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J. Elle

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*School Library Journal*

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**a reader will happily follow into battle.**’

*Historical Novel Society*

# IRON TONGUE OF MIDNIGHT

◆ The Forge & Fracture Saga ◆

**Brittany N. Williams**

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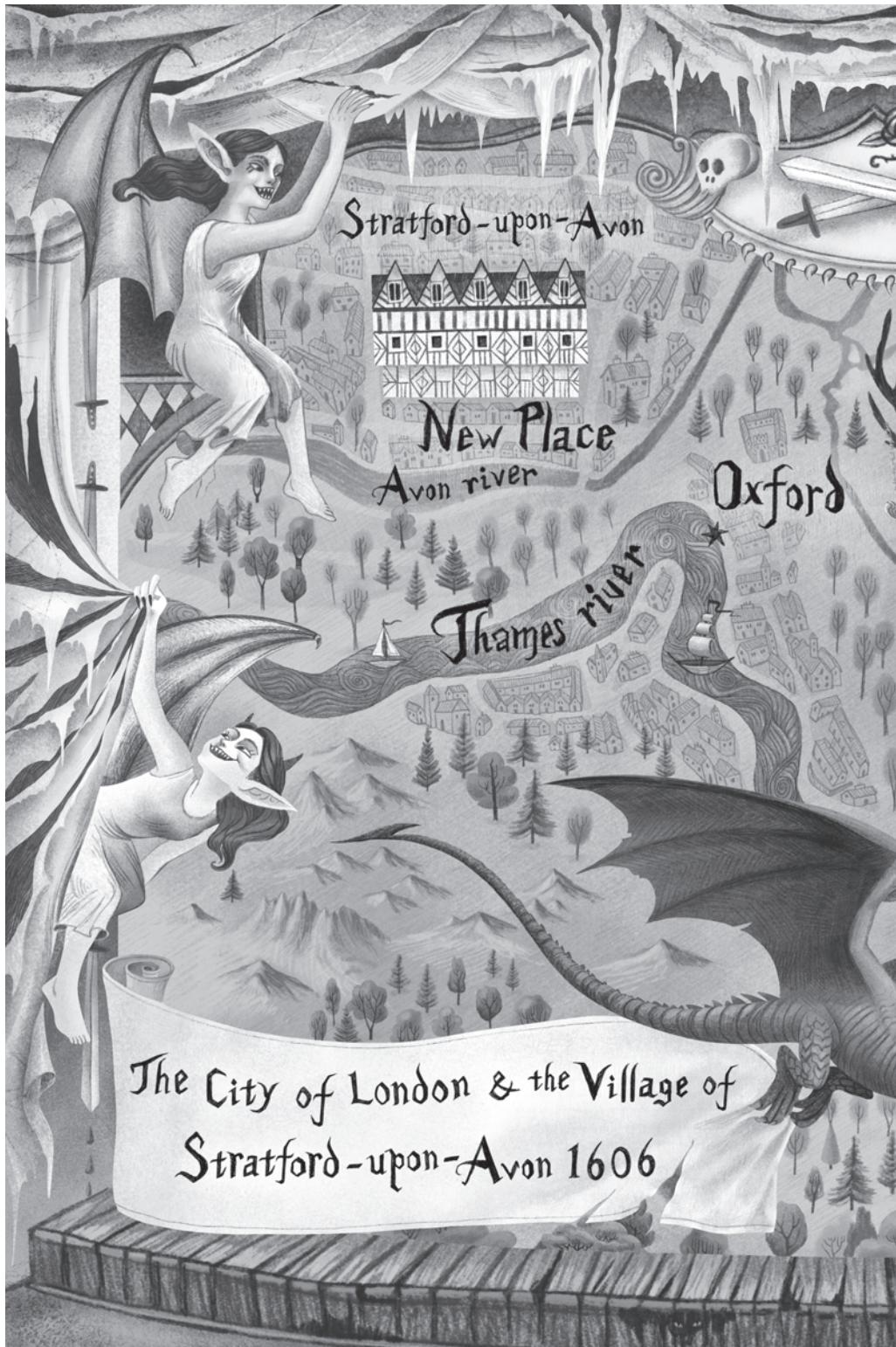
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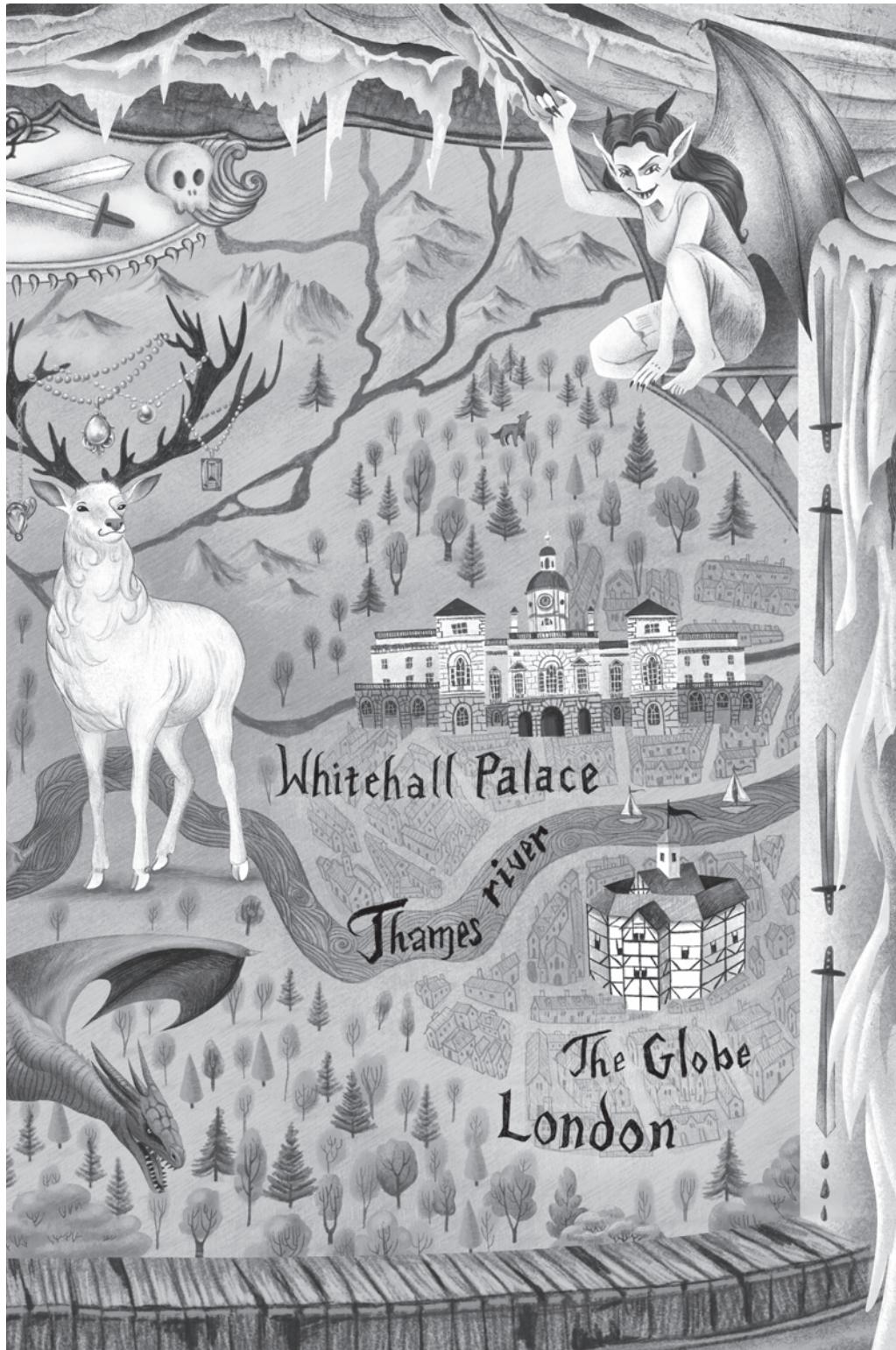
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*For my love, Daniel.  
Thank you for everything you are and all that you bring to my life.*

