

Arms-Commander (Saga of Recluce)

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L.E. Modesitt, Jr.'s Arms-Commander continues his bestselling fantasy series the Saga of Recluce, which is one the most popular in contemporary epic fantasy.

The keep of Westwind at the Roof of the World, faces attack by the adjoining land of Gallos. Arthanos, son and heir to the ailing Prefect of Gallos, wishes to destroy Westwind because the idea of a land where women rule is total anathema to him.

Westwind dispatches Saryn, their Arms-Commander, a neighboring land to seek support against the Gallosians. To secure their aid, Saryn must pledge her personal support-and any Westwind guard forces she can raise-to the defense of its ruler.

The fate of four lands, including Westwind, rest on Saryn's actions.

"An intriguing fantasy in a fascinating world."-Robert Jordan, New York Times bestselling author of The Wheel of Time series

Saga of Recluce

#1 The Magic of Recluce / #2 The Towers of Sunset / #3 The Magic Engineer / #4 The Order War / #5 The Death of Chaos / #6 Fall of Angels / #7 The Chaos Balance / #8 The White Order / #9 Colors of Chaos / #10 Magi'i of Cyador / #11 Scion of Cyador / #12 Wellspring of Chaos / #13 Ordermaster / #14 Natural Order Mage / #15 Mage-Guard of Hamor / #16 Arms-Commander / #17 Cyador's Heirs / #18 Heritage of Cyador / #19 The Mongrel Mage / #20 Outcasts of Order / #21 The Mage-Fire War (forthcoming)

Story Collection: Recluce Tales

Other Series by L.E. Modesitt, Jr.

The Imager Portfolio

The Corean Chronicles

The Spellsong Cycle

The Ghost Books

The Ecolitan Matter

L. E. MODESITT, JR. is the bestselling author of more than seventy novels encompassing two science fiction series, the Ghost Books and the Ecolitan Matter, and four fantasy series, the Imager Portfolio, the Saga of Recluce, the Spellsong Cycle and the Corean Chronicles. He lives in Cedar City, Utah.

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In the late afternoon on the Roof of the World, the guards stood silent on the practice ground, their eyes fixed on the blackness rising just above the western horizon as Istril stepped out of the main door of Tower Black and crossed the causeway. Saryn, arms-commander and former command pilot, stood beside Ryba of the swift ships of Heaven and Marshal of Westwind. The tip of the marshal's wooden practice wand touched the

ground, and she gestured toward the silver-haired guard and healer to approach.

Istril continued her measured pace toward the Marshal and the arms-commander. The other guards waited, their eyes moving from the Marshal to Istril and back again, while Saryn of the flashing blades studied the darkness rising in the western sky.

The silver-haired healer halted three paces from Ryba and inclined her head. "Marshal?"

"What do you think of that?" Ryba glanced from the pregnant and silver-haired healer to the west, beyond the imposing ice needle that was Freyja. "That has to be the engineer."

Darkness swirled into the sky, slowly turning the entire western horizon into a curtain of blackness that inexorably enfolded the sun, bringing an even earlier twilight to the Roof of the World. For a moment, Freyja shimmered white, then faded into the maroon darkness that covered the high meadows and Tower Black.

"I could already feel the shivering between the black and white," Istril said slowly. "So did Siret."

"And you didn't tell me immediately?" asked the Marshal.

"What could we have done? Besides, it's more than him. More than the healer, too. Something bigger, a lot bigger."

Ryba shook her head before asking, "Do you still think it was right to send Weryl?"

"He's all right. I can feel that." Istril paused. "That means Nylan is, too . . . but there's a lot of pain there." Her eyes glistened, even in the dimness.

"When the engineer gets into something . . . there usually is." Ryba's voice was dry.

Saryn said nothing, wondering still how Ryba could be so chill.

"He doesn't do anything unless it's important." Istril continued to look past Ryba toward the horizon.

"That just makes it worse, doesn't it?" Ryba's voice was rough.

"Yes, ser."

It's worse because you forced him out, you and your visions. But Saryn did not speak the words, nor look in at the Marshal. Visions have high prices, and deeper costs.

After another period of silence, Istril nodded, then turned and walked swiftly back across the practice ground and the causeway into the tower.

For a time, Ryba continued to study the growing darkness of a too-early night as the faces of the guards shone bloodred in the fading light. Then, Saryn gestured, silently, and the guards slipped away, filing quietly back into the tower for the duties that never ended.

The faintest of shivers ran through the ground beneath the Marshal's and the arms-commander's feet, and the meadow grasses swayed in the windless still of unnatural twilight.

Another ground shudder passed, then another, as the gloom deepened. The Marshal waited . . . and watched. Then, abruptly, she turned and walked back across the practice ground and the causeway into Tower Black.

Long after the Marshal had returned to Tower Black, Saryn remained on the stone causeway just outside the door to the tower, her eyes still gazing toward the west and the darkness that glowed, framing the ice peak of Freyja, as if to suggest that even the mightiest peak on the Roof of the World was bounded by forces beyond mere nature.

Between darkness and darkness. Again, she did not voice her thoughts. That, she had learned from the engineer and the singer . . . that was unwise.

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And the guards of Westwind hardened their hearts, hearts as cold and as terrible as the ice that never leaves Freyja, against the power of any man in any land under the sun. For Ryba had declared that Westwind would hold the Roof of the World for ages, and that Tower Black would stand unvanquished so long as any guard of Westwind remained.

Saryn of the black blades of death said nothing, although she demurred within her heart, for she knew that Westwind had been built of the darkness of Nylan and would stand unvanquished only until an heir of the darkness that had toppled great Cyador returned to Tower Black and cloaked the walls of Westwind in ice as cold and hard as that which covered Freyja, ages though it could be before such might come to pass.

Yet Westwind prospered, for to Ryba came women who had long since tired of bondage and of bearing children who, if male, too often died in warfare and mayhem or under the yoke of great labor and, if female, bore children until they died as well. For such women, the cold of the Roof of the World was the least of tribulations, and in their freedom, they took up the twin blades first forged by Nylan, then by Huldran, then others, who had learned well from the master of darkness.

And Saryn trained each and every one of them so that the least able of any who carried the twin blades was more than a match for twice her number, and with the bows formed of order itself by Nylan, even a man-at-arms in full armor was but as a fat boar ready for slaughter.

With those blades and shafts, they dispatched the brigands of the Westhorns so that

traders and others could travel the heights unmolested, and for that safety, all were content to pay tariff to Ryba. Still, those who would cross the heights traveled but in late spring, summer, and early fall; for once the snows fell and the ice

winds blew, none traveled the Roof of the World, save the angels

of Westwind.

All was well in Westwind in the days that followed the fall of

Cyador, for though the winters were long and chill, Tower Black

was warm and well-provisioned . . .

Book of Ayrlyn Section I [Restricted Text]

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With the coming of spring on the Roof of the World, most of the snow around Tower Black and its outbuildings had finally melted, rushing down the stone-lined channels to the reservoir and the waterfall. The one exception was on a shaded section of the north side, where more than a yard of snow and ice yet remained. Once the reservoir was full, the water that came over the spillway followed the old channel to the cliff, where it poured downward into the small lake below, created by another stone-and-earth dam that Nylan had designed to provide power for the mill and ceramic works beyond the dam, although Saryn had been the one to oversee the actual construction.

Saryn walked swiftly along the south side of the stone road from the tower up toward the smithy. So early in the season, the ground around the tower was swampy, and her boots would have sunk up to the calf everywhere except the arms practice field, which had been laid over stone and was well drained, and the stone-paved roads and causeways. The starflowers had begun to bud, covering the stone cairns to the south and east with green, but the delicate blooms bent to a gentle though still-chill breeze out of the north. The south-facing sloping meadow to the north and east of the tower was a pale green haze. Saryn could remember all too well when it had been seared gray. Now, even the small stone cupola from where Nylan had wielded the last laser in all of Candar, and perhaps the first and last in the world, had been removed, its stones incorporated in the foundation of the larger complex of towers and quarters that Ryba had ordered begun the previous year. Just to the south of the foundation and the courses of stones that reached head height in some places was a low building-the so-called guest cottage-where messengers or travelers could stay, not that the interior was all that elaborate.

A squad of junior guards was running through warm-up exercises as Saryn left the practice field behind. They were the newest of more than two companies of guards-nearly two hundred armed women-and another hundred who had some weapons training. Saryn shook her head. Who-except Ryba and Nylan-would have believed Westwind could have

mounted an effective armed force of so many women? And who among the marines and ship's officers who had landed more than ten years earlier would have realized that those ten years would have been filled with fighting off attack after attack—largely because Westwind was controlled by and for women?

She kept striding up the stone-paved road, and, shortly, she stepped through the half-open door into the far warmer air of the smithy. Both anvils were in use. Cessya and Huldran worked a short-sword blade on the larger, and Daryn and Ydrall used the smaller to forge arrowheads, with Zyendra standing by. Nunca and Gresla—two junior guards—alternated working the forge bellows. Neither Huldran nor Cessya looked up until Cessya took the partly worked blade from the anvil with the tongs and returned it to the forge for reheating.

Daryn gave Saryn a quick glance and a nod, but did not miss a beat with his hammer. The year after Nylan and Arylyn had departed Westwind, Daryn had asked to be allowed to help at the forge, pointing out that his artificial foot made him a poor field worker and an even poorer hunter, but that it mattered little in the smithy. Because he'd been willing to undertake the dirtier work and pump the bellows whenever asked, Huldran had agreed . . . and Ryba had said nothing. Although Ydrall had begun almost a year before Daryn, after nine years she and the one-footed man were about equal in smithing skills, and both were adequate smiths.

Daryn had also become a father twice, and both his son and daughter were with Hryessa, the brunette local who'd shown such fire and such a zest for arms that she'd become the guard captain of the second company. Saryn had no doubts that Hryessa was act...

Other Books

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