



Book One

Unlegendary Dragon

The Magical Kids of Lore

By
R.L. Ullman



Unlegendary Dragon
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for Matthew

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ONE

Welcome to Lore

“Get him! He’s the one!”

I’m running for my life. The funny thing is, I’m always running for my life. Each time my pursuers are different, yet the scenario is always the same. I’m wearing something around my neck. Something they want.

For once, I just wish I knew what it was.

My heart pounds as I dash through the dark, menacing forest, my footsteps betraying me as they crackle through the fallen leaves. When I finally reach the large, knotty tree I can either turn left or right. For some reason, I always choose left. Then, as usual, I trip over my untied shoelaces and fall hard on my hands and knees.

Now comes the bad part.

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Within seconds I'm surrounded. There must be a dozen of them. I can't see their faces, only the angry red pupils in the narrow slits of their eyes. I stagger to my feet but there's no way to escape and I wonder what kind of evil has come to claim my soul this time.

But when they step into the moonlight I gasp, because instead of the usual werewolves or lizard-men, I'm surrounded by... pickles?!

I do a double-take but there's no mistaking it. I'm actually being hunted down by a gang of burly, humanoid pickles! Their faces are all bright green, like they're half-sour, except for the big boss lingering in the back. His face is more olive-colored, like he's full sour.

If there's one thing I hate, it's full sour pickles.

"Connor?"

Huh? That's different. For a second, I thought I heard a woman calling my name.

"Connor, wake up!"

Then, someone vigorously shakes my left arm.

Suddenly, the deadly pickles disappear and I blink my eyes open. I feel drool running down the side of my mouth and wipe it away with the back of my sleeve. Then, I look over and see Mom at the wheel of 'The Clunker,' looking at me with her big, blue eyes and that goofy smile she always gets when she thinks we're doing something cool.

"Hey, sleepy head," Mom says. "We're almost there."

"How long was I out?" I ask, noticing that it's now

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dark outside. I check the dashboard clock but it's permanently busted at 3:23 p.m. so that's no help. I catch a glimpse of myself in the side view mirror and wince. The dark circles around my blue eyes make them look like archery targets, and my long, messy hair could pass for a straw bird's nest.

"About an hour," Mom says as she taps her fingers on the steering wheel. "You were muttering something about pickles. You seemed very distressed."

"You have no idea," I say, watching her silver wedding band bounce up and down. She's worn that ring my whole life even though my dad abandoned us when I was a baby. She never talks about him but says wearing it 'keeps the undesirables away,' whatever that means.

"You were snoring so loudly I thought the engine was dying," she says. "Luckily, the radio drowned out the noise. Well, mostly anyway."

The radio? Ah, so that's where that grating static sound is coming from. But I'm not surprised she thought the engine was dying. Our Chevrolet Caprice station wagon is so old it's a moving violation. I nicknamed it 'The Clunker' because every time we start it up, it sputters so violently that I expect a white surrender flag to pop out of the hood. It's all Mom could afford, but it's been surprisingly reliable considering it's the only vehicle on the road that's still rocking wood paneling.

The radio usually picks up static, but occasionally we get some old-timer station like the polka channel. And

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trust me, static is much better than the polka channel.

“Why did you wake me?” I ask, rubbing my eyes.

“Because we’re close,” Mom says, doing a little happy dance in her seat. “We’re almost at Lore.”

“Yippee,” I mutter sarcastically. “What was their slogan again? Lore, the Dullest Place on Earth?”

“Oh, stop it,” Mom says. “Let’s give it a chance.”

“Just like we gave Lubbock, Detroit, and Poughkeepsie a chance?” I ask. “Not to mention, Little Hope, Death Valley, and Misery Bay? We gave those places a chance too and look at us now. I’m tired of giving chances. I’m tired of moving.”

“Connor,” Mom says, her voice softening, “I know it hasn’t been easy. But now that I have my nursing degree, things will be more stable. My new job at Lore Hospital is a good one. I’ll be working the afternoon and night shifts for a while, but it pays well and it’s steady. Who knows? Maybe we’ll even settle down there.”