*For my queer Black girls,  
may you find all the beauty you inherently possess and feel  
my love for every one of you within these pages.*







## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

### **The Sands Family**

Joan – a teenage swordswoman blessed by Ogun  
James – her twin brother & an actor blessed by Oya  
Bess – her mother blessed by Elegua  
Thomas – her father blessed by Yemoja  
Nan – their maid

### **The Shakespeare Family**

William – playwright & actor blessed by Oshun  
Mary – his mother blessed by Obatala  
Anne – his wife blessed by Oya  
Susanna – his oldest daughter blessed by Shango  
Judith – his youngest daughter blessed by Ochoosi

### **The King's Men**

William Shakespeare – playwright & actor blessed by Oshun  
Richard Burbage – actor  
Nicholas 'Nick' Tooley – actor  
Robert Armin – actor  
Rob Gough – actor



## **The Fae**

Titanea – queen of the fae disguised as Queen Anne

Robin Goodfellow – a powerful fae

Rose – their half-mortal daughter

Herne the Hunter – leader of the Wild Hunt

Various sirens, red caps, jacks-in-irons, goblins, hags, grim and the like

## **The Children of the Orisha**

Sir Oscar Pearce – a knight blessed by Aganju

Tobias – a young man blessed by Elegua

Avalee – a young woman blessed by Oshun

Martin – a man blessed by Ochoosi

Roger – a man blessed by Ochoosi



## **The Royal Court in Exile**

King James VI & I – king of England and Scotland

Philip Herbert – Earl of Montgomery & the king's favourite

William Cecil – Robert Cecil's son

Frances Cecil – Robert Cecil's daughter

Grace – a palace servant



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◆ The Forge & Fracture Saga ◆

.20 JANUARY.



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CHAPTER ONE

## All the Devils Are Here

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Three months ago, the Pact protecting the mortal realm shattered. Ten days ago, assassins murdered its custodian, Benjamin Wick, in his cell in the Tower of London. Eight days ago, the Fae and their queen conquered Whitehall Palace as the children of the Orisha fled.

*Augustine Phillips shoved Joan through the magical doorway into Stratford-upon-Avon as fingers burst through his chest in a spray of blood that splattered across her skin.*

Seven days ago, Joan Sands decided she was done losing.

*'Close it,' Phillips whispered, crimson dripping from his lips.*

Joan stood before the forge in her father's workshop, their abandoned house creaking and groaning around her. Wind buffeted the front windows. They shook violently in their frames as January's chill claimed the air inside. The hollow sounds thundered in the stark absence of the home's inhabitants.

Of her family.

She shivered beneath her heavy wool cloak and rubbed at her icy nose. Her brother's clothes offered less of a shield from the cold than her usual gowns, but she hadn't borrowed them for comfort. Maybe the discomfort was payment for her deception.

Joan could accept that, if this gambit succeeded. And it must succeed.

*Blood gushed down Phillips' doublet as another set of fingers shoved through his chest.*

*'Close the doorway,' Joan rasped, her voice tight with tears. 'Close it.'*

*The old man seemed to smile before the hands impaling him rent his body in two. The bloody remains fell away to reveal Goodfellow, cold-eyed and covered in gore. They stared at Joan as the portal between London and Stratford-upon-Avon slammed closed between them.*

Bile rose in her throat as she swiped at the wetness splattered across her face. She looked down, expecting her palm to be smeared with blood again but found it clean, the phantom droplets nothing but a memory. She clenched her fist. That moment refused to leave her. The sudden spray of red, the horrific sound of rending flesh and bone, the sharp ache of betrayal.

Bia's warm metal pressed against the skin of her wrist, a stark contrast to the air around her. The shrunken sword hummed gently, offering comfort.

