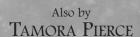


BATTLE MAGIC



CIRCLE OF MAGIC

Book One: Sandry's Book Book Two: Tris's Book Book Three: Daja's Book Book Four: Briar's Book

THE CIRCLE OPENS

Book One: Magic Steps Book Two: Street Magic Book Three: Cold Fire Book Four: Shatterglass

THE WILL OF THE EMPRESS

MELTING STONES

BATTLE MAGICIA

TAMORA PIERCE

SCHOLASTIC PRESS

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Summary: When messengers arrive in Gyongxe "inviting"
Dedicate Initiate Rosethorn and her two young companion
mages, Evumeimei and Briar, to court to celebrate the
birthday of the Emperor of Yanjing, Rosethorn is eager to go,
but Briar suspects that there is an ulterior motive behind the
invitation.

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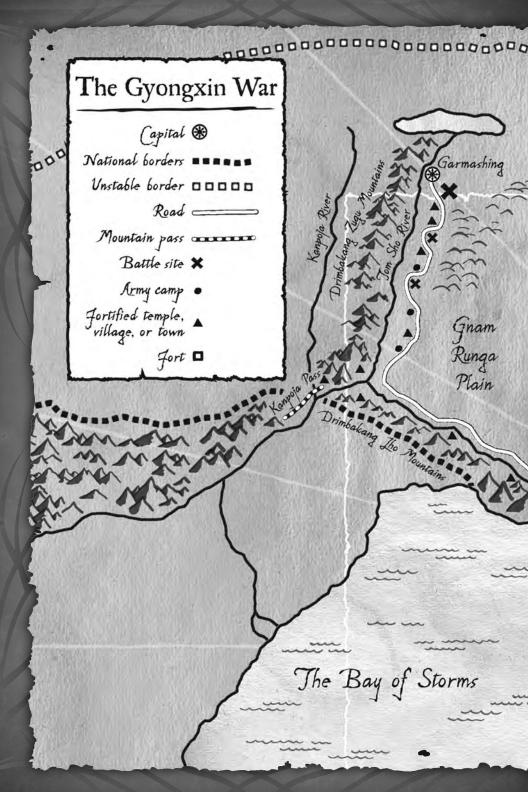
Family and not,

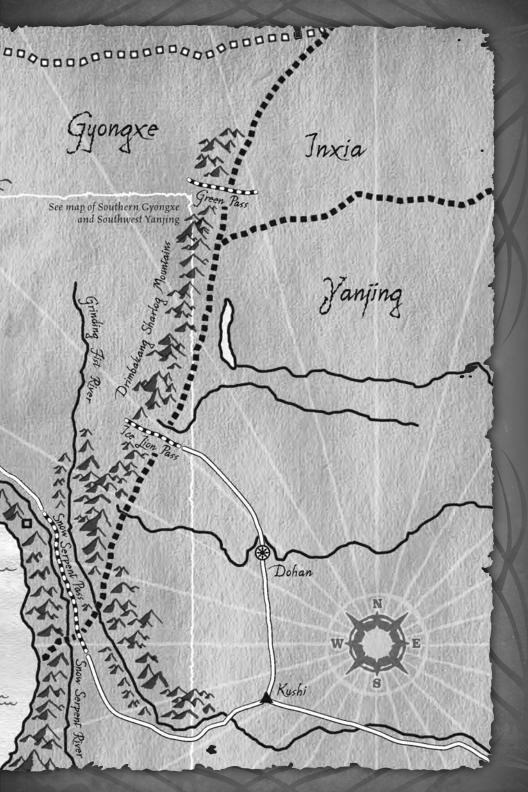
Friends and not,

Past, present, future,

Because William Tecumseh Sherman was right

And war is all hell.





