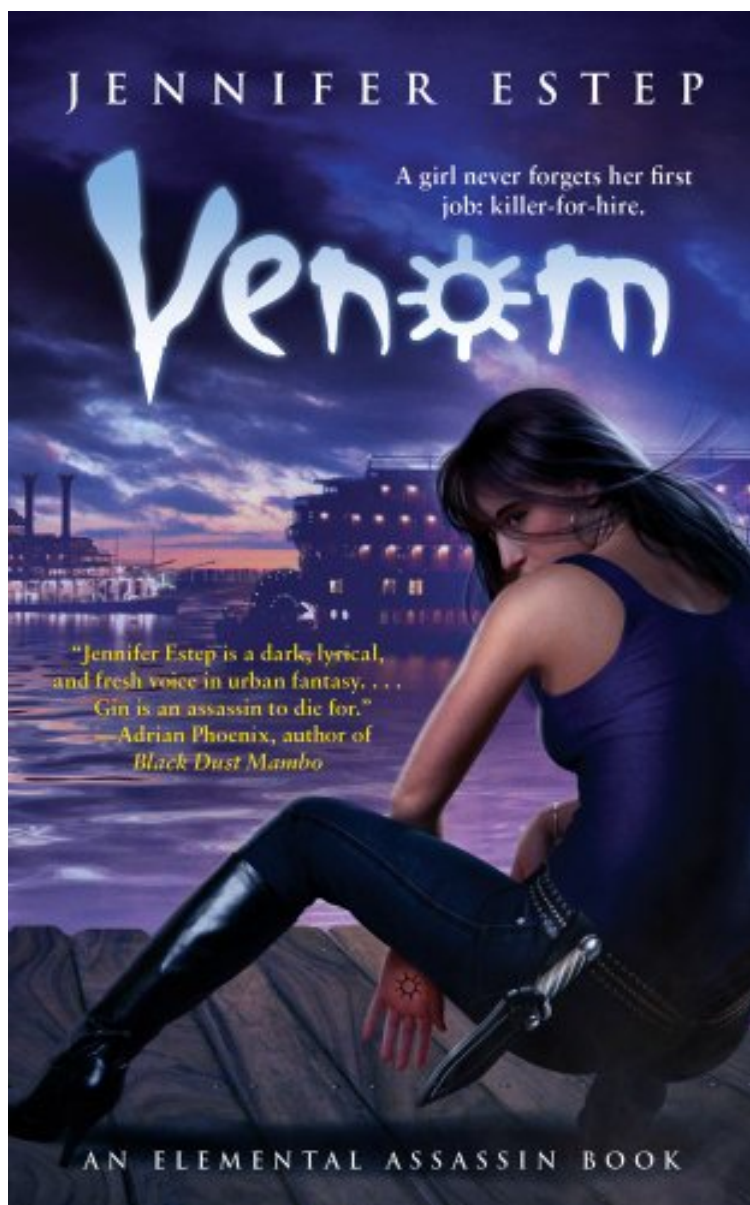


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Venom: An Elemental Assassin Book



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWhat kind of assassin works pro bono?Its hard to be a badass assassin when a giant is beating the crap out of you. Luckily, I never let pride get in the way of my work. My current mission is personal: annihilate Mab Monroe, the Fire elemental who murdered my family. Which means protecting my identity, even if I have to conceal my powerful Stone and Ice magic when I need it most. To the public, Im Gin Blanco, owner of Ashlands best barbecue joint. To my friends, Im the Spider, retired assassin. I still do favors on the side. Like ridding a vampire friend of her oversized stalkerMabs right-hand goon who almost got me dead with his massive fists. At least irresistible Owen Grayson is on my side. The man knows too

much about me, but Ill take my chances. Then theres Detective Bria Coolidge, one of Ashlands finest. Until recently, I thought my baby sister was dead. She probably thinks the same about me. Little does she know,

Im a cold-blooded killer . . . who is about to save her life.Extrait 1 The bastards never even would have gotten close to me if I hadnt had the flu.Coughing, sneezing, aching, wheezing. That was me. Gin Blanco.