*Enough.*

Joan huffed out a breath and strode towards the cold forge, shifting her heavy cloak back over her shoulders. Her feet squelched over the spoilt rushes strewn across the floor, the damp stink of rot wafting up with each step. Shadows stretched long against the orange light of the setting sun as the few candles she'd lit made them twist and dance at the edges of her vision. The neglected hearth gaped like an open mouth. A breeze shot down the chimney, puffing old soot into Joan's face. She sneezed and shivered again.

They'd only been gone a week, yet her family's home felt foreign and hostile.

Another injury she'd pay back to Titanea, perhaps soon. Joan had placed herself in the middle of the Fae's territory, and their queen would take notice.

She *had* to take notice, for the sake of the others. This audacious gamble would prove worthless otherwise, and the consequences of failure were unacceptable. She refused to lose anyone else.

Joan grabbed the spade from the rack leaned against the stone base and raked it along the grate to sweep the old ashes away. Each loud scrape vibrated in her chest, drawing her back to the present. A fine dust kicked up into the air as she worked. It sparkled in the fading sunlight. She'd allowed the uncanny emptiness of her home and the seductive pull of painful memories to distract her, but this, this familiar, repetitive movement, this action, settled her mind.

This felt right.

She cleaned until she was satisfied, then hauled up an armful of wood in one scoop, the bulky weight nothing against her supernatural strength. She tossed the logs into the forge, and they clattered into a messy pile. The sound echoed around her, devouring the silence greedily. Joan threw one more in for good measure.

At this moment, Joan's mother and Master Shakespeare were with Master Burbage and Nick retrieving the families they'd been forced to leave behind after Titanea's victory.

This was why Joan snuck to London today. She'd draw Titanea to this house and distract her while the Burbages and Tooleys were rescued. She'd only have to evade Titanea until James revealed that Joan had come to London in his place and sent their mother to retrieve her.

The plan was far from perfect and quite dangerous, but Joan would do anything to cure Master Burbage of the melancholy that shrank his great presence and the misery that hung round Nick's neck like a lodestone. Besides, she could handle the risk. As a child of Ogun, she was the only one who could know that her godfather was dead.

Joan tried to swallow around the lump in her throat and turned back to lighting the forge. She snatched up the kindling, shoving it furiously into the gaps between the firewood. She flinched, hissing as the splinter buried itself beneath her skin. The tiny point of pain grounded her in the present. She wiped away the blood and let possibilities of the far future flow from her mind.

Anger made her sloppy. She need only focus on lighting the fire and preparing for Titanea to find her here. Any other worries left her vulnerable.

She lifted the flint and steel, tilted it at an angle and struck. The spark caught the kindling on the first hit. She leaned forwards, blowing gently against the tiny flame.

'James?'

Joan spun at the sound of her brother's name, flicking Bia into her hand as it grew to its full size. A wide-eyed Henry stumbled backwards, his hands raised placatingly as he looked down at her blade. His light brown skin paled.

'Joan? How did you . . .' His gaze darted from her face to her sword, then back again. 'Why are you . . .'

She scowled at the older boy but didn't lower Bia. 'What are you doing here?'

'What am *I* doing here? I'm your father's apprentice.' He gripped his curly black hair, his voice raising in pitch as he spoke. 'Was I to ignore the

fact that my master and his whole family had disappeared without a word? That the house and the shop and all our work had just been abandoned?’

She took a deep breath and lowered her sword. She couldn’t blame Henry for his prying. Her father should have told him something instead of leaving behind an empty goldsmith’s shop and an apprentice with no direction.

Henry ran his hands down his face and shook his head. ‘What happened at the palace, Joan? Why are you here dressed like your brother?’

‘You shouldn’t be here,’ Joan blurted. She discreetly touched her handkerchief, shifting it to secure the sword to her belt.

No, Henry wasn’t wrong for coming to check on the Sands family, but it didn’t mean he could stay. It was far too dangerous for that.

