



Timetalks



Alfraeda and the Easter rescue

It was the first really warm day of the year, and it had arrived just in time for the Easter holidays. 2020 had been a terrible year for weather; storm Ciara, followed almost immediately by storm Dennis had created havoc for many parts of the country, especially in the Calder Valley, and there had been several smaller, but still fairly wild storms to follow. People were fed up and ready for some sunshine.

High up on Grinton moor in north Yorkshire, the Manning family were sitting down to a picnic. Consisting of mum and dad, Gemma and Danny, and their two children eight-year-old Freya and Loic, aged five, they had parked on the verge of the quiet road that climbed out of Redmire on its way to Grinton and Reeth.

For Danny, this was like coming home. As a child, along with his mum and dad, his two older brothers, Martijn and Wouter, and his dad's younger brother, Uncle David, he visited the area most years. Later, they were joined by the young lady who would marry his uncle and become Auntie Sue. They spent many hours wandering the moors, climbing rocks, building dams in the numerous streams, exploring Aysgarth Falls, and when warm enough, swimming in the stream at West Burton.

Now a grown man himself, Danny wanted his children to experience the type of childhood he had enjoyed, hence the visit to Yorkshire. The first stop had been Bradford, where his aunt and uncle still lived, and a trip to climb the Cow and Calf rocks, something he had been doing for over 40 years and a 'must do' for every time he came north from his home in Surrey.

That was yesterday; today they had travelled further north, with their aunt and uncle, for a day out in Wensleydale and Swaledale. Unfortunately, it was still too cold for a quick dip in the pool at West Burton, but absolutely perfect for a picnic on the moors. They had left Auntie Sue and Uncle David at the old Medieval fortress of Bolton Castle, where they were both working, intending to return there later, and then driven through the village and up Hargill Lane and onto the moor.

As they rattled across the cattle grid and onto the highest point of the moor, Freya decreed that this would be the perfect place to stop. The rest of the family were in total agreement, so Danny pulled their BMW onto the verge, and climbed out to enjoy the splendid view that was on offer. Freya and Loic wanted to be off, ready to explore, but Gemma, busy unpacking the blankets and picnic basket from the boot, cautioned them to stay with her and their dad, explaining that the moors can be a dangerous place.

The honour of choosing the exact spot to eat went to Loic, and after making themselves comfortable on the blanket that Gemma had spread out, the family settled down to enjoy their food. The sun was warm on their backs, and the slight breeze

carried with it the call of the curlews returning from their winter at the coast, and the tumbling display flight and 'peewit' call of the lapwings was another harbinger of spring. It was a beautiful, peaceful scene, that was, unfortunately, soon to be shattered.

A few miles to the south was Bolton Castle which they had left shortly before. Uncle David and Auntie Susan were very busy. Encouraged by the beautiful spring weather, families from across the north had followed the Mannings' example and had headed to the moors to enjoy a day out. The destination of many was the building that dominated the western end of the village, Bolton Castle. Now over 600 years old, the Orde-Powlett family who maintain it and can trace their family back to the original owners, had spent the winter rewiring the building and improving the presentation of the rooms, many of which are completely intact, and afford a good representation of how we think they might have looked all those years ago. As such, many people were keen to see the transformation and to find out what was on offer.

It was Auntie Sue's and Uncle David's job to work with the visitors flooding into the castle, of which there were many, the car park already full and cars parking all over the grass areas below the wild boar pen. Dressed in the clothing of people in the 15th Century, Goodwife Sue and Master David, as they were now called, were telling the guests all about life in Medieval England, especially as to how they celebrated Easter, this hugely important time of year for people of the Christian faith. Children could paint hard-boiled eggs, then go on a trail round the courtyard to find some eggs already painted with letters that would give them a clue to a room they needed to visit, the chapel. The chapel's altar was arranged with a 'Paschal' candle to represent the light of Jesus and was also covered in thorns to show Jesus' suffering on the cross. Here the children could collect a coin, money from Maundy Thursday, and for those involved it would be almost like time travel, copying the customs of children from hundreds of years ago.

There was another custom on offer for the children to experience; a much more modern one in which the prize for completion would be a chocolate egg. Past and present would then come together. The search for this challenge again involved finding an egg, although this one would be much larger than the hens' eggs involved so far, and hidden in the highest room of the castle, Lord Scrope's bedroom. What was the trophy they were all looking for, then? It was a dragon's egg, or at least what Goodwife Sue and Master David thought a dragon's egg should look like, seeing as neither of them had ever seen one before.

Unbeknown to nearly all of the people in the castle, and only suspected of by one or two of the others, there was someone there who could tell them exactly what a dragon's egg looked like; Alfraeda. The problem with this is, of course, Alfraeda is a dragon, and consequently is unable to speak, and most people would not believe in her even if they saw her, especially the grown-ups. For the few who might believe, the lies told hundreds of years ago, when people and dragons lived together, about dragons being horrible and fierce creatures who would eat anyone they met, are still believed by most people today. Consequently, it would be hard for Alfraeda to persuade them to sit still while she tried to explain that simply wasn't true.

Sadly, experience over the years had taught her it was best to stay hidden and not reveal herself to humans. Children were fine, and she loved the occasions, like today,

when the children would play with her, even though they were unaware they were playing with a dragon, as she looked exactly like a maze, Alfraeda's disguise for the last 20 years. Dragons have this ability to change their shape, and people from the past used to talk about 'shape shifters' that prowled the night, but this again is another story and belief long forgotten, fortunately for Alfraeda, because Bolton Castle had been her home for over 600 years, ever since it had been first built. Her first disguise had been the north-eastern tower, which grown-ups will tell you fell down in a storm. Children all know that Alfraeda had changed her shape to look like a tower, and it was only when she had been betrayed by one naughty boy, but recued by the other castle children in the nick of time, that she had to fly away and make her home upon the moors. Refusing to believe their eyes and thinking they would be seen as going mad, the grown-ups created the story of the storm, rather than talk about a dragon which no-one had seen in several hundred years, believing them to be made-up, mythical creatures.

It was not until much later that another group of children invited her to return, and suggested that she could disguise herself as the maze, and it was as the maze that she lay in the garden today, enjoying the spring sunshine, the noise of the children playing, and wondering idly what the reaction might be if she suddenly revealed herself to all the people in the garden. Unbeknown to Alfraeda, she was only moments away from having to make that decision.

High upon the moor, the Manning family had just finished their picnic, and both Loic and Freya were keen to explore and let off steam. Gemma and Danny had been remarking upon the damage the storms of the previous two months had done to the landscape. Much of the soil had been washed away, debris deposited on road and fell, and even dry-stone walls brought down by the strength of the water. Just 50 yards from where they sat, but unseen by them as it was hidden in a dip in the ground known as a hush, the legacy of years of mining for lead, there was another result of the torrential rain. Created by the miners to carry water, the hush channel was a ready conduit for the flooding, and the force of its stream had crashed into the rotting timbers that had been inserted into the entrance of an old, disused lead mine many years ago, collapsing them and leaving a gaping hole that was an almost irresistible invitation to children to look inside to see what was there.

Already near to the unseen mine entrance, but under strict instructions not to move from that spot, Freya and Loic looked around as their parents returned the picnic basket and blanket to the car. It was only the work of minutes and, Danny and Gemma quickly returned and re-joined their children. Having already spotted the entrance to the mine, Loic set off as soon as he was given the nod by his father that he could explore further. By the time the entrance came into Danny and Gemma's view, Loic was already in the tunnel. Much like his father had been at that age, he would explore first and think about the dangers afterwards. At their parents shout to stop, Freya who had been following Loic, paused at the entrance.

"Don't you dare go in there!" said her mum, and Freya stayed where she was.

Danny immediately took out his phone, switched on the torch, and followed Loic into the tunnel. The passageway went straight for 15 yards or so, and then swung to the right. It was a further 10 yards down this passage that Danny saw Loic who had turned back as it was now becoming too dark to see. Knowing that he would probably

have done exactly the same when he was a child, Danny was reluctant to be too angry, but he also realized that Loic's impulsive nature must be curbed a little so he wouldn't keep putting himself into danger.

"Come on," he said to Loic, holding out his hand, suppressing a grin and trying to look stern. Knowing he had been naughty, Loic was a little unsure of the reaction he would get, but the look on his father's face was vaguely reassuring, so he stepped towards him., hand outstretched. The sudden shudder, followed by a hissing sound, then a roar, took both of them by surprise. Danny stepped forward and covered Loic with his own body, just in time, as a cloud of dust enveloped them as the roaring sound continued for a few more seconds. Choking and spluttering, Danny reached out for the torch he had dropped, and flashed it over his son to make sure he was all right. Wiping dust away from his face, he could see that Loic was unharmed, two big white eyes staring back at him in shock, but with very little fear. Dad was here, so everything will be OK.

Having checked that Loic was fine, Danny turned around to find out what had happened. The torch light reflected off a wall of jumbled rock that filled the tunnel from top to bottom, a cloud of dust still swirling around that caused both father and son to cough and splutter. The roof had collapsed, and there was no way out.

Recovering quickly from the shock, Danny pressed Gemma's number on the speed dial on his phone. Unfortunately, as he already suspected it would, Gemma's phone went straight to 'answer'; trapped beneath the ground, there was no signal. All that he and Loic could do was wait.

Back on the surface, the blast of air from the roof fall had bowled over both Freya and Gemma, and they were now slowly getting back to their feet. In shock, and covered in dust just like her brother, Freya clung to her mum, not realizing what had happened and too confused to even cry. Taking Freya away from the mine entrance, Gemma sat her on the floor, cautioned her to remain there and returned to the opening. The dust was slowly clearing, and she could see that after a few metres, the tunnel was completely blocked by rock and there was no way that anyone could get past. Her shouts went unanswered, and the lack of response from her attempts to phone Danny made it immediately apparent that they were going to need help.

The crowd making their way to the garden for the egg rolling competition heard the faint noise of the collapse, but for those who thought about it at all, bangs and explosions drifting on the wind were a common occurrence due to the army firing ranges just a few miles away, and they continued on their way, totally unconcerned. The visitors were making for the western side of the maze, and the banking was quickly filling up with the excited families; an almost carnival atmosphere was prevailing.

Alfraeda was really excited by what was going on. She couldn't remember this amount of people being in the castle since 1951 when they held a celebration for the Festival of Britain. That event she had to watch from afar, but now it was taking place right next to her and she couldn't wait for the start. Among the crowd she had noticed some old friends, Kate and Dave with their daughters Sophie and Faye. She wondered if the girls still remembered her, or had they grown too old and forgotten?

Back on the moor, Gemma was on the phone to a member of the Mountain Rescue

Team, who was assuring her that help was already on its way and that she must remain calm and under no circumstances attempt to enter the mine herself, something that she had no intention of doing. She knew that the only way her family could be saved was for her to keep cool and to remain in a position to direct the rescuers.

Purely by chance, a rescue helicopter was already close by, having attended a call to Arkengarthdale to the north which proved unnecessary, as the casualty only had minor injuries and was able to travel out by ