

‘Glorious (and very stabby!) . . . a heroine you instantly root for and admire.’

The New York Times

‘Perfect for anyone looking for
a fresh take on faerie magic.’

Leigh Bardugo

‘Every sentence will thunder through your bones.

I felt like I’d been spirited to another land and time.’

Roshani Chokshi

‘Will pull readers in.’

Kirkus Reviews

‘Nothing short of **a spectacular debut** . . .
a groundbreaking addition to the fantasy genre.’

Ayana Gray

‘An addicting, original story. With charming characters
and surprising twists, this historical fantasy
will delight readers of all ages.’

Booklist

‘Vividly expressive, riotously queer, beautifully Black and
wildly creative . . . **a pleasure to read.** If this is what she
can do as a debut, there’s no stopping her.’

Locus Magazine

‘Wildly imaginative and refreshingly diverse.’

J. Elle

‘An intricate, historically rich tapestry.

Fans of Holly Black and Sarah J. Maas will love this.’

School Library Journal

‘Seamlessly weaves together history, fantasy, culture, magic, and love . . . **I couldn’t stop reading it**, and when I finished all I wanted was more.’

Daniel José Older

‘Fast-paced . . . **a fresh take** on inclusive historical fantasy.’

NPR

‘A richly woven fantasy . . . has all the elements necessary for a clever, entertaining, thoughtful read.’

Shelf Awareness

‘An absolute feast of imagination.

Complex, brooding, impossible to put down.’

Scott Reintgen

‘Williams’s **fast-paced adventure** gallops apace . . . if the sequel were done, then ’twere well it were done quickly, because once immersed in the world of Joan Sands, you’re not going to want to leave.’

Tor.com

‘A fun, quick read with diverse and queer characters a reader will happily follow into battle.’

Historical Novel Society

THAT SELF-SAME METAL

◆ The Forge & Fracture Saga ◆

Brittany N. Williams

faber

First published in the US in 2023 by Amulet Books,
an imprint of Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, New York.
First published in the UK in 2024
by Faber & Faber Limited
The Bindery,
51 Hatton Garden,
London EC1N 8HN
faber.co.uk

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

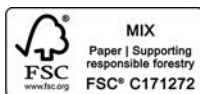
All rights reserved
Text copyright © Brittany Nicole Williams, 2023
Sword artwork courtesy Ezepev Dmitry/Shutterstock.com
Book design by Chelsea Hunter
Map by Jamie Zollars

The right of Brittany Nicole Williams to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-571-38162-3



Printed and bound in the UK on FSC® certified paper in line with our continuing commitment to ethical business practices, sustainability and the environment.

For further information see faber.co.uk/environmental-policy

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

*For Grandma who's always been with me
and Tito who's just arrived*



*In loving memory of Mommy, Sonia, and Sherman.
Thank you for always believing in me. I know you'd love this one.*



Westminster

The Strand

Devil Tavern

Whitehall Palace

Banqueting Houses

House of Commons

Palace of Westminster

House of Lords

Southwark

London
1605



Shakespeare's House

Goldsmiths Row

Joan's House

St. Martin Ludgate

St. Paul's Cathedral

Tower of London

Nonesuch House

London Bridge

Bear Garden

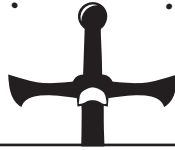
Globe Theatre

Clink Prison

St. Mary Overies

Tabard Inn

31 OCTOBER



CHAPTER ONE Rotten in the State



ou two need to count before you accidentally take each other's eyes out.'

Joan Sands watched the two boys practicing in front of her and struggled not to breathe too deeply.

A chill wind blew through the weathered tapestries covering the gaping windows. Shadows floated and shifted as the candles danced with the breeze, their light the only thing keeping the darkness at bay. The draft carried the mouldy aroma of damp fabric across the open room.

Joan scowled as the stench filled her nose, so strong she could taste it.

The Banqueting House at Whitehall Palace stank to high heaven and not even the wide-open main entertainment room could save them from the rank smell. Joan would've held practice outside in the nearby courtyard but for the day's heavy rain.