Gyongxe Gnam Runga Plain Temple of the Tigers Temple of the Sealed Eye Temple of the Yak Queen's Children Temple of the Sun Queen's Husbands Ganas Gazig Rigyal Po Kangri Skad Po Ganas Rigyal Po Fort Sambachu The Bay of Storms Southern Gyongxe and Southwest Yanjing

BATTLE MAGIC





Outside the walls of Dohan Winter capital of the Yanjing empire Five weeks later, the second week of Seed Moon

Evumeimei Dingzai was very unhappy. First of all, she was hot. Once they had come down from the heights of the Drimbakang Sharlog, they had found themselves in wet, sunny lands that were already warm despite it barely being spring. Today was even warmer than usual. To add to her discomfort, she and Rosethorn were traveling in the most elegant of palanquins, on their way to the first part of Emperor Weishu's birthday celebration. Bearers carried them along one of the many roads of the Winter Palace, a skull-thumping "honor" Evvy would have happily done without. The curtains of the palanquin were drawn, they had been told by their servant-guardians, to keep the emperor's favored guests from being stared at by the vulgar, and to keep dust from their clothes. It meant they bounced along in an airless silk-wrapped box.

Only the thought of Rosethorn's grip on her ear if she voiced her feelings kept her silent. Surely even Rosethorn could understand how a girl in three layers of silk robes, with her hair oiled, braided, and secured by jeweled pins, might want to say something, even if she only muttered it. Still, Rosethorn so often held strange views about the behavior she expected of her traveling companions that it was really better for Evvy to keep any complaints behind her teeth. That was, at least, if she wanted her ear to stay in its normal position on her head.

It wasn't fair, Evvy wanted to say. Court etiquette only required Rosethorn, a dedicate of an established religion, to wear garments like those she wore in service to her gods. Of course, the emperor required that those garments be silk: a white shift and the pine-green habit worn by Earth dedicates of the western Living Circle. Rosethorn wore no collar. Evvy had three, all of which framed more of Evvy's bare skin than she thought was right. She tried to tug a layer over her upper chest and failed.

"Stop fussing," Rosethorn ordered. She lay back against the cushions, waving a fan to cool herself. "The clothes will be easier to wear if you forget you're wearing them. You don't see Briar tugging and squirming."

"I don't see Briar," Evvy grumbled, trying to slouch. "He got to ride a horse."

"If we wore clothes suitable to horseback riding, I'm sure we would have been allowed to do the same."

The palanquin tilted suddenly; Evvy tumbled among the cushions. The slaves who carried the chair with its box-like compartment were climbing. Evvy wriggled back to a sitting position and risked a peek through the curtains. "Stairs," she told Rosethorn. "Big flat stone ones, like in that old temple back on the Sea of Grass." She let her magic drip down into the polished

surfaces below their palanquin. The stone steps were old, quiet, and sleepy. She had woken them up to ask them questions. "There's dips worn into them by people coming and going, but they say they don't mind." She let the ancient voices roll through her bones. "They say humans tell them they are white marble from Sishan. They've been here for more wet seasons than they can count, if they could count." She leaned back, letting the curtains shut. "They're going back to sleep." She sighed, feeling better. Carefully she smoothed one of her sleeves, then confessed in a tiny voice, "I wouldn't fuss so, only I'm scared."

"I had noticed," Rosethorn said quietly. "We are guests, Evvy. The emperor made promises to the God-King and First Dedicate Dokyi that we would be safe. We have to trust that he's telling the truth. We *have* heard how much pride he takes in his gardens. From his letter to me, he believes I am a gardener of great renown. He wants to show off. Perhaps he would even like me to do a little work with some plants of his."

Evvy bit her lip. Until she was four, her parents had taught her that the emperor could do anything he wished. When she lived in her burrow in the rock in Chammur, the old Yanjingyi woman Qinling had told her stories of home. In them, the emperor had figured as being one step below the gods. Evvy had survived on her own for years by avoiding powerful people. This trip to the imperial court went against every survival instinct she possessed.

Their palanquin bearers slowed to a stop, but when Evvy tried to get out, a frowning eunuch appeared in the opening of her curtain. He shook a finger at her and closed the curtain with a yank.

"We're hot!" Evvy snapped in Chammuri, vexed.

Rosethorn slapped her arm lightly. "Manners," she warned. "We aren't in Gyongxe."

"I can't *breathe*," Evvy whined. She felt cramped and suffocated in this cushion-stuffed silk box.