She grabbed the tall boy’s shoulders, turning him quickly and shoving him toward the door. She felt it then, the slightest shift in the air. Bia shook at her hip, the blade itching for a fight. Not that she’d needed the warning. She laid her hand over its hilt. The hair at the back of her neck lifted, drawing all of her attention to the space near the worktable to her right.

*She’s here,* Ogun whispered the words inside her head as his burning energy filled her chest. Titanea had come.

Henry glanced over his shoulder, his eyes widening.

Joan nudged him forwards again, catching his gaze when he looked down at her. ‘Hide,’ she whispered, putting the urgency she wouldn’t let her body show into the word.

He obeyed her terse command with an uncharacteristic quickness, and Joan watched him disappear behind the wall that separated the work area from the shop. The fire crackled in the forge, flames devouring the wood in snapping licks. Heat rolled against her back. She touched the

handkerchief, letting Bia slip into her grip as the fabric went slack. A drip of sweat slid down her spine. Finally, Joan turned.

The Fae queen sat atop the worktable; her legs delicately crossed one over the other. The growing flames cast a golden glow over the rich brown skin of her true form. She wore a crimson velvet doublet embroidered with swirling gold thread and a set of black hose and boots – King James’s clothes, Joan realised.

The true king was safely in Stratford along with his courtier Philip Herbert, whisked there on the night of Titanea’s attack. That the Fae queen now wore his clothes meant that she’d likely abandoned her guise of Queen Anne for one with far more power. None of it boded well.

Titanea stared at Joan, her gaze sharp and predatory.

‘You shouldn’t be here,’ she echoed, her tone mocking. She jerked her head towards Bia. ‘But since you are, give us the sword.’

Joan subtly shifted her stance to balance her weight on her toes, ready to dodge or attack if Titanea so much as twitched. ‘No,’ she said defiantly.

‘You cannot defeat us here, dear Joan,’ Titanea cooed, wrapping Joan’s name in false affection. ‘But if you hand over that sword, you shall be greatly rewarded. Think carefully before you . . .’

‘No.’

Rage burst across Titanea’s face before she wrestled her expression to calm benevolence. The table beneath her creaked as her hand clenched around it, the wood splintering under the force of her grip.

*Steady, Joan thought. She sent iron flowing down Bia’s blade.*

The wind kicked up, shrieking against the windows and rattling the glass. It echoed through the house, amplified by the empty rooms until it seemed to roar around them.

Titanea pushed herself to her feet, the quiet menace in her movements in stark contrast to her soft expression. 'Give up the sword and forswear that spirit who drives you against us and you shall be protected from all that is to come.' She smiled. 'And there is much to come.'

Something in the distance yowled, deep and primal. Joan felt panic surge within her. She clutched Bia tighter, her sweat-slick palm sliding against the grip as she shoved the feeling down fiercely.

Titanea held out her hand, beckoning with her fingers.

Joan didn't move.

'Hand over that damned sword!' the Fae queen screamed. The house trembled with the force of her words. 'We will not tell you again!'

Joan glared back at her, ignoring the fine tremors shaking her hands as she steadied Bia. 'I said no.'

Titanea dove at her. Joan dodged, scrambling across the floor as the Fae queen soared past her. She surged to her feet and swiped at Titanea's throat. Titanea shoved her arm away, jerking Joan backwards by the collar. Joan stumbled at the sudden shift in weight and tried to regain her footing. Titanea twisted the fabric, tightening it around Joan's neck.. Joan gasped and thrust Bia under her arm in a desperate strike. Titanea hissed as the sword sliced across her skin. She threw Joan to the floor and danced out of the blade's reach.

Joan grunted as the back of her head cracked against the ground. Her vision went white but she scrambled to her feet. She had to keep moving or Titanea would . . .

Titanea appeared in Joan's face, snatching up both Joan's wrists before she could react and wrapping her other hand around Joan's throat. She squeezed.