The hall, made of brick and timber and canvas, had been a source of pride for King Henry VIII – rest his soul – back in 1540, but it had barely made it to 1605 intact. Rumour said that King James absolutely hated the building.

Not that Joan blamed him. She swore a hard enough gust would send the whole thing tumbling down. Besides, who wants to entertain royal guests and courtiers in a place that smelled like a soggy alehouse?

She willed herself to get used to it. She couldn't stop up her nose without blocking her view of Samuel Crosse and Nick Tooley butchering the fight she'd taught them months ago.

Behind them, the other members of the King's Men set properties in their places – pillows, daggers, a fake vial of poison, and the like – and unpacked costumes. The acting company always eagerly anticipated the summons to perform for their royal patron – King James himself. His Majesty's favour gave them the protection of being members of his household, the clout of serving the king, and the money that being so powerfully employed afforded. If the king called, so would the company appear, no matter how much the musty old banqueting hall smelled like old, soggy potatoes.

Every so often, one of the men would glance Joan's way and chuckle. All the actors in the company knew Joan never forgave the sloppy execution of a stage fight, and each was grateful to not be currently under her scrutiny.

Samuel and Nick had both fumbled so badly through the movements in that morning's rehearsal that Joan demanded they drill the fight in the empty playing space. She'd see they got the moves right before they performed for King James and the court. Or before the boys accidentally ran each other through.

Samuel yelped as Nick's blade sliced across his knuckles.

'Sorry!' Nick shouted.

The latter looked more and more likely.

'Hold,' Joan called, shaking her head as Nick and Samuel stopped fighting. She walked over to Samuel, who had his injured fingers in his mouth.

‘Are you bleeding?’ Nick tugged anxiously at his ponytail; his blade pointed safely towards the ground.

Samuel frowned and looked at his hand, blond brows drawn together on his pale forehead. ‘No,’ he said.

Joan’s eyes followed Nick’s length of hair from where it was tied at the base of his neck and swept around past the smooth column of his elegant throat. It draped over one broad shoulder, slithering down in an inky black fall. The barest glimpse of a rich brown collarbone peeked out through his open shirt. His skin was as dark brown as her own, only with undertones of red instead of gold. His hair straight and silky where hers was a lush spray of soft coils and curls. But that she could trace that path with her fingers and know the feel of his hair.

She shook herself when she realised she’d been staring, her entire face going hot.

‘Be glad it only hurts.’ Joan took the sword from Samuel, who smiled at her knowingly. ‘Being a full beat behind can cause much worse.’

He laughed. ‘Yes, yes, of course. Well, will the master show me how it’s done?’ He grinned and stepped back, arms wide in a flourish.

Joan rolled her eyes at him and squared herself up with Nick. ‘Come on, then.’

‘Ah, please be gentle with me, Joan.’ Nick stood tall, bringing his sword up in a salute.

Her heart raced as her gaze instantly caught on the thick fan of lashes surrounding his deep-brown eyes.

She needed to focus.

Joan touched her fingers to the blade, felt the metal sing to her. It whispered its secrets, gave Joan its name – Alala. The cold surety of the steel grounded her. She commanded the sword to dull even more. The

metal shifted under her fingers; the change subtle enough that no one watching could have noticed what Joan had done.

This was a secret she would not share.

Joan cleared her throat. 'Half speed this first time, then full.' She tightened her grip on the sword and saluted him back.

'In your skirts, Joan?' Samuel snorted. He looked her up and down appraisingly. 'Really?'

She cut her eyes at him. 'There's no need to trouble myself with changing for this simple a combination.' She smacked the flat of the blade against the fleshy back of his thigh, grinned when he yelped. 'Do try to pay attention so you don't embarrass the whole company in front of His Majesty and the whole court.'

Nick and Samuel both guffawed but listened, Samuel stepping off to the side to watch and Nick taking his first position. She smiled to herself. It was always easier working among the apprentices. These two boys at seventeen were only a year her elder, and, for all his talk and bluster, Samuel always listened to Joan's directions. The older company members were another story – especially a certain white-haired sharer. Augustine Phillips only pushed himself to a point. He and Joan never seemed to agree on what that entailed, but, as one of the men whose money paid for their costumes, props, and her instruction, Phillips's desires always prevailed.