Suddenly someone thrust a tray with two bowl-like cups through the curtains. Rosethorn frowned, then chose a bowl. Evvy took the other. It was chilly on the outside. There was no spoon, so the contents must be drinkable. She took the tiniest of sips. The taste was as refreshing as cold water, but with a slight, unfamiliar, fruit-like taste that cleared her head. She drank eagerly.

"Very nice," Rosethorn said appreciatively when they had returned their bowls to the tray and the patient arm. Both tray and arm pulled away. "It's coconut water — I showed you coconuts in the market last week. You see, Evvy, there are benefits to this."

Evvy stared at her. "Yanjing has hungry ghosts that eat the insides of people and take their skins. Is that what happened to you? Is that why you're all calm?" Then she noticed the beautifully carved supports around them. Rosethorn had run a hand over the wood once they were inside, telling her what it was called, though Evvy hadn't listened. She was attentive now. The frame over Rosethorn's shoulder had sprouted a couple of leafy twigs. Shame twisted inside Evvy's belly. While she had fussed, Rosethorn had been so tense that the wood of the palanquin had grown saplings to console her, despite its layers of polish.

Evvy smiled at Rosethorn. "The drink was very nice," she said agreeably.

Rosethorn raised her brows. "That was too polite. What is the matter with you? Are you unwell?"

"I just don't mean to be a burden to you," Evvy explained as the palanquin surged into motion once more.

Immediately Rosethorn set the inside of her wrist against Evvy's forehead. "No, you're not running a fever," she said. "Where did you get this 'burden' notion?"

The palanquin moved into the shade and halted again. This time eunuchs on both sides opened the curtains. They offered silk-clad arms so the emperor's guests could climb out of their luxurious box.

Once they were on their feet, imperial waiting-women rushed forward to straighten Evvy's layers and even Rosethorn's habit. They backed away when Rosethorn glared at them — or had they seen the tiny saplings that also sprouted on the outside of the palanquin's box? Evvy wasn't sure. She held still, determined to be good for once and not give Rosethorn anything to worry about. Instead she looked at the ceiling while the women tidied her robes and hair.

There was a ceiling because they had been brought inside a huge stone building. The rafters were dark, gilded wood hung with huge paper lanterns. Evvy was grateful that the lanterns weren't lit. It was fairly cool in here, except for the occasional drift of warm air from outside.

An insistent thumb called her away from her thoughts on weather and rafters. A maid was pushing on her chin while another waited with a pot of red lip paint.

"I'm too young for that," Evvy said flatly in *tiyon*. What she wanted to say was that the court women with their single drop of

red on each upper and lower lip looked stupid, but Rosethorn wouldn't like that. "Take that red stuff away."

"Evvy," Rosethorn said, warning dripping from her voice.

"I let them put the white stuff and the rouge on my face because you told me to," Evvy said. If anyone within earshot speaks Chammuri, it serves them right for eavesdropping, she thought fiercely. "I look like a tumbler in a show. I will not let them give me the drop of blood." The maids at their guest pavilion had told them that was the name for the current style in lip paint.

Both she and Rosethorn turned when they heard the scrape of a chain on the floor. "But all the ladies who must make their kowtow to his imperial majesty wear the drop of blood and the lily face," the stranger said. He had stopped next to the newly arrived Briar, as if for contrast.

Briar was a slender youth, handsome and smiling in his own set of green, peach, and ivory-colored robes. He did not wear the stiffened black silk cap of a *nanshur* or a noble, leaving his short, glossy black hair uncovered. The newcomer also had very short black hair. He wore only a white garment like very loose, draped breeches that ended at his knees. He was a darker bronze than Briar, heavy with muscle, and scarred as a warrior was scarred. His wrists and ankles were secured by gold shackles and connected by lengths of heavy gold chain. His wrist shackles were chained to a throat collar, also gold.

He saw the direction that Evvy's eyes had taken and raised his wrists a little, tightening the chains that led from throat to arms to feet. "No, I'm the only one required to wear these," he said, a wry twist on his mouth. "It makes it difficult for me to run away."

He bowed deeply and saluted first Rosethorn, then Evvy, then Briar by touching his fingers to his brawny chest, then to his lips, and last to his forehead. "I am Parahan, the latest imperial amusement. Just now I am ordered to bring you into the presence."