Restaurant owner. Stone and Ice elemental. Former assassin. And all-around badass. Laid low by a microbe.It had started as a small, ominous tickle in my throat three days ago. And now, well, it wasnt pretty. Watery eyes. Pale face. And a nose so red and bright even Rudolph would have been jealous. Ugh.The only reason Id even crawled out of bed this evening was to come down to Ashland Community College and take the final for the classic literature class I was auditing. Id finished my essay on symbolism in The Odyssey ten minutes ago. Now I plodded across one of the grassy campus quads and feverishly dreamed of sinking back into my bed and not getting out of it for a week.Just after seven on a cold, clear December night. This was the last day of finals for the semester, and the campus was largely deserted. Only a few lights burned in the windows of the kudzu-covered brick buildings that rose above my head. The stones whispered of formulas, theories, and knowledge. An old, sonorous, slightly pretentious sound that was decidedly at odds with the sinister shadows that blackened most of the quad. No one else was within sight. Which is probably why they decided to jump me here. Well, that and the fact that kidnapping me would be such a bother.One second I had my face buried in a tissue blowing my sore, drippy nose for the hundredth time today. The next, I looked up to find myself surrounded by three giants.Oh, fuck.I stopped, and they immediately closed ranks, forming a loose triangle of trouble around me. The giants were all around seven feet tall, with oversize, buglike eyes and fists almost as big as my head. One of them grinned at me and cracked his knuckles. Someone was anxious to get down to the business of beating me.My gray eyes flicked to the leader of the group, who had taken up a position in front of meElliot Slater. Slater was the tallest of the three giants, his enormous figure making even his flunkies seem small in comparison. He was almost as wide as he was tall, with a solid, muscled frame. Granite would be easier to break than his ribs. Slaters complexion was pale, bordering on albino, and almost seemed to glow in the faint light. His hazel eyes provided a bit of color in his chalky skin, although his thin, tousled thatch of blond hair did little to cover his large skull. A diamond in his pinkie ring sparkled like a star in the dark night.Up until my retirement a few months ago, Id moonlighted as an assassin known as the Spider. Over the years, Id had plenty of dealings in the shady side of life, so I knew Slater by sight and reputation. On paper, Elliot Slater was a highly respected security consultant with his own platoon of giant bodyguards. In reality, Slater was the number-one enforcer for Mab Monroe, the Fire elemental who ran the Southern metropolis of Ashland like it was her own personal fiefdom. Slater stepped in and either cut off, took care of, or permanently disposed of any pesky problems Mab didnt feel like dealing with herself.And tonight it looked like that problem was me.Not surprising. A couple of weeks ago, Id stiffed someone during a party at Mab Monroes mansion. Needless to say, the Fire elemental hadnt been too thrilled about one of her guests being murdered in her own home when shed been entertaining a few hundred of her closest business associates. Id gotten away with it so far, but I knew Mab was doing everything in her power to find the killer. To find me.I sniffled into my tissue. I wondered if Mab had figured out who I really was. If that was why Slater was here tonightElliot Slater looked over his broad shoulder. Is this her?Slater slid to one side so another man, a much shorter human, could join the circle of giants surrounding me. Underneath his classic trench coat, the man wore a perfect black suit, and his polished wingtips gleamed like wet ink in the semidarkness. His thick mane of gunmetal gray hair resembled a heavy mantle of silver that had somehow been swirled and sculpted around his head. Too bad hate made his brown eyes look like congealed lumps of blood in his smooth, tight face.I recognized him too. Jonah McAllister. On paper, McAllister was the citys premiere attorney, a charming, bellicose defense lawyer capable of getting the most vicious killer off scot-free for the right price. In reality, the slick attorney was another one of Mab Monroes top goons, just like Elliot Slater was. Jonah McAllister was Mabs personal lawyer, responsible for burying her enemies in legal red tape instead of in the ground like Slater did.McAllisters son, Jake, was the one Id murdered at Mabs party. The twentysomething, beefy frat boy had threatened to rape and murder me, among other things. Id considered killing him pest extermination more than anything else.Elliot Slater and Jonah McAllister tag-teaming me. This night just kept getting better and better. I sniffled again. Really should have stayed home in bed.Jonah McAllister regarded me with cold eyes. Oh, yes. Thats her. The lovely Ms. Gin Blanco. The bitch who was giving my boy a hard time.A hard time? I supposed so, if you thought turning him in to the cops for attempted robbery, breaking a plate full of food in his face, and ultimately stabbing Jake McAllister to death was a hard time. But I noticed that Jonah