Joan shook her head and slipped into the first stance, feet wide, left forward, right back, rapier held in front of her ready to strike. Her mind went quiet as her focus zeroed in on the impending fight. The blade hummed in her hands. Nick had the first move.

He swung his sword around and brought it down directly over her head. Joan caught his blade on hers, knocking it away with her guard. The move left him wide open and she faked an elbow strike to his face. He

grunted and threw himself backwards, giving an extra flourish because they were moving so slowly.

Joan stifled her grin. She swept across, as if to slice open his belly, and Nick jumped back out of the way. He jabbed at her hip. She parried. He sliced at her opposite arm. She brought her rapier up to block just as he swung his sword back around and pretended to slice into her gut. The death blow. End of fight.

‘At speed?’ Nick said as they shifted back to their starting positions.

Joan nodded. ‘Keep watching, Samuel.’

‘Yes, teacher,’ he droned.

Joan ignored him.

Nick swung for her head. She blocked, shunting his blade away and elbowing him in the ‘face.’ He grunted, stumbled back a few steps. Joan pressed forward, slicing at his belly. He dodged, stabbing at her hip. Blocked. His sword swung for her arm. She brought hers up to parry and met only empty air as he tapped the flat of his blade against the side of her bodice. He flexed his shoulder and jerked his hip to make it look like he drove his sword deeper into her side. Joan dropped her rapier and fell towards him, selling her ‘death.’

Joan looked up and their eyes met. Their faces were so close, she could see the hints of gold swirling in his brown irises. All she needed to do was lean up and—

‘Hm, I’m not sure I have it as yet,’ Samuel said, leering at them. ‘Would you two go at it again? Although, if you need a moment alone with Nick, Joan, I can . . .’

Joan’s face exploded with heat. She stepped away from Nick, doing her best not to look at him. She picked up her fallen sword and tossed it at Samuel – point down, of course – keeping her expression neutral.

‘Laugh if you’d like, but mess up again . . .’ She let the threat hang in the air, leaving Samuel to dread what dastardly and exhausting punishment she’d come up with should he fail.

Samuel laughed harder but Joan could see the fear in his eyes. ‘Aye, teacher.’

Good.

‘Now let’s see it once more.’ She stood back and folded her arms, pretending that her heart wasn’t still racing.



Later, Joan wandered around the playing space with her hands full of dulled swords that she herself had mended and prepared for the King’s Men’s impending royal performance.

It wasn’t the most profound use of her skills, but it was a consistent one, and that was enough for now.

‘Which would you say is worse?’ James – Joan’s twin brother and of no relation to the king, though they shared a name and an attitude – strolled up behind her, waving a handkerchief in front of his nose. ‘The chill or the smell?’ He was set to perform this evening just like Samuel and Nick, though you’d never know it from his calm behaviour. James never panicked before a play, and none of them ever understood how he managed it.

His soft features matched Joan’s own, from the curve of their broad noses to the gentle slope of their cheeks to the roundness of their wide brown eyes. But while James kept his dark, curly hair cut short, Joan let hers grow – the spiralling strands long enough to reach her waist when stretched.

James still wore the yellow jerkin he’d chosen this morning – he’d picked a matching yellow skirt, bodice, and sleeves for Joan, as was his

practice – but he'd exchange it for an elaborate white gown to play Juliet for tonight's play.

'Can we say the smell and this chill both are equally bad?' Rob Gough said, his dark brown face twisted into a scowl. He already wore his wig but not his costume. The flowing red curls looked odd without the gown he'd wear later, but somehow it didn't seem ridiculous on him.

Joan shook her head. James and Rob could wear nearly anything and look fantastic. As apprentice members of the King's Men, both boys played the women's roles in the company's plays. English ladies were forbidden by law to perform themselves onstage in such 'vulgar' displays.

No. More specifically, the law didn't allow women to speak lines onstage. The women of court often danced in their own masques – elaborate spectacles of music and fantastical costumes – in this very building. And there was even a troupe of female acrobats set to perform sometime this evening. So, while the female body was allowed space, the same couldn't be said of the female voice.

And wasn't that the most unfair thing.