"I am —" Rosethorn began.

"Rosethorn," Parahan interrupted. "Though I have trouble believing that so beautiful a rose has any thorns at all."

"You have no idea," Briar murmured as he fell in step with Evvy behind Parahan and Rosethorn as they walked out into the open.

The big captive led them to a small cluster of three chairs at the foot of a stone dais. Evvy saw now that they stood at the top of a short pyramid. Its point had been lopped off to make a platform. Briar dug a sharp elbow into Evvy's side and nodded in the direction of the throne. The emperor was looking at them. Hurriedly Evvy joined Briar and Rosethorn in a deep bow. Parahan managed to kneel without his chains getting in the way. Like the emperor's messengers in Garmashing, he touched his hands and forehead to the stones.

The emperor only nodded casually to them. Then he turned his attention to what lay before them all. They did the same as Parahan got to his feet.

The view spread out below the pyramid left all three of the newcomers silent and staring. Before them horsemen rode in complex patterns, fighting mock combats with long spears and swords, shooting at targets, and racing down grassy strips set on either side of the sprawling field. Periodically, at the rear of the performing troops, something would boom. In the distance, earth would explode into the air and fall.

"What was that?" Evvy cried the first time it happened.

"Boom-dust," Briar muttered in Imperial. His hands were clenched into fists on the arms of his chair. He still had night-mares of the time pirates had attacked his and Rosethorn's home with the brand-new weapon, maining and killing many.

Parahan sat cross-legged on the stones between Rosethorn and Briar. "I don't know your name for it," he said in *tiyon*, half turning to look up at Briar. "Here it's called *zayao*. And I think they have the right to call it whatever they want, since they invented it." His gaze sharpened as he took more notice of Briar's hands and the movement under his skin. "Raiya be kind, what happened to you?"

Briar sighed and stretched out one hand so Parahan could have a closer look. "I was trying out a little tattoo," he explained. "Something with vegetable dyes I made up myself — I'm a green mage. I applied it with one of my foster-sisters' needles."

"She's a stitch witch," Evvy said cheerfully. She never tired of the story. She spent so much of her time feeling stupid around Briar that it was very comforting to know he could be stupid, too.

"She is more than a stitch witch," Rosethorn corrected. "She is a thread mage. He borrowed the needles she uses in her magic."

"It wasn't like she has one set for sewing and one for magic," Briar protested. "Her sewing *is* her magic. *Anyway*," he told Parahan, after glaring at Rosethorn, "it should have worked. Only the flowers I put on my hands weren't just pictures after all."

"They grow," Evvy explained. "They bloom and move around and die and grow some more. And they're growing up along his arms. I think it's *splendid*."

"Hmm," Parahan said. "May I?"

Briar let the man turn his hands over and inspect them. Parahan saw deep pockmarks in Briar's palms, reminders of a determined thorny vine that had not wanted to release the boy when he was younger. The man noted that the flowers and leaves grew under Briar's fingernails. When he lifted Briar's hand to let the silk robes slide back, he even saw that the colorful plants continued up the young man's arms, moving and opening leaves or new blossoms and sending out new stems as he watched.

Finally he said cautiously, "I find it very interesting that a young fellow would want to put flowers on his hands. Might you have been trying to cover over something, oh, between your thumb and forefinger, perhaps?"

Evvy covered her giggles with both hands. This friendly stranger had guessed Briar's secret. Before he had been a mage, Briar was a thief and jailbird, with two arrests to his discredit — and two jailhouse X tattoos, one on the web between the thumb and forefinger of each hand. He'd been arrested a third time, about to go to hard labor for life, when a mage had seen the magic in Briar and brought him to Rosethorn.

Briar glanced at the throne and its occupant. Neither the emperor nor his immediate court was within earshot. "I'm reformed, practically," Briar said quietly, his voice very dry. "And I do so much more damage as a *nanshur* than I did as a thief."

Parahan released him with a sigh. "I am only envious," he confessed. "Had I been a mage of your skills, instead of a spoiled warrior prince, I might have stopped my uncle from selling me to the emperor. You *were* wondering about my attire." He shook his wrists, making his chains jingle.

This interested Rosethorn. "Your uncle sold you?"

Parahan grinned, displaying strong white teeth. "You should pity him. I know he would much rather have killed me so he would be sure to inherit my father's throne someday. Sadly my uncle did not dare to do so." Parahan looked out over the field. The horsemen were forming in brigades to either side of the great field. "In Kombanpur — where I come from, one of the Realms of the Sun — it is very bad luck to kill a twin. I have the good fortune to be one such, with my sister Soudamini. Actually I am not certain if my uncle believes in bad luck in general, or if he simply knows what would happen if Souda learned I was dead by his hand." He winked one large brown eye at Evvy. "I'm the easygoing one. Souda is the battle cat."

Anything else they might have discussed was drowned out as musicians came forward to strike drums, blow horns, and hammer large gongs. The explosions stopped; those who had set them off cleared away. In the distance Evvy could see a line of color. Slowly it grew larger and larger still, until she realized that she was looking at line after line of armored soldiers, flanked by officers and flag bearers. After them came teams of camels pulling catapults and companies of archers.

Spaced between companies of foot soldiers, archers, and the teams that worked with each catapult and its ammunition were men and women on horseback. Many of them wore the long black silk robe and cap of a *nanshur*. Evvy did not need the wardrobe to identify the role played by the new arrivals. To her ambient magic, the power of these people blazed from around their necks and wrists. They had to be wearing some kind of spell-worked stones as jewelry. If they embroidered occult signs or threaded

their stones on cotton or linen, they would be just as obvious to Rosethorn and Briar.

None of them spoke as the army marched, and marched, and marched, its members coming all the way up to the foot of the imperial pavilion. When at last the drums, gongs, and horns fell silent and there was no more movement on the ground, the army stretched as far as Evvy could see. Her skin was crawling with goose bumps. She had never seen such a large force in her life.

The officers yelled something, and the warriors shouted in *tiyon*. Three times they repeated it, making Evvy's ears ring. It took her a moment to realize they had cried out, "Long live the emperor!"

When they stopped, the emperor left his throne and walked down to the foot of the dais, where those soldiers who were fairly close could see him. Two black-clad mages moved forward to stand each at one of his elbows. Then he raised his hands and began to speak.

Stones at the mages' necks blazed. The emperor's voice rolled across the field like thunder. He praised their strength; he praised their obedience to him and to the gods of Gyongxe. He promised his warriors battles and honor and tales to tell their grandchildren. Last of all he cried, "Death to the enemies of Yanjing!"

All of the people who stood before him — even the riders had dismounted by then — dropped to their hands and knees. Nine times in utter silence they touched their foreheads to the ground. The last time they remained in that position.

"I am really starting to hate that ceremony," Briar muttered softly in Imperial.

The emperor and his mages walked away around the far side of the dais. Other mages and nobles streamed off the dais after him.

"Are we supposed to follow?" Rosethorn asked Parahan.

"I have been placed in charge of escorting you to the Hall of Imperial Greetings," the big man explained. "We're waiting for the crowd to ease. Then we can go."

"Why didn't he greet us here?" Evvy wanted to know.

"I would imagine because he wanted you to admire one of his armies," Parahan replied blandly. "He likes to show them off to visitors."

For a long moment no one said anything at all. Evvy was wondering if she was the only one left breathless by Parahan's words when Rosethorn said, "This is just *one* of his armies?"

"Oh, yes," Parahan said quietly. "Specifically it is the one for Center Yanjing. I have also seen the armies for North Yanjing and South Yanjing. South is much larger. I am told North was much larger, before he decided to fight three of his neighbors at once."

"Why does he show you all his armies?" Briar asked.

Parahan shook his head. "Oh, it's nothing to do with me. He likes to show them off to everyone. He reminds his friends that he is a dread enemy, and he gets word to his enemies that it would be better if they surrendered."

"And his guests?" Rosethorn asked. "Our home in Emelan is neither friend nor enemy. Why show them to us?"

Parahan replied, "So you will tell those you meet what you have seen."