causing disappointment to my benevolent Master. Ordinarily I do not act unbidden, but --

"No need to apologize," Kedrigern broke in. "It was thoughtless of me to put you there."

Oh, no, no, Master, you must not blame yourself. It was sheer audacity on my part, the carpet scribbled.

"Nothing of the sort. You're a flying carpet, and you flew. That's nothing to apologize for."

But I flew without your leave, Master. Without your command, I drew upon already much depleted reserves of magic that should have been dedicated entirely to your service. I did a shameless selfish thing. I deserve unraveling.

"Ah. I begin to comprehend," said Kedrigern. "Grunjak kept putting you in places where you might get burned, or faded, or torn, and you kept moving away. It was pure self-preservation."

Precisely so, Master.

"And moving without a command draws on your reserves of magic."

It practically drains them, Master.

"Well, you needn't worry about such treatment here, Carpet. Do you have a name?"

Kurdestan is my name. My beloved master and beautiful mistress may call me "Stan" if they so choose.

"All right, Stan. First thing we'll do is give you a good cleaning and air you out. No beating, I promise you. We'll take you for a spin every now and then, but we won't nail you to the floor or stuff you in holes."

The carpet, which had risen several inches off the ground at Kedrigern's promise of better treatment, sank at the mention of flying. Its descent was accompanied by a soft sighing sound, and the tassel wrote the single word Alas.

"Why `Alas,' Stan? Don't you enjoy flying?"

Oh, wise and kindly master, I loathe flying. I wish only a proper place on a decent, solid, honest wooden floor.

"But people would walk on you," said Princess.

Yes! Yes! wrote the carpet in huge exuberant letters.

"Do you mean to say you like the idea of having people walk all over you, and put tables and chairs on you?"

Oh, yes, most kindly and perceptive lady! Even spills would not be taken amiss. That is the way of the carpet. The tassel paused, then with a flourish wrote, Some were born to fly; some achieve flight; some, like me, have flight thrust upon them.

"Don't get dramatic, Stan," Kedrigern said.

Princess regarded the carpet with bewilderment. "I don't understand how you can complain. Flying is wonderful!"

For a beautiful lady with gossamer wings, it may be so. But carpets are carpets. They were not meant to fly about the world, they were meant to lie on floors, If carpets were meant to fly, we would have been Liven wings.

"You've been given magic. That's even better," said Princess. When the carpet made no response, she demanded, "Well, isn't it?"

After a thoughtful interval, the carpet wrote,/:or birds and insects, flying is a way of life. For people, it is a pleasing diversion./:or carpets, it is a painful ordeal. The cold and dampness of the upper air loosen our knots and accelerate fading. Over time there is serious shrinkage.

Princess bit her lip and looked chagrined. The possession of a flying carpet delighted her, and she hated to relinquish the convenience it afforded. But she was too tender-hearted to force her household furnishings to fly against their will.

Kedrigern said, "If you hate flying so much, why did you become a flying carpet, Stan?"

I had no choice in the matter, wise and benevolent Master. I was one of a large family. My brothers and sisters went to decorate the palaces of sultans. I was bought by a sorcerer, enchanted, and sold to an emir who made use of me to spy on his neighbors. He was blown off by a high wind one stormy night, and I flew on, masterless, without goal or purpose, until I became soaked with rain and was forced down near an encampment of nomads. They took me in and treated me with kindness. For a long time I fulfilled the true purpose of my kind, though I lay on sand rather than a proper floor. Then I was seized by an avaricious emir. Since that evil day, I have passed through many hands and suffered great indignities and unspeakable cruelties. I was sold to a Frankish knight who brought me home to his castle. He beat me regularly and at last sold me to Grunjak. And now you have delivered me.

"There'll be no more cruelty, we promise," said Princess gently. "But we really would like you to fly from time to time. I do my own flying, but my husband has to travel on horseback, and a long journey can be so fatiguing."

I shall serve you loyally, the carpet wrote. But its tassel drooped and the pen moved sluggishly.

"Well, let's give it a try," said Kedrigern, settling himself cross-legged on the carpet. "Go, Stan!"

Urged on with such elan, the carpet shot forward like a bolt from a crossbow. Kedrigern tumbled heels over head and rolled off the rear and onto the grass. "Come back here!" he howled.

The carpet, well off in the distance by now, did a tight turn and circled back to the foot of the oak tree, where it stopped abruptly at Kedrigern's side and floated gently to the ground. The wizard rose, brushed himself off, and seated himself once again, keeping well forward. "This time, control your exuberance," he said. "Go slowly. Once around the house and yard, and don't get more than a foot off the ground."

The carpet rose and moved forward at a dignified pace, slightly faster than a walk. It accelerated as it proceeded along the tree line, picked up more speed as it swung around the cottage and the outbuildings, and was moving at a good clip as it made its last turn and headed across the yard toward the oaks.

The door yard was enclosed by a very sturdy two-rail fence. The lower rail was just a bit more than a foot off the ground. The top rail was about head-high to a man seated on a flying carpet. They were headed for the fence at alarming speed.

Kedrigern had been enjoying the trip. His attention was on the exhilarating sensation of flight, not the fence, and only a warning shout from Princess, who was flying above, following him, alerted him to the danger.