'At least you two could spend most of the day outside,' Nick said, joining their small group. Joan jumped at the sound of his voice, swords clattering together loudly as she struggled not to drop them. 'Joan, Samuel, and I have been breathing in the stench for hours.'

She tried to slow her breathing. This was ridiculous. She'd spent the better part of the day with Nick, why should his presence now make her anxious? She needed to collect herself.

James gave her a look. She ignored it. Because she was busy holding swords.

Very important business—

Nick smiled at her, his full lips quirking a little higher on one side as they always did before he slid into conversation with Rob. Joan suddenly found that she enjoyed this lopsided grin the most.

Nick's glorious black hair hung loose around his shoulders this time, thick and shiny and nearly reaching the small of his back.

Joan's curly hair wound about her head in an elaborate series of twists and braids held in place by yellow ribbons and fine silver thread. Had it been loose, the damp air would have the strands shrinking themselves closer and closer to her head. She wondered if Nick's hair would be as soft as hers, if it would slide through her fingers like silk.

'Sister' – James bumped against her shoulder and held out a handkerchief – 'careful, you're salivating.'

Joan went bright red and smacked him with the hilts of the swords.

Through some supernatural twin connection, James had sensed that the boy they'd known for three years suddenly made Joan's heart pound whenever he so much as looked at her. And now her brother refused to give her a moment's rest whenever Nick was near.

'Nicholas,' he crooned, 'doesn't my sister look splendid in yellow?'

Joan's heart plummeted to her feet as Nick turned to look her over. His gaze swept over her, from her finely braided and pinned hair, down along her broad nose and full lips, past her slim shoulders. His eyes lingered on her modest bosom, accentuated by her tight bodice, then skirted away.

Joan wanted to melt into the floor. She wondered what it would feel like to be an only child.

She only needed one free sword to find out.

'Two things,' Samuel said as he strolled over. 'One.' He held up a finger. 'Master Phillips suggested I come to make it look less suspicious that all the brown folk are standing together like it's some kind of meeting.'

Joan rolled her eyes but blessed Phillips and his paranoia for saving her further embarrassment. She glanced across the great hall to where the white-haired old man stood watching them, all pale face and bushy white brows and beard.

Rob and James exchanged a look and Samuel shrugged apologetically. 'If you were holding a meeting, I expect I would have been invited despite my fair complexion.'

Nick burst out laughing. 'What a foolish old—'

James pinched Nick into silence, a gesture Nick returned in kind.

Joan shook her head. Nick wasn't wrong. Phillips's suspicious beliefs about her, James, Rob, and Nick were surprising given what the old man was hiding from the rest of the company.

Rob rolled his eyes. 'Why is Master Phillips always like this?'

Joan clenched her back teeth together and kept her mouth shut. Despite his prejudices and stubborn nature, she liked Master Phillips. He was the actor under whom her brother served as apprentice and was generally kind. But sometimes he just—

Well, it needn't be said. They all understood.

She, James, and Rob were all Black and of a similar complexion, Rob only a bit darker than the twins. Nick, while not Black, could thank his distant ancestors from the east for his rich brown skin. Then there was Samuel, with the barest hint of a tan on his pale face and bright golden-blond hair.

Though the whole lot of them had been born here in England to English parents who had English parents, only Samuel never had to combat questions about his heritage.

Or petty suspicions.

'Two,' Samuel said, continuing his message, 'Joan, I'm to ask you to

deliver this token of esteem' – he held up a sparkling necklace – 'to one of the lady acrobats over in their tiring-rooms.'

Joan sighed heavily but handed Samuel the swords. His knees buckled under the sudden weight before he got his bearings. James snickered.

Joan rolled her eyes. They always forgot she was stronger than them. No matter how many times she'd proved it.

Samuel huffed and held the chain out for Joan to take. As soon as the metal touched her hands, she knew what it was: gilded tin. Cheap but done well enough to fool someone less savvy.

And Joan knew metals better than nearly anyone else.

'Which lady is this meant for?'

'I was told you should use your refined eye and give it to the lady you think it suits best.'

James nodded with a grin. 'Joan does know beautiful women.'

'And men,' Samuel said and wiggled his eyebrows at Nick.