McAllister didnt say anything about me actually killing his son. Hmm. Looked like this was some sort of fishing expedition. I decided to play along for now. What is this meeting all about? My voice came out somewhere between a whiny wheeze and a phlegmy rasp. Are you taking up Jakes bad habit of assaulting innocent people? Jonah McAllisters face hardened at my insult. As much as it could, anyway. Despite his sixty-some years, McAllisters features were as smooth as polished marble, thanks to a vigorous regimen of expensive Air elemental facial treatments. I would hardly consider you innocent, Ms. Blanco. And youre the one who assaulted my precious boy first. Your precious boy came into my restaurant, tried to rob me, and almost killed two of my customers with his Fire elemental magic. I spat out the words, along with some phlegm. All I did was defend myself. What does it matter now anyway? Your boy is dead because of some weird heart condition. At least, thats what was in the newspaper. Jonah McAllister stared at me, trying to see if I knew more than I was letting on about his sons untimely demise. I used the lull to blow my nose again. Fucking microbes. McAllisters mouth twisted with disgust at the sight and sound of my sniffles. Admittedly, it wasnt my most attractive moment. He jerked his head at Elliot Slater, who nodded back. Now, Ms. Blanco, Slater drawled. The reason for this meeting is that Mr. McAllister thought you might have some information about his sons death. Jake did have a bit of a heart condition, but there were also some suspicious circumstances surrounding his passing. Happened a couple of weeks ago. Suspicious circumstances? I assumed that was polite talk for a sucking stab wound to the chest. But I kept my face blank and ignorant. Why would I know anything about Jakes death? I asked. The last time I saw the little punk was the day he brought his old man there down to the Pork Pit to threaten me into dropping the charges against him. Lies, of course. Id run into Jake McAllister one more time after that at Mab Monroes party. Even though Id been gussied up as a hooker, hed still recognized me. Since Id been there to kill someone else, Id lured sweet little Jackie into a bathroom, stabbed him to death, left his body in the bathtub, and washed the blood off my dress before going back out to the party. Nothing I hadnt done a hundred times before as the assassin the Spider. I certainly hadnt lost any sleep over it. But right now, it looked like I might lose a whole lot more. See, thats the problem. My good friend Jonah doesnt believe you. So he asked me and some of my boys to come down here and see if perhaps we could jog something free from your memory. Slater smiled. His lips drew back, giving me a glimpse of his pale pink gums. The giants grin reminded me of a jack-o-lanterns gaping maw completely hollow. Were going to pay these sorts of visits to anyone Jake might have had a problem with. And your name was at the top of the list. Of course it was. I was probably the only person in Ashland whod ever dared to stand up to Jake McAllister. Now his daddy was going to make me pay for it. Slater took off his suit jacket, handed it to Jonah McAllister, and started rolling up his shirtsleeves. I sniffled, blew my nose again, and considered the situation. Four-on-one odds were never terrific, especially since three of the four men were giants. The oversize goons could be hard to bring down, even for a former assassin like me. None of the giants showed any obvious elemental abilities, like letting flames flicker on their clenched fists or forming Ice daggers with their bare hands. But that didnt mean they didnt have magic. Which would make them doubly hard to get rid of. Still, if I hadnt had the flu, I might have considered killing them or at least cutting down a couple so I could run away. Although Id dragged myself out of bed this evening, Id grabbed my silverstone knives on the way out the door. Five of them. Two tucked up my sleeves. One nestled in the small of my back. Two more in the sides of my boots. Never left home without them. Of course, being an elemental myself I didnt really need my knives to kill. I could just use my magic to take down the giants. My Stone power was so strong that I could do practically anything I wanted to with the element. Like make bricks fly out of the wall of one of the surrounding buildings and use them to brain the giants in their melon-size heads. Splat, splat, splat. Itd be easier than using an Uzi. Hell, if I really wanted to show off, I could just crumble all four of the buildings that ringed the quad down on top of them. I was also one of the rare elementals who could control more than one