“Settle down in boring Lore?!” I say, crossing my arms and slumping in my seat. “I’d rather listen to polka.”

“You know, it might be better than you think,” Mom says. “I mean, I didn’t even know Lore existed until I found the job, but it’s not like anywhere we’ve lived before. It’s an island off the coast of New England so that’s different. Plus, the middle school has a great reputation and there are all kinds of extracurricular clubs you can join.”

“I’m not joining any clubs,” I say.

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I don't want to hurt Mom's feelings but I've heard it all before. How great this new place will be and all of the amazing experiences we'll have there. And guess what? We always end up moving for a better job, a better opportunity. I mean, don't get me wrong, I love Mom and I know she's doing her best, but she's right, it hasn't been easy. Especially for me.

"Did you know Lore has a famous Renaissance Faire?" she tries next. "People come from all over to see it. I read that it's the only Renaissance Faire in the world that operates year-round due to the unseasonably warm weather—even in winter. That should be fun."

"I'm not going to any ridiculous Renaissance Faire," I say. "It's not my thing."

"Well, well, Mr. Judgy-Judgy," she says. "How do you know it's not your thing? They're wonderful reenactments of medieval times. You really feel like you've stepped back in history. Have you even been to a Renaissance Faire before?"

"Well, no," I admit reluctantly. "But I'm not a kid anymore. I'm twelve which is too old for all of that make-believe sword and sorcery stuff."

"Well, forgive me for even mentioning it then," Mom says. "I forgot you were so grown up. Of course, I still like that make-believe stuff and I'm an adult."

"That's debatable," I mutter.

"Very funny," she says. "Look, I get it. We've moved around a lot and that's not what I wanted for you... for

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us. But this one will be different. I feel it in my bones. We also get to live with my Aunt Agnes.”

“Is that really a selling point?” I ask, rolling my eyes. “She never remembers anything, including my name.”

“I admit she’s a little kooky,” Mom says, “but she’s the only relative we have left and she loves you. Besides, it’ll be nice to have family watching you for once while I’m at work.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” I say. “I’m—”

“—twelve,” Mom finishes. “Yeah, I know. But that’s still a little young to be on your own. Plus, you can hang out with Tito. He’s the cutest little chihuahua ever.”

“Tito has no teeth!” I exclaim. “His tongue hangs out and he drools all over the floor. Don’t you remember Aunt Agnes’ last visit? I stepped barefoot in one of Tito’s saliva pools and wiped out on the kitchen floor!”

“He’s a sweet dog, Connor,” she says. “I’m sure you’ll adjust.” Then, she points and says excitedly, “Look, there’s the sign for the bridge.”

I look up and see a big, green sign that reads:

WELCOME TO LORE

POPULATION: 16,531

BRIDGE AHEAD

Mom raises her hand for a high five but I leave her hanging. Then, she steers ‘The Clunker’ up a ramp and onto a long suspension bridge perched over the water.

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Surprisingly, we're the only car driving in either direction.

"Are you sure other people live here?" I ask.

"Of course, other people live here," she says. "You saw the population number on the sign, right?"

I did but it sure doesn't feel like anyone else lives here. Then, I notice something strange. There's a thick wall of mist hanging like a fluffy curtain in the center of the bridge, extending from the water up to the sky.

"Um, what's up with that?" I ask.

"Oh, I read about the mist effect," Mom says. "Apparently, it's caused by the unique atmospheric conditions found only in Lore."

"Great," I say. "Well, since we won't be able to see anything on the island, maybe we should turn around."

"Ha," Mom says matter-of-factly. "The mist is only around the perimeter of the island. Once you're on the island itself you can see perfectly fine."

"Gee," I say, "that sounds completely normal."

"Oh, Connor," Mom says, "just give it a chance."