'I do,' Joan said, thrusting her chin high despite her mounting embarrassment. 'Does your sister still ask after me, Samuel?'

Samuel's grin turned lewd. 'Oh, she pines, Joan. Shall I bring her by the playhouse again? She'll be sad to know she has competition now.'

'What competition?' Nick asked suddenly.

The other three boys burst into laughter and Joan used the distraction to race for the door.

It was best to leave before their innuendo dug even deeper into her thoughts and feelings.



The halls that wound through the rest of the Banqueting House connected rooms and smaller sections in a twisting labyrinth that erased all sense of

direction or time. Everything became dark-painted wood beams that pressed in on you from all sides, flickering candles, and a rush-strewn floor that hissed with every step. The contrast with the wide-open main hall was stark.

Joan would never say she was afraid to walk the narrow expanse, but the trip was never her favourite.

She was halfway to the rooms reserved as a tiring area where the women changed and prepared for their performance before she realised she had the tin necklace clenched in her fist. She relaxed her hand.

The chain lay in a crumpled and crushed mess, more a lump of tin than cheap jewellery.

Wonderful.

Joan glanced around the empty hall before holding the twisted necklace up in the air. She focused on the knots, on the places where the links fused together.

Joan huffed, annoyed that she'd let her anxiety and nerves trigger her powers like that. Thankfully, she could fix her mistake just as easily.

She coaxed them to unbind themselves, to straighten back into the easy linked chain. As the metal ran over her fingers, it sang and grew warm to the touch.

Done. The necklace looked unblemished. She sent the links curling around themselves, creating a delicate spiral pattern in the cheap metal.

She draped the chain gently over her fingers and breathed deeply. She felt the metal go cool and quiet against her skin then realised she had no idea which of the elder acting company members had sent the trinket to woo a lady acrobat.

Joan could narrow the suspects down to the two most obvious culprits, but if she chose the wrong one, she'd be subjected to his incessant whining. She'd have to double back to ask them outright.

Damn.

‘Should you be doing that here in the open?’

Joan flinched and threw her arm back in the direction of the man’s voice. Her head whipped around and she stopped her fist just before it connected with the familiar brown face of her godfather.

‘Bless your quick reflexes, Joan,’ Baba Ben said, eyes wide.

Joan dropped her hand to her side, cheeks hot and heart racing with embarrassment. ‘Sorry,’ she mumbled.

‘Are you apologising for nearly backhanding me, or for using the powers Ogun blessed you with out in a place where you could be caught?’

Joan knew the folly in answering truthfully so she murmured, ‘Both?’
‘Are you asking me?’

‘No . . .’

Baba Ben sighed, his slim shoulders slumping. ‘Joan, this of all places is not a safe location for us to show our magic.’

Joan nodded, her face blazing hot. She knew this. Not only did the religion they practice fall outside of the legally mandated Protestantism, the spirits Joan and her family venerated – the Orisha – blessed the faithful with magical abilities. Blessings the law and King James would see as witchcraft and an abomination punishable by death.

And here she was, on the very grounds of the royal palace of Whitehall, in a building soon to be full of members of the king’s court, using her magic openly to fix a cheap trinket – and a mistake of her own making.

‘And,’ Baba Ben said, ‘I think you forgot to say a certain something—’
‘Maferefun, Ogun,’ Joan mumbled quickly.

She always forgot to say the words of gratitude to Ogun, the Orisha of iron, her head Orisha.

Baba Ben shook his head. 'Be mindful, Joan. Without Ogun's blessing, you have no power over metal. You wouldn't have been able to fix that little necklace.'

Or mangle it in the first place, honestly.

But he was right, and thanks was so simple to give.

'You cannot be so careless with the Orisha.' He grabbed her shoulders, leaning down to look her in the eye. 'These rituals, our practice, are here for a reason.'

'I know.'

'You and I are the only living children of Ogun. He chose us, and the least we can do is show him we're grateful for his blessings.' He straightened, a frown darkening his face. 'And this should be the last time I have to remind you. Understand?'

Joan nodded, her gaze skittering to the floor. Baba Ben's disappointment always cut her, and she faced it so often because of this. She knew she'd likely face it again, because as natural as it felt to use her magic, connecting with Ogun still felt foreign. And how could she explain that to the man who'd been communing with Ogun since before Joan had been born?