element. Stone and Ice, in my case. Until recently, my Ice magic had been far weaker than my Stone power. But thanks to a series of traumatic events, I could do much more with it now. Like create a wall of Ice knives to fling at the men. Id sliced through a dwarfs skin doing just that. Giants werent quite as tough as dwarves, at least when it came to cutting into them. Even if they did have more blood to spare than their shorter compatriots. But the odds or how to go about killing the giants wasnt what was holding me back. Not really. It was the consequences; what would happen afterward when their boss, Mab Monroe, got involved. Seventeen years ago, Mab Monroe had used her elemental Fire magic to kill my mother and older sister, a fact Id only recently learned. Shed also tortured me, using her magic to superheat and burn a spider rune medallion into my palms. I was planning to deal with Mab myself after I figured out a few things, like why shed murdered my family in the

first place and where my long-lost baby sister, Bria, was now. Taking care of Jonah McAllister and the rest of his hired help tonight would definitely tip my hand and draw even more of Mabs attention my way. I didnt want Mab and her minions to realize that I had any elemental magic. To suspect that I was anything more than the simple restaurant owner Jonah McAllister wanted dead for tattling on his son to the cops. At least, not before I killed her for what shed done to me. All that left me with only one option tonight I was going to have to let the giants hurt me, beat me. That was the only way I could keep my cover identity as Gin Blanco safe, along with who I really was, Genevieve Snow. Fuck. This was going to hurt. Elliot Slater finished rolling up his sleeves. Are you sure you dont have anything to tell us, Ms. Blanco? I sighed and shook my head. I told you before. I dont know anything about Jake McAllisters death except what I read in the newspaper. Im sorry to hear that, Slater murmured. The giant stepped forward and flexed his fingers, ready to get on with things. Time for me to put on a little show. I widened my eyes, as though it had just sunk into my flu-addled brain what Elliot Slater was planning to do to me. I let out a phlegmy scream and turned to run, as though Id forgotten all about the two giants standing behind me. I ran right into them, of course, and they reached for me. Even though I had no real intention of trying to break free, I still struggled to keep up appearances. Yelling, flailing, kicking out with my legs. While I fought with the bigger, heavier men, I managed to discreetly slip the two silverstone knives that I had up my sleeves into the pockets of my jacket. I didnt want the giants to feel the weapons when they finally latched onto me. Most innocent women didnt go around wearing five knives on them, and my being so heavily armed would be the final nail in my coffin as far as Jonah McAllister was concerned about my involvement in his sons death. The two giants laughed at me and my weak, exaggerated blows. After a minute of struggling, they seized my upper arms and turned me around to face Elliot Slater once more. And thats when the fun really started. Slater snapped his hand up and slammed his fist into my face. Bastard was quick, Id give him that. I hadnt braced myself for the blow, and I jerked back in the giants arms. The force almost tore me out of their grasp. Pain exploded like dynamite in my jaw. But Slater didnt stop there. He spent the next two minutes beating me. One punch broke my drippy nose. Another cracked two of my ribs. And I didnt even want to think about the internal bleeding or what my face looked like at this point. Thud, thud, thud. I might as well have been a piece of meat the giant was tenderizing for dinner. Every part of me hurt and burned and throbbed and pulsed with pain. And he laughed the whole time. Low, soft, chuckling laughs that made my skin crawl. Elliot Slater enjoyed hurting people. Really enjoyed it. His hard-on bulged against the zipper on his black pants. Slater hit me again and stepped back. By this point, I hung limp between the two giants, all pretense of being tough and strong long gone. I just wanted this to be over with. A hand grabbed my chin and forced my face up. I stared into Slaters hazel eyes. At least, I tried to. White starbursts kept exploding over and over in my field of vision, making it hard to focus. The light show was better than fireworks on the Fourth of July. Now, Elliot rumbled. Do you want to reconsider what you know about Jake McAllisters death? Maybe you have something new to add? I dont know anything about Jakes death, I mumbled through a mouthful of loose teeth. Blood spewed out of my split lips and cascaded down my navy fleece jacket. I swear. I made my voice as low, weak, and whipped as I could. Jonah McAllister stepped forward and peered at me. Malicious glee shimmered in his brown gaze. Keep hitting her. I want the bitch to suffer. Elliot Slater nodded and