"Stop!" he cried.

The carpet stopped at the instant of command. Kedrigern did not. He continued his forward progress at a speed only slightly diminished, inserting himself neatly between the rails, skimming along the grass on his face, and coming to a stop not far from his starting point.

The carpet sank close to the ground and began to back off slowly. Kedrigern climbed to his feet, shook his head, felt his limbs, and brushed himself off. He looked around. His expression was grim. Catching sight of the carpet trying its best to ease unobtrusively around the corner of the house, he pointed and cried, "You! Assassin! Get back here at once, do you hear?"

So low now that it brushed the grass in its passing, the carpet moved slowly toward him and stopped at his feet. It did not settle, but remained just a hair off the ground, trembling slightly. Kedrigern looked down on it, his arms folded, his jaw set severely. He said nothing. Princess fluttered to his side and placed a hand on his arm. Still he said nothing.

"We promised no cruelty," she said.

"You promised. I said nothing of the son."

"Yes, you did. You promised no beating."

Kedrigern gave an exasperated sigh. The carpet edged a bit closer and, dipping a corner, attempted to dust off his boot.

"There," said Princess. "It's sorry."

"So am I. I should have left it to plug the wall in Grunjak's castle."

"Don't frighten it."

"I don't mean to be cruel, my dear, but this carpet is not cooperating. It represents a large portion of my fee, and I see no way that I'll ever get to put it to proper use."

"With a little cleaning and patching it would look nice in front of the fireplace in the great room. It would be happy there, too."

"I suppose so. But if all I wanted was a carpet for the great room, I needn't have gone all the way to Grunjak's for it."

"Surely you wouldn't want an ordinary carpet on your floor. You're a wizard. You have standards to maintain."

"I also have my life to preserve. This thing would have knocked my brains out against the fence rail."

"Don't blame the carpet. It was doing what it's supposed to do."

"Yes, but it doesn't want to do what it's supposed to do, and I think it's deliberately creating problems." Glancing down, he said, "You don't want to fly me around, do you? Not me, not anyone. Tell the truth, Stan."

The carpet slunk to where the pen and inkstand stood. Taking up the pen, it wrote. All I want is to be a real carpet. I want to lie on a nicely waxed floor in front of a roaring fire. Not too close. The sparks can be very distressing.

"I thought as much," said Kedrigern. He remained silent for a time, looking thoughtfully down on the carpet, and finally said, "Let's go inside. Princess will show you where to lie down. And see to it that you stay put."

"What are you going to do?" Princess asked.

"I'm going to look through my spelling books. There may be a way to work this out to our mutual satisfaction."

It was some months later that a solitary figure dressed in the robes of a pilgrim made his way to the little cottage on Silent Thunder Mountain. Kedrigern was in the door yard, seated amid cushions in his most comfortable chair, meditating in the autumn sunshine. The pilgrim hailed him wearily in a gruff but kindly voice.

"Greetings to you, pilgrim," the wizard replied, rising and going to the gate. "May I offer you something?"

"A sip of water. No more."

"How about a crust of bread?"

The pilgrim weighed the offer, then said, "As long as it's stale."

Kedrigern studied the gaunt, dusty figure for a time, then said, "Have we met? You look familiar."

"I am that wretch who once was known as Grunjak the Gross, the Greasy, the Grisly, the Grim, the Grungy, the Greedy, the Gruesome, and the Grotty."

"Ah, yes, of course, Grunjak. You've lost some weight."

"I eat very little these days. I am on pilgrimage to atone for the evil life I once led. I have much atoning to do, but perhaps some day I shall be known as Grunjak the Good."

"The boils haven't returned, have they?"

"No, my reformation is genuine. I've come to thank you."

"Glad to have been of help. Where are you headed?"

"To the shrine at Campostella. After that, to the Holy Land"

"Well, you're certainly not the old Grunjak."

"I am such a reformed man that I also wish to apologize for attempting to cheat you of your promised fee."

Kedrigern waved his words off. "Don't give it a thought. As a matter of fact, that carpet you gave me was a magic carpet."

"Indeed? I am happy to learn of it. Has the carpet been sold at a great and well-deserved profit to yourself?"

"No. The poor thing hated flying. It's just an ordinary carpet now. It cleaned up very nicely. We've repaired the nail holes and replaced the tassels. It's lying in front of the fireplace, if you'd care to have a look."

"I have forbidden myself the comfort of entering under a roof until my pilgrimage is complete, but I thank you for your kind offer. Your words have gladdened my heart, wizard."

"Can I offer you anything more, Grunjak? A sip of water and a bit of stale bread hardly seems --"

"No, no, nothing more," said the pilgrim, waving a sun-browned hand. "I must be on my way. So much to atone for, so little time. Farewell, wizard."

As the dusty figure trudged off down the mountain, Kedrigern looked after him with great satisfaction. Here was proof of a job well done. The Grunjak case, undertaken with such reluctance, had turned out to be one of his great successes.

He watched until the pilgrim disappeared around a bend in the road, then he returned to the chair and seated himself once again.

"Time to go inside," he said, with a friendly pat on the chair arm. "Once around the grounds, then to the usual spot in the great room. And mind you keep low going through the doorways, or I'll take the magic off and give it back to Stan. All right, let's lift off."