‘That offer wasn’t a lie, Joan, but you know that,’ she said softly. She stretched Joan’s arms so high her shoulders popped. ‘Our affection would’ve protected you had you been obedient.’ She glanced up to where Joan held Bia uselessly above them, and her lips twisted into a sneer. ‘You’re so much like her.’

*Do not speak of her!* Ogun’s voice burst into Joan’s mind as she struggled to breathe, the Orisha’s anger burning fiercely in her chest.

If she could hit Titanea with some iron, she might . . .

Her head throbbed as her vision darkened around the edges. Every movement felt sluggish and impossible. She jerked her arms down, trying futilely to break Titanea’s hold.

The Fae queen tugged them up again and leaned in close to whisper into Joan’s ear. ‘But disobedience has its own reward. You can reap what she and your god sowed.’

She slid her thumb along Joan’s neck, slowly forcing her head to the side until it twisted unnaturally. Searing pain shot through Joan as her muscles threatened to tear under Titanea’s supernatural strength and the world shifted into sudden, stark focus.

Titanea would snap her neck if she didn’t move.

She kicked at Titanea’s torso, her eyes tearing up as the Fae queen took every blow as if a feather’s brush. Joan’s chest burned for air. Something popped in her neck.

‘Pity,’ Titanea said, her face dispassionate. ‘You truly were our favourite.’

*CLANG!*

Titanea pitched to the side, brow furrowed with pain. Henry struck her again with the iron skillet, throwing all of his weight into the blow.

*CLANG!*



Titanea's eyes rolled up into her head as her body went slack.

Joan collapsed, her knees slamming into the wooden floor with a crack. She gasped and coughed and gulped in air as she tried to regain her senses and think beyond the joy of being able to breathe again. Her neck ached. Henry stood above her, staring at the spot where Titanea had fallen, his knuckles pale from how tightly he gripped his makeshift weapon in shaking hands. His gaze drifted to Joan.

He blinked rapidly and crouched down beside her. 'Get up,' he whispered, tugging at her arm, his grip tight enough to bruise, 'before she comes for both of us.'

Henry was right; they needed to escape. The Burbage house was nearby. Her mother was there, and she'd take them all safely back to Stratford-upon-Avon.

Titanea started to rise from the ground.

But for that, they needed time.

Joan held out her hand. Heat blazed in her chest as the tools hanging around the forge vibrated and swept into the air. The metal that sang back was more steel than iron, but she didn't care.

Any iron at all would hurt.

The tongs and hammer melted into a shimmering flow of liquified metal that danced into the air at Joan's command. She flicked her fingers in Titanea's direction. A set of cuffs slammed shut around the Fae queen's wrists as thick metal braids shot out from them and burst through the floor, pinning her to the foundation beneath the house. Titanea shrieked in fury. The sound echoed through the house. She glared up at Joan, naked betrayal cut across her face.

'You'll earn what you deserve, Iron Blade,' Titanea said, her voice raspy and tight. The light caught a shimmer in her eyes that disappeared



as she blinked rapidly. She grunted, tugging at the restraints holding her in place. The house groaned as it rattled beneath the force.

The cuffs wouldn't hold her for long. They needed to run.

'We'll pay it to you from our own hands.' Titanea bared her teeth in a smile that sent a shiver down Joan's spine. 'What you all deserve.'

Henry dragged Joan to her feet, her rising panic allowing him to move her with ease. He swung the door open. The gust of frigid air buffeted them and seemed to find all the exposed skin between the folds of her cloak.

Titanea jerked her hands upwards. Somewhere beneath her, wood splintered with a shriek. The house gave a violent shiver.

The sound might as well have been the boom of a cannon. Fear shot through Joan as Henry gave a half-swallowed shriek. His nails cut into her arm through the fabric of her shirt. Bia slipped in her sweaty hands. She locked her fingers around the hilt as the sword vibrated in her grip.

Titanea scowled, her gaze shifting slowly to Joan. Their eyes locked. 'Run, little girl.'

Joan obeyed.