Joan felt the anxiety tensing her shoulders and took a breath to calm herself. There was no need to mangle the necklace again by getting worked up.

She was wrong. She'd have to learn and adjust or face the consequences.

Then it hit her.

'Baba Ben, what are you doing here?' She stepped back, really taking her godfather in.

He wore an elegant brocade doublet, his linen shirt peeking through the matching slashed sleeves. A green velvet floppy cap accented with a

long pheasant feather sat atop his head, covering his kinky white hair. Shining silver thread wove through the fabric, catching the light as he moved.

That thread was Baba Ben's signature, put into every garment he made in his tailor's shop.

'I have business with the king,' he said, grinning.

Joan frowned. 'Business?'

'Yes, business.' Baba Ben glanced around then beckoned her closer. 'Do you know of the Pact between we mortals and the Fae?'

Joan shook her head.

'Nearly two millennia ago, Ogun helped broker a deal between the people of this land and the Fae determined to do them harm. It therefore falls on we children of Ogun to ensure that the ritual to keep it in place is performed with each new king or queen of England.' Here Baba Ben frowned, the expression casting deep creases along his face. 'I've tried to meet with King James to reestablish the bonds for the last few years with no success. I've felt something fraying with these past two All Hallows' Eves and I fear what will happen if the ritual isn't performed before the end of this third. Thankfully, an acquaintance was finally able to arrange an audience for me, which is why I look my best.'

Joan's mind raced. Ogun had helped bind the Fae nearly two thousand years ago? Sometimes the depths of what she didn't know about the Orisha seemed boundless.

'What is the ritual, Baba?'

He smiled and touched her shoulder gently. 'That we will discuss when you're more spiritually mature. Yes?'

Joan sighed but returned her godfather's smile. 'Of course, Baba.' She added this to the long list of things she'd only find out when she was 'more spiritually mature,' whenever that would be.

'I saw him come this way,' a gruff voice said from somewhere down an adjacent hall. The thump of several heavy boots followed soon after. 'How hard can it be to find a blackamoor in a feathered cap?'

Joan's heart dropped.

Guards.

Baba Ben spun her, shoving her back into the hall. She slipped around the corner, her feet catching in her skirts, and hit the ground hard. She bit down on her lip to keep from shouting and tasted blood. Joan strained her ears to hear anything.

The boots thundered closer, the sounds of a struggle, shouting, the loud smack of a slap, a grunt of pain.

'Why are you arresting me?' Baba Ben said, his voice raspy.

Joan clamped a hand over her mouth as the clanking of manacles echoed down the hall.

'I have an audience with His Majesty,' Baba Ben shouted.

'Oh, of course,' a nasally voice replied – one of the guards. 'I'm sure the king is just waiting around to talk to a common Negro.'

The group of guards burst into loud laughter. The thud of flesh hitting flesh again and again. A cough then a low groan.

Joan felt tears burn her eyes.

This couldn't be happening. Not to Baba Ben.

'Take him away,' said one of the officers.

She had to see. She needed to know what was happening. She pressed her back against the wall, leaning over to peek around the corner.

Two guards, their faces pale in the candlelit hall, hauled Baba Ben none too gently, the shackled man's feet stumbling across the floor. A third hung behind as they dragged their prisoner away.

The man barked out a loud laugh once he was alone. Then his pale skin seemed to melt off his body, leaving behind a woman with golden-brown skin and a bald head.

Joan gasped.

That woman's transformation meant only one thing.

She was Fae. But it didn't make sense because she didn't glow. All Fae looked illuminated to Joan – to all who'd been blessed by the Orisha – but this woman—

She turned, and Joan threw herself backwards and out of sight.

Whoever – whatever – that woman was, she'd infiltrated the royal guards. That made her seriously dangerous.

Joan didn't know if she'd been seen. If the guards or that woman found her now, her fate would surely be the same as Baba Ben's. She couldn't risk that.

She slipped her shoes off, grasping the hard soles to keep them from clacking against the floor. Silently as she could, praying with every shift of a muscle, Joan eased to her stockinged feet, and ran.