



Dragon Slayer

P rincipal Martin was waiting for me as I pulled my school bus into the middle-school driveway on a bright spring morning. His eyes looked tired, his face tight with a hint of annoyance.

"We have a new student starting next Monday," he said after I'd opened the door and let the kids out. "He's disabled, and I'm afraid we'll have to switch you over to another bus."

I knew what bus he was talking about. It was number seventeen, a used vehicle we'd had for several years. It was equipped with a special lift to load a wheelchair. In poor re-

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pair and probably not even usable, the lift served to bring the district into compliance with federal accessibility guidelines. Our small school system had never had to accommodate a wheelchair student—a blessing in more ways than one.

Principal Martin sighed. "He's in seventh grade," he added. "We have to construct a ramp to the middle-school entrance and remodel the boys' bathroom. Plus I think the cafeteria door and lunch line will have to be redesigned."

The antiquated junior-high building had no ground-level entrance.

The school itself badly needed to be replaced. Now expensive changes would have to be made—changes that were necessary but which would still tax the reserves of a school system already struggling with an overburdened budget.

I sympathized with the look on the principal's face. Old number seventeen wasn't my choice of buses to drive, and I didn't have a clue how to work the lift.

But by Monday morning, the construction of a new ramp had begun, plans were being drawn for the lunchroom changes, and I was headed out into the country with one quick lesson in hydraulic-lift operation under my belt.

None of our preparations, however, could have prepared us for Alan Hasselroth.

My bus kids weren't happy about switching to the old, noisy bus, and they all complained as they walked up the steps. But the moans and groans faded to silence as we pulled up to the Hasselroth drive. A small, tow-headed boy in a wheelchair struggled down the gravel lane. Even from where I sat, I could see the sweat on his forehead as he negotiated the bumpy path. We watched for a moment, not knowing what to do.

"Let me out. I'll help." The voice behind me belonged to Ross Miller, the biggest football player on the varsity squad. He trotted down the drive while I busied myself trying to figure out the wheelchair lift.

"To the coach, my man!" a voice cried. Alan was waving his arms about and pointing in the direction of the bus. "I'll make sure the king rewards you most handsomely." Ross, who had never seemed to have much of a sense of humor, surprised me by grinning as he pushed the chair up to the bus.

On closer inspection, Alan wasn't as small as he'd appeared. His broad shoulders were muscular, as were his upper arms and hands. The blue eyes peering out from under a shock of

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blond hair were wide and bright. Somehow this kid didn't fit my idea of "physically challenged."

"Ah, there you are," Alan said. "I was afraid this sixty-passenger pumpkin had no driver."

"Fear no more, kind sir," I teased back. "Your chariot awaits, and your driver, Miss James by name, is at your disposal." I bowed as I pushed the remote—and prayed. The lift cranked noisily, and metal shrieked against metal as it lowered halfway to the ground. And there it stuck.

"Well, Driver James," Alan said, grinning as he surveyed the cranky lift, "it looks as though getting me aboard today will be a bit of a tussle."

A tussle, to say the least. The temperamental lift refused to come down. With the help of several more senior football players, we finally managed to get it back into the bus. Then we bodily carried Alan in through the front door while others stuffed the wheelchair in through the back door. When at last he was seated and secured, I noticed that beads of sweat had again popped out on his face. The whole affair had been hard work for him too.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "I promise I'll get the hang of this. Sorry to make it such a problem."

"Problems are my life," he said. "This happens a lot. It's okay." His smile was sincere.

When we pulled up to the middle school, the procedure was reversed, except this time Alan had to be carried up the school steps and into the front hallway. He maintained his

sense of humor and cheerful attitude through it all. I knew the difficulty with the bathrooms and the lunchroom was still ahead, and I was embarrassed by our lack of preparation—mine, the school's, the district's. How could we have worried about the extra effort and expense of accommodating this boy whose days—even under the best of conditions—were so difficult? I knew I was getting a small glimpse of what hard work life is for a person with a disability in a world not tailored to his or her needs.

That afternoon a crowd gathered around Alan as he was carried onto the bus. He was waving a cardboard sword and carrying an old bicycle helmet that could be mistaken for the headpiece of a knight's suit of armor...if you had a great imagination.

Strong young hands lifted him into the bus and down the aisle while others pushed and pulled the wheelchair into the back. They were all there to help when we reached the Hasselroth driveway, and I just stood out of the way, not minding the commotion one bit. It was good to see the kids so concerned about a fellow classmate.

"Hey, Alan," I called as two classmates helped him negotiate the gravel lane. "What's with the sword and helmet?"

He turned around and leaned over the side of the wheelchair. "I'm Sir Lancelot in the school play," he yelled back. "They had to give me the part...I'm permanently attached to this horse!"

It made me smile. *What a wonderful addition to our school*, I thought. A kid like Alan brings out wonderful things in everyone. And how fitting that he should play Sir Lancelot. After all, he spends every day of his life slaying dragons.

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