

The Crooked Ladder: Heirs of Regula 2

C. R. Bracher

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In the redemptive fantasy novel The Crooked Ladder, a cursed prince fights to rise above his circumstances.

In C. R. Bracher's introspective fantasy novel *The Crooked Ladder*, a broken prince seeks to claim his birthright.

This second series title opens in dramatic form, with sullen Prince Eldred running from warriors who wish him harm. He has completed his quest to defeat a dragon only to be cursed with a condition that causes others to become violent when they are near him. He comes home a broken man, his right cheek "plastered with pallid dead-looking skin, his left hand scarred and ugly," who worries that he is "beyond repair."

Eldred strives to come to grips with his physical injuries and the trauma he endured. Though he had hoped for more adventures, these expectations are dashed. He's set up as somewhat of a tragic figure. But then he discovers that his father, King Alfred—who relies on Eldred's magical powers to maintain his grip on the kingdom—is immune to his curse. Alfred decides to help his son by having him undergo a coming-of-age trial to gain the skills necessary to inherit the kingdom. Still, Alfred is a complex figure: though he proclaims to want to help his son, he is an unforgiving leader driven by a need for power, and he's often more of an obstacle to Eldred than a help.

Eldred's mother displays a similar lack of virtue, scheming to entrap her son in an arranged marriage despite his protests. And the story is populated further by an engaging mix of loyal friends and members of the court, though these secondary figures often behave in a similar fashion, foiling Eldred's plans and reinforcing his disappointments.

Eldred's story is set in a dark fantasy world where the spark of magic needed to defend the kingdom is both rare and dangerous—powerful enough, in fact, to subsume the identities of others and allow for the creation of superhuman pods of warriors. The neighboring kingdoms are also violent in nature, and there's a lingering sense of decay in the countryside's abandoned homes. Word of dragons, images of which are enough to stop the prince cold, flesh out the world further.

Alfred's trial for Eldred is completed midway through the novel, after which Eldred turns his attention to the neighboring kingdom, which invaded his land. He prepares for battle. Here and elsewhere, each scene heightens the novel's overall sense of despair; Eldred suspects that all is not as it seems to be. A sense of foreboding pervades the story's progression, even as the prince is forced on a halting path forward. Once the prince attains the freedom to work through his disappointment and find new hope, though, the story blossoms—though at its end, Eldred's future is still in question.

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JEREMIAH ROOD (September 4, 2023)

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