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# attack of the assassins



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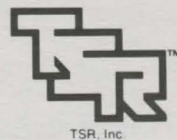
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## ATTACK OF THE ASSASSINS

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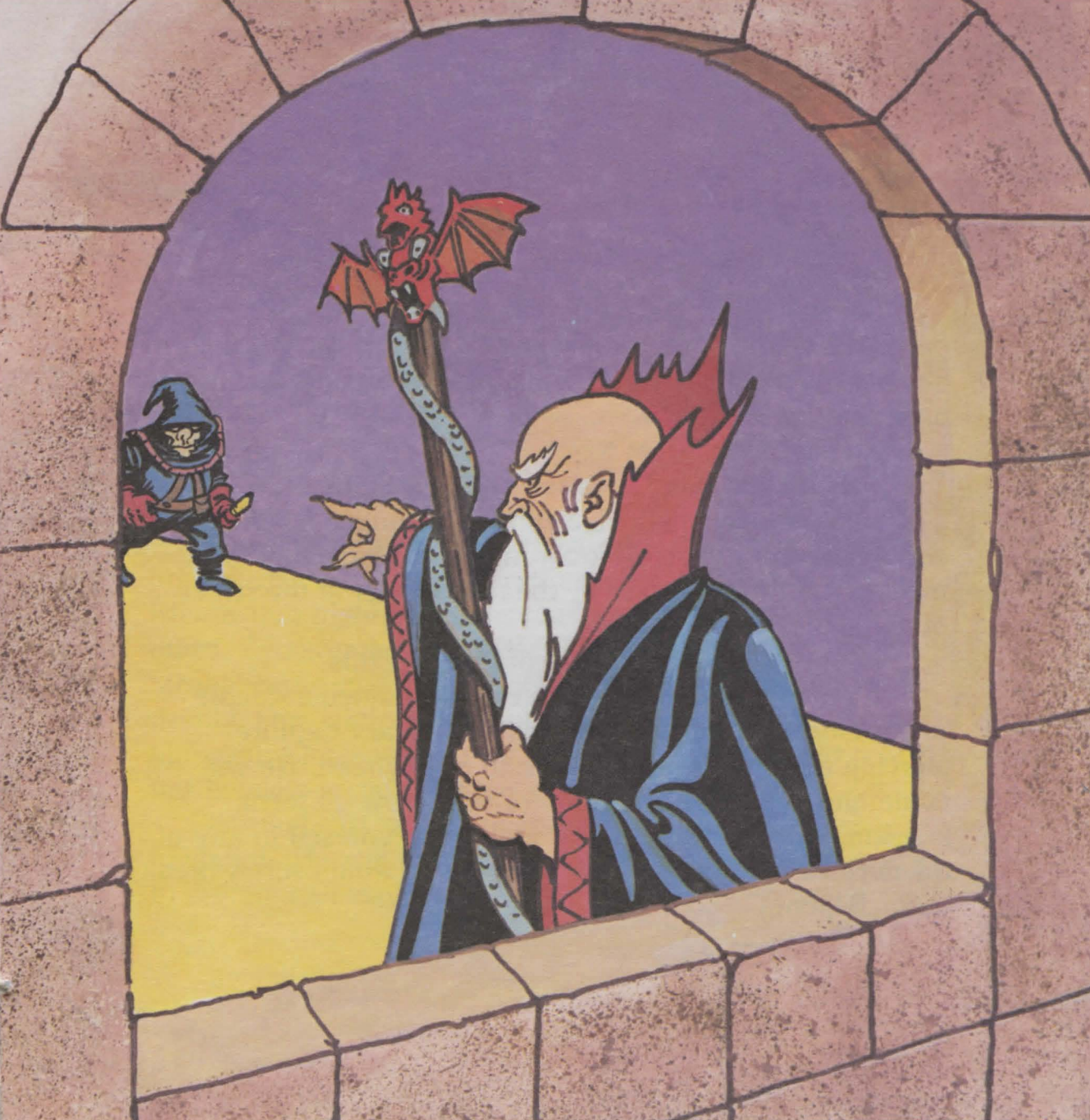
The dim half-light of sunset shone down through the huge, vaulted windows at the end of Kelek's chamber. Silhouetted by the fading sun, Kelek's shadow fell long and dark across the stone floor. The wicked sorcerer sensed something moving in the dark corner and shouted, "Come forth, Zarak! I know you're out there! Out into the light where I can see your wicked little frame!"