Then, she drives us straight through the mist, and when we pop out the other side, the radio miraculously connects to a real station and we hear—

"—listening to WLOR, Lore's one-and-only radio station. And now for local news. A man was issued the largest late fee in library history when he returned a book he checked out more than fifty years ago. The librarian recognized the man as her long-lost ex-husband who not only owed her six hundred dollars for the book, but over

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sixty thousand dollars from the divorce agreement he never paid her. In other news, a small dog ate a giant pair of underpants...”

Are. You. Kidding. Me? If this is what passes for news, then life around here is going to be as interesting as watching paint dry.

“... dog is expected to make a full recovery. The underpants, however, did not survive the encounter. And finally, late last night over one hundred rings were stolen from the Lore Jewelry Shoppe. That’s right, the jewelry shop was burglarized but only rings were taken. Police suspect a man was responsible who either got spooked and ran away before he could steal other items or he just needed some backup rings on hand for his wedding day. Of course, if you have any information about this theft please contact the Lore Police Department. Now, back to the music. Here’s a little ditty from the Old Folks Band and their number one, chart-smashing hit, Polka, Polka, Polka.”

I turn off the music.

“Fine,” Mom says. “We’re almost there anyway.”

We exit the bridge onto the island and I realize Mom was right. You *can* see the sky on the other side of that mist monster. I know she’s excited about this move, but deep inside, I’m hoping The Clunker conks out before we reach Aunt Agnes’ house.

I take a deep breath and breathe out. Honestly, I’m not looking forward to starting my brand new life at Lore

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Middle School. After all, classes started weeks ago so I'll be dropping right into everyone's established routines. By now, kids already have their friends, teachers have their pets, and I'll be on the outside looking in... again.

The only positive is that I can walk to school this time. I didn't tell Mom but I looked at a map of Lore last night. It looks like I could easily walk from Aunt Agnes' house to school, which is great so I don't have to show up for my first day in The Clunker.

Talk about embarrassing.

We turn off the main road and go down a side street where all of the houses look the same. I think Mom called them Cape Cod-style houses, which are kind of boxy with shingled siding. Aunt Agnes' house will be the first house I've ever lived in. Until now, we've only lived in apartments. Lots and lots of apartments.

Our last place was pretty typical. It was a tiny, one-bedroom walk-up on the sixth floor. Mom always gives me the bedroom, but she was working so hard I insisted she take it this time. I slept on the couch.

We were there for almost a year while she worked as a supermarket cashier by day and finished her nursing degree at night. When she was at school, I'd stay down the hall with our neighbor, Ms. Schmiedak. She was a nice lady but her apartment smelled like bananas. After I finished my homework she'd let me watch TV. Fortunately, she never checked my assignments, so let's just say I watched a *lot* of TV.

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But I was proud of Mom. She worked hard to graduate from nursing school. She said it would give us a chance to put down roots and I believed her. Except, I thought we'd be putting down roots at our old place.

I still remember the day she pulled the rug out from under me. She told me she got a nursing job in Lore and we'd be moving in with Aunt Agnes and Tito the toothless wonder. I was in shock. I mean, I wanted us to put down roots too. But not in Lore. Anywhere but Lore.

"We're here!" Mom says suddenly.

"Ugh, shoot me now," I quip.

"You know, Connor," she says, "we're going to be here for a while so it's okay for you to like it. Things are going to be different. Promise me you'll try."

"Uh-huh," I say, rolling my eyes.

Mom pulls The Clunker into the dirt driveway of a small, gray, Cape Cod-style house that's missing several shingles. But that's not all. Nearly all of the blue shutters are hanging off their hinges and the lawn is a tangled mess of weeds. I don't know what I was expecting but it certainly wasn't this.

"You know, it's not too late to go back," I offer.

"Oh, stop it," Mom says. "Here's Aunt Agnes now."

Just then, the front door opens and Aunt Agnes comes out holding Tito in her arms. I have to say, Aunt Agnes' style is certainly unique. Her long, gray hair stops at her waist and she's wearing a black headband with a moon symbol on it. Silver bracelets line her arms and her

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purple dress is long and flowy. I think Mom once called her a ‘free spirit,’ whatever that means.