stepped back. The giant spent another two minutes hitting me. More pain, more blood, more cracked ribs. As I coughed up another mouthful of coppery blood, it dawned on me that Slater just might beat me to death, right here in the middle of the campus quad. Jonah McAllister certainly wouldnt have any objections to that. Damn. Looked like I was going to have to go for my knives, blast them with my elemental magic, and blow my cover after all, if I still had the strength to do that. Enough. A low voice floated out from somewhere deeper in the shadows. A soft, breathy sound that reminded me of pieces of silk wisping together. I knew that tone, that sultry cadence, knew exactly whom it belonged to. So did my inner psyche. Enemy, enemy, enemy, a little voice muttered in the back of my head. A strange, primal, elemental urge flooded my body, the desire to use my Stone and Ice magic to lash out and kill whoever and whatever was within striking distance. Elliot Slater ignored the command and hit me again, adding to the pain that racked my body. I said enough. The voice dropped to a low hiss that crackled with power, menace, and the promise of death. Elliot froze, his hand pulled halfway back to hit me again. Let her go. Now. The two giants whod had their hands clamped around my upper arms dropped me like I had the plague. I lay on the ground, my blood soaking into the frosty grass. Despite the pain, I managed to roll over onto my side. I also slid one of my silverstone knives out of my jacket pocket and palmed it. The weapon felt cold and comforting against the thick scar embedded in my palm. Something rustled, and Mab Monroe stepped out of the shadows to my left. The Fire elemental wore a long wool coat

done in a dark forest green. Her red hair gleamed like polished copper, but her eyes were even blacker than the night sky. A bit of gold flashed around her pale throat in between the folds of her expensive coat. I couldn't see that well, given the stars still exploding in my vision, but I knew what the gold flash was. Mab Monroe never went anywhere without wearing her signature rune necklace. A large, circular ruby surrounded by several dozen wavy rays. From previous sightings, I knew the intricate diamond cutting on the gold would catch the meager light and make it seem as though the rays were actually flickering. Or perhaps my vision was just that screwed up at the moment. Still, I knew what the rune was. A sunburst. The symbol for fire. Mab Monroe's personal rune, used by her alone. At the sight, the silverstone scars on my own palms started to itch and burn. Mab wasn't the only one here with a rune. I had one too. A small circle surrounded by eight thin rays. A spider rune. The symbol for patience. The rune had once been a medallion I'd worn on a chain around my neck, until Mab had used her Fire elemental magic to superheat and burn the silverstone metal into my palms like it was a cattle brand. That's how she'd tortured me the night she'd murdered my family. I was looking forward to returning the favor someday soon. Enemy, enemy, enemy; the little voice in the back of my head kept up its muttered chorus. Mab Monroe walked over and stood beside Elliot Slater and Jonah McAllister. She glanced down at me with all the interest she might give a cockroach before she crushed it under the toe of her boot. Her dark eyes swallowed up the available light, the way a black hole might. I lay very, very still and tried to look like I was a mere inch away from death. Not much of a stretch tonight. I said enough, Jonah, Mab said. Or have you forgotten that you and Elliot work for me? After a moment, Elliot Slater stepped back and bowed his head in deference. The other two giants did the same. But Jonah McAllister was too angry to heed the hard edge in Mab's breathy tone. This bitch made problems for my son, and I think she knows something about his death, McAllister barked. I want her to pay for that. I want her to die for that. Mab stared down at me again. You're letting your emotions cloud your judgment, Jonah. Ignoring the facts. It's most unbecoming. And what would those facts be? McAllister demanded. That Ms. Blanco is just a woman, a mere, weak woman with no elemental magic or other notable strength or skills. Otherwise, I'm sure she would have used everything at her disposal to keep from being so viciously beaten tonight. She's not the person you're looking for, Jonah. More importantly, she's not the woman I'm looking for. McAllister's brown eyes glittered. You and your obsession with that blond whore. Why can't you accept the fact that she's dead? Buried somewhere in that coal mine, just like Tobias Dawson and his two men were? Mab's eyes grew even blacker. She reached for her Fire elemental magic, holding the power close to her like she might a lover. As an elemental myself, I could feel her magic, especially since she was consciously embracing it. Just the way Mab might have been able to sense my Stone and Ice magic, if I'd been stupid enough to actually reach for any of it. Of course, I would have felt Mab's magic anyway, since she was one of the elementals who constantly gave off waves of power. The Fire elemental literally leaked magic, the way water would drip from a faucet. Unlike me. As long as I didn't draw upon my own elemental strength, didn't use it in any offensive way, others couldn't sense my power. A trait that had saved me more than once over the years. Mab's magic pricked my skin like hot, invisible needles, adding to my misery, but I stayed still, giving no indication I could sense it or that I knew what they were talking about. I doubt that hooker was a real hooker, and they never found her body in the rubble of the collapsed mine, Mab replied in a cold voice. Until I see her body, she's not dead. I'm going to find her, Jonah, and then we can both have our revenge. She killed Dawson, and she's the one who killed your son. Not Ms. Blanco. They were talking about the night of Mab's party, when I'd dressed up as a hooker to get close to Tobias Dawson, a greedy mine owner who was threatening some innocent people. Dawson was the one I was supposed to kill that night, but Jake McAllister had spotted me before I'd had a chance to do the hit. Mab had caught me in the bathroom a few minutes after I'd stabbed Jake to death. Evidently, the Fire elemental had put two and two together and realized that I'd stiffed Jake, then done the same to Tobias Dawson later on in his own mine. Not good. I agreed to this little test with the understanding that Ms. Blanco would live through it, should she prove herself to be innocent of your son's murder, Mab continued. She's done so, at least to my satisfaction. Nobody would willingly let herself be beaten the way she has. So Mab didn't understand the concept of self-sacrifice. Not surprising. I might have laughed, if it wouldn't have hurt so much. Still, I was doubly glad that I'd let Elliot Slater hit me. Otherwise, I would have been dead by now, ambushed from the sidelines by Mab and her elemental Fire magic. Who cares if the bitch lives or dies? Jonah McAllister scoffed. She's nobody. That might be true, but unfortunately, Ms. Blanco is not without friends, Mab replied. Most notably the Deveraux sisters. I don't care about those two dwarves, Jonah snapped. You could easily kill both of them. Mab gave a delicate shrug of her shoulders. Perhaps. But Jo-Jo Deveraux is quite popular. It might be

entertaining, but killing her wouldnt win me any favors. Besides, I have other concerns at the moment, most notably Coolidge. My dazed mind latched onto the unfamiliar name. Coolidge? Who was Coolidge? And what had he done to piss off Mab Monroe? Youve had your fun, Jonah. Face it, Ms. Blanco isnt the one who killed Jake. And shes suffered plenty tonight for whatever insults she laid on him previously. Now, are you going to come quietly so we can talk business? Or should I start looking for a new attorney? Malice dripped from Mabs voice like acid rain. Jonah McAllister finally realized he wasnt going to win this one. And that if he kept arguing with his boss, she was likely to use her Fire magic to fry him where he stood. So the lawyer clamped his lips together and nodded his head, acquiescing to his bosses wishes. At least for tonight. Then the silver-haired bastard turned and kicked me in the stomach as hard as he could. The blow wasnt entirely unexpected, but it still made me retch up even more blood. Something hot and hard twisted in my stomach. I needed to get to Jo-Jo Deveraux soon so the dwarven Air elemental could heal me. Otherwise, I wouldnt be breathing much longer. Fine. Well move on to the next person, then. Jonah McAllister leaned down and grabbed my brown ponytail, pulling my face up to his. You talk to the cops about this, bitch, and you will die. Understand me? Cops? Oh, I had no intention of going to the cops. No siree. I was going to handle this matter all by my lonesome. But to keep up the act, I let out a low groan and nodded my head. Satisfied that I was suitably cowed this time, McAllister let go. I flopped back onto the ground. Lets get out of here, the lawyer growled. The bitch dripped blood all over my coat. Jonah McAllister stepped over my prone body and disappeared into the darkness. Elliot Slater and the other two giants followed him. But Mab Monroe stayed where she was and studied me with her dark gaze. Her power washed over me again, the invisible, fiery needles pricking my bloody skin. I bit back another groan. I do hope youve learned your lesson this time, Ms. Blanco, Mab said in a pleasant voice. Because Jonahs right. Next time you cross one of us you will die. And I promise you that it will be far more excruciating than what youve experienced here tonight. A bit of black fire flashed in her eyes, backing up her deadly promise. Mab Monroe smiled at me a moment longer, then turned on her boot heel and vanished into the cold night.

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