The twisted little half-orc crept out from his hiding place. His blood-red gloves seemed to glow in the pale light.

"And put that dagger away before I turn you into a lower life form than you already are!"

"You sent for me, Kelek? There must be some blood which needs letting."





"For too long now, Strongheart has escaped my powers. I want him dead, but not by my hands. Warduke has bid me send you on a mission to wipe out Strongheart, once and for all."

"No easy task, great Kelek!"

"This should make it easier," replied Kelek.

From out of a small, black box Kelek pulled a scroll. It was a note from Mercion to Strongheart, asking him to meet her in the courtyard by the north tower at the stroke of midnight.

"By my dagger, Kelek! How did you get this?"

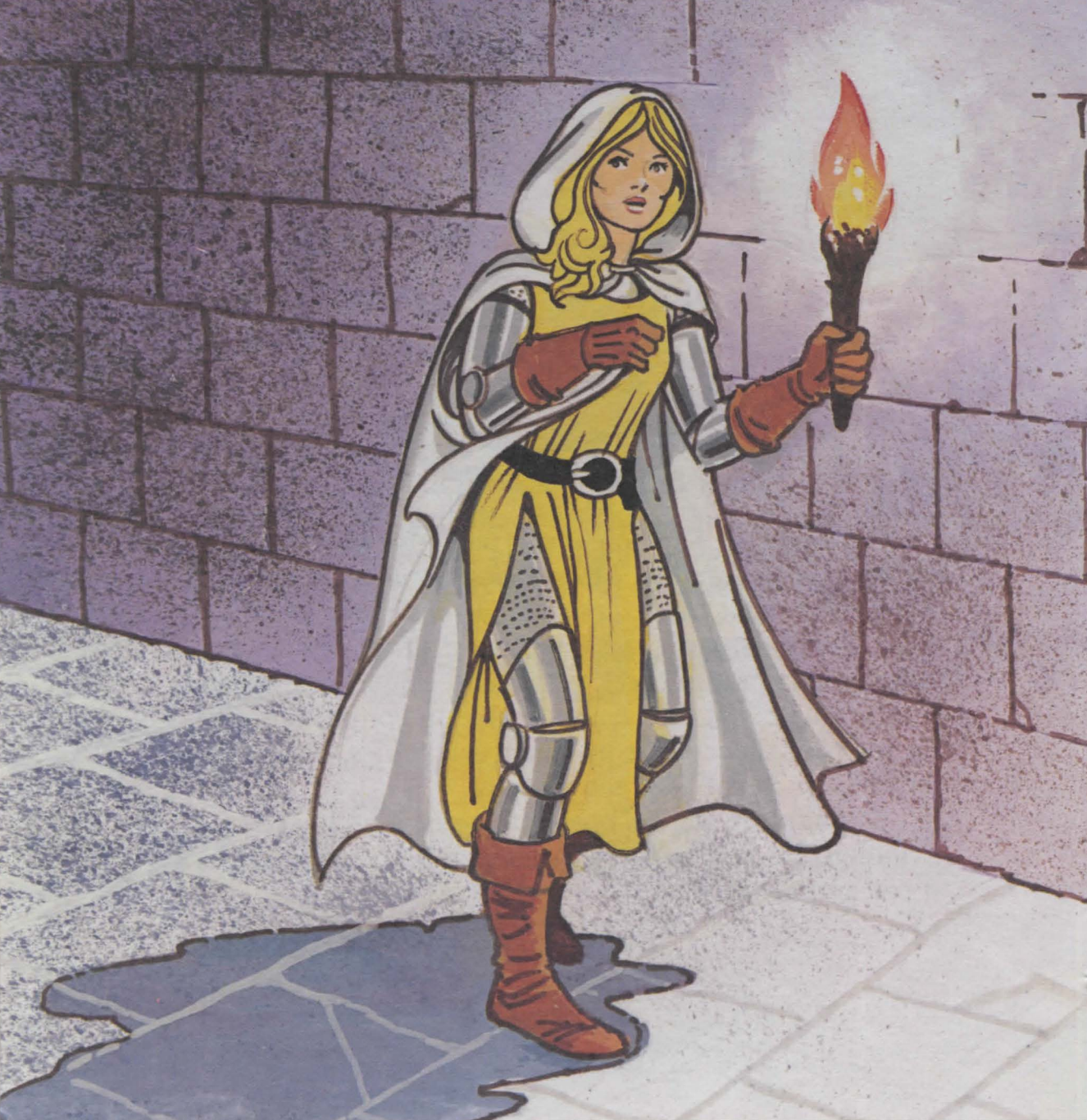
"It's a forgery, of course. I secretly obtained a sample of Mercion's writing; the rest was elementary. Capture Mercion and then send the note to Strongheart. He will come and you will be waiting for him. Now go forth, assassin, but be careful not to look upon yourself in any of my mirrors. Your appearance is so foul, it would surely break them. Begone!"





Knowing that Mercion was a powerful cleric and would not be easy to capture, Zarak called upon several old friends that night. After demanding repayment of favors owed, Zarak gathered the three evil half-orcs just outside Strongheart's castle. Zarak's plan was simple. Simple and deadly. One cleric might not be able to control Mercion, but spells of silence cast by three evil clerics would render her helpless for at least ten minutes.

"Strongheart will be unable to resist Mercion's invitation. He will be there at midnight, and shall not live to see another day!"






A cold draft blew through the long, dark corridor which led to Mercion's chambers. Mercion pulled her cape close about her for warmth. Suddenly, a gust of wind blew out the torch which she carried. Having no fear of the dark, she continued down the black corridor, unaware of the wicked little eyes which followed her every move.

"What a stroke of luck! Though she cannot see us, we can still see her clearly," whispered Zarak.

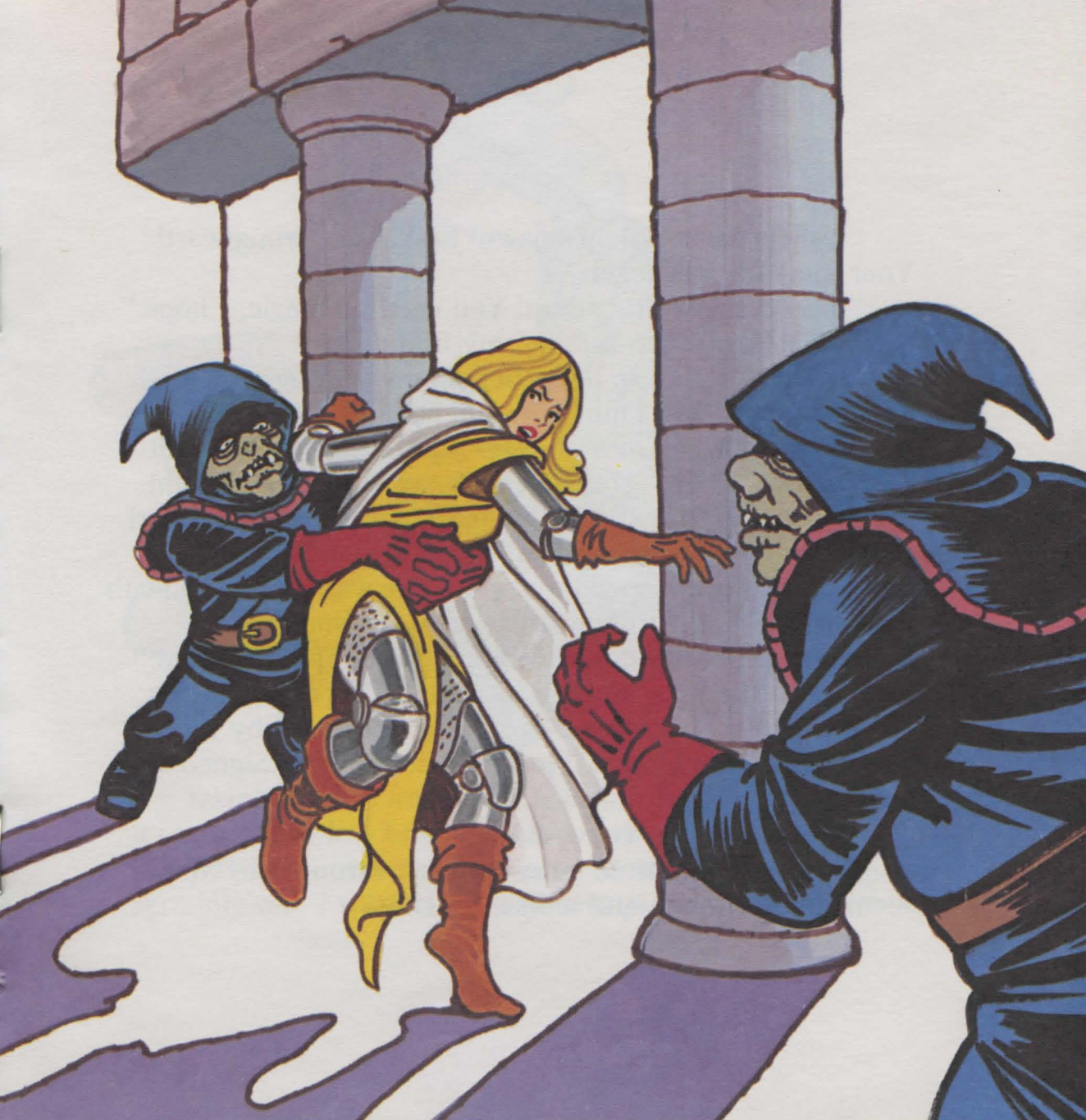
The half-orcs' power of infra-vision enabled them to see anything in the dark by the heat it gave off. Mercion was well within their sixty-foot infra-vision range now. Zarak sharpened his dagger on his leather breeches, and his evil friends prepared to cast their spells of silence upon the unsuspecting girl.

The moment Mercion rounded the corner, she saw, illuminated by the moonlight, two half-orcs standing before her and blocking her way. Instantly, she started to call out a spell upon them to protect herself. She found, however, she was unable to speak. At once she knew what had happened. Stripped of her powers to speak, she could cast no magic. Now all she could do was fight. But before she could raise her staff in her defense, she was jumped from behind by the two other half-orcs who had lain in ambush. Hopelessly overpowered, Mercion was soon bound and dragged away toward the courtyard.

"Now, Graznak, take the note and slip it under Strongheart's door. He will come at once. You see, Mercion, forgery or not, you and Strongheart do have a rendezvous to keep tonight. A rendezvous with death! Ha, ha, ha, ha!"







“Bishop takes Bishop’s pawn! En garde, Strongheart! Your queen is in danger.”

“Indeed she is, Ringlerun. You used no magic, I hope.”

“Would I do such a thing, my friend?”

Strongheart just smiled. “Behold my next move. I shall counterattack! Now I move my knight—and check!”

“Zounds! I shall have to think about this development!”

The two friends’ game of chess had run late that night. It was just a few minutes before midnight when Strongheart heard the sharp knocking at his door. Before he could cross the room and open the door, a note was slipped beneath it. Grabbing it up, Strongheart opened the door but saw nothing except a shadow receding down the dark hallway. He opened the note and read it aloud. “Strongheart, it is most urgent that you meet me in the courtyard by the north tower at midnight. Please do not fail me. Signed, Mercion.”

“She asks me to come at once, and so I shall.”

“May I see the note for a moment, Strongheart? This seems quite strange and unlike Mercion.”





Taking the parchment in his hands, Ringlerun examined it carefully: its color, its weight, and the writing upon it.

“While the writing appears to be Mercion’s, the paper is certainly not. I suspect forgery, and perhaps foul play.”


"Forgery or not, I must still do as the note bids. If Mercion did not send the note, she is surely in danger."

As Strongheart grabbed his sword from the wall and started to leave, Ringlerun held out his hand.

"Here, my son. Take this Ring of Invisibility to protect you. As long as you wear it you will be unseen, but as soon as you remove it you will be visible once more. If Mercion is indeed in danger, her captors will be unable to see you. Even the infra-vision of half-orcs will not penetrate this spell."

"Wish me luck, old friend, for I am off!"

"Be careful, Strongheart. This could be most dangerous and...he cannot hear me. By now he's already nearing the courtyard."

A series of horizontal, overlapping yellow brushstrokes of varying lengths and thicknesses, creating a textured, sunburst-like effect in the bottom right corner of the page.



The sound of Strongheart's boots echoed across the stone courtyard. Zarak and his murderous crew hid in the shadows with Mercion still bound and at knife's point.

"I see nothing, yet the sound of the boot is clear. We must make our move."

Zarak snarled into the night air: "We know it is you, Strongheart, ever loyal, ever prompt. Hear now, the clock strikes twelve. Mercion's tender throat rests dangerously close to the tip of my dagger. Show yourself, or my hand may slip!"







Strongheart pulled the ring from his finger and, in an instant, his form appeared before the evil abductors.

"Zarak! I might have known it would be you. Rats love the cover of darkness. Unhand Mercion at once or I shall skewer you like the rodent you are."

Half-orcs have small patience for insults, and Strongheart knew it. Zarak's wide nostrils flared with rage. "If I be a rat, then feel my bite! Take him! Take him!"

From out of the darkness sprang the four assassins. In their anger they left Mercion unattended. Strongheart could have put the ring back on his finger, but he preferred to fight the half-orcs squarely, without the use of magic. The clatter of steel against steel cut through the night. Strongheart fought heroically, but four skilled half-orc assassins proved to be quite a match. Suddenly his boot slipped on the damp stones, and, much to Zarak's glee, Strongheart stumbled to the ground. He looked up and saw the silver gleam of four long knives before him.

"How I have longed for this moment, Strongheart. To see you helpless before me. Warduke will reward me well for this. But it is reward enough just to see you..."

"Die!"

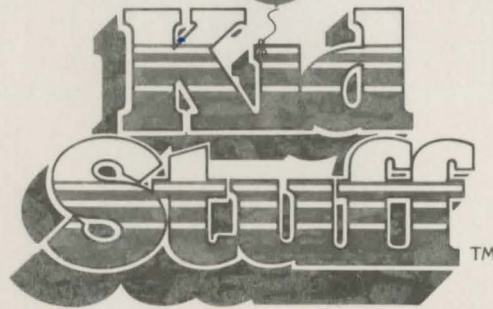
But the last voice was not Zarak's. It was Mercion's. The wicked cleric's spell had lasted but ten short minutes. She regained her powers just in time to save Strongheart.

The very instant Mercion shouted her command, Zarak fell paralyzed to the ground. Seeing their leader struck down, the three other attackers made a dash for the cover of darkness and escaped.

Although he was helpless, Zarak was not dead. Mercion's spell was not intended to kill. It did, however, give Strongheart enough time to bind the evil assassin in chains. Strongheart's guards soon led the pathetic little fiend away towards the dungeon. Ringlerun watched on in his crystal ball as Strongheart untied Mercion and helped her to her feet. The old wizard smiled as the two friends clasped hands and walked across the courtyard in the moonlight.



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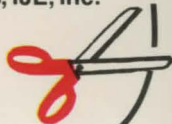
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