I flash a pleading look at Mom but she ignores me, turns off The Clunker, and signals for me to get out.

“Kevin!” Aunt Agnes calls out when she sees me.

“Connor,” I remind her.

“Connor!” she calls out, giving me a side hug.

“Tito,” I say with a nod, acknowledging the bug-eyed creature wedged into her arms.

Tito lets out a low growl.

“Thank you for letting us stay with you,” Mom says, giving Aunt Agnes a big hug.

“Oh, it’s my pleasure, Jennie,” Aunt Agnes says. “Besides, it’ll be nice to spend some time with, um, my little buddy here. It’ll be groovy, won’t it, buddy?”

“Totally groovy,” I reply, dreading the number of times I’m about to be called ‘buddy.’ I open the trunk, grab my backpack, and pull out both of our suitcases.

“Is that all you have?” Aunt Agnes asks.

“Yep,” I say. “When you move around as much as we do, you learn to travel light.”

My new bedroom is already small but having to share it with mountains of Aunt Agnes’ clutter makes it feel downright claustrophobic. Every surface is covered with dusty boxes, tattered photo albums, and ancient

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household objects like a typewriter, a record player, and a rotary phone. Aunt Agnes apologized and said she'd get it out tomorrow, but I told her not to bother. After all, I'm hoping we won't be here long.

I clear the bed and then look at myself in the cloudy wall mirror. Mom keeps saying I'll be tall when I grow up but my growth spurt must be on a permanent vacation. I'm still small for my age and rail-thin. Hopefully, that'll change, but there's one thing I know I'm stuck with.

I lift the hair over my left ear and cringe.

For some reason, my right ear is perfectly normal but my left ear is super pointy at the top. Wherever I go, kids love to tease me about it. They call me names like 'Santa's little helper' or 'Mini-Dracula.' Unfortunately, the doctors didn't have any explanation for it. According to Mom, I should just ignore the kids who make fun of me but that's way easier said than done.

I try to hide it by wearing my hair long, but I wish I just looked like everyone else.

Well, I can't wait for school tomorrow. Not.

I remove a heap of floral-patterned pillows from the bed and sneeze in the resulting dust cloud. Then, I flick off the bedside lamp, climb into bed, and pull the covers over my body. That's when I realize something is wrong.

Why does the back of my head feel... moist?

I spring up and flick on the lamp when I see a small creature staring back at me.

"Tito? What are you doing here?"

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Rudely, he doesn't answer and that's when I see his wet tongue splayed out on my pillow. Great. There's no way I'm sharing my bed with a slobber fountain. I try to pick him up but he GROWLS.

"Listen, Tito," I warn, pointing my finger at him. "This room isn't big enough for the both of us. And in case you didn't notice, I'm the human around—"

CLANG!

The sharp noise catches us both off guard and we stare at each other for a second. Then, Tito turns toward the window and YIPS!

What was that? It sounded like it came from the front yard. I turn out the light and head to the window. But when I look into the moonlit night, I do a double-take, because standing behind the Clunker is something I can't believe I'm seeing.

It's... a monster?!

Except, it's a small monster, maybe smaller than me, with green skin, a pig-like nose, and big, neon-yellow eyes. It's peeking out from behind our car, and when it sees me looking back, its electric eyes go wide and it takes off with surprising speed, disappearing into the night.

I blink a few times and stare into the darkness but I don't see it again. And that's when I realize I must be more tired than I thought because now I'm imagining things. So, I shake my head, make my way back to bed, and lay down next to Tito.

Then, I fail to get some sleep.

Connor Pendridge

(sketched outside Aunt's house)

Clearly
unhappy
about moving
to Lore

Prefers to keep
to himself—
probably due
to so many
moves



Pointy left
ear — he's
unaware of
significance

Medium
height and
thin build
— scrappy

Will he be ready for what's coming
his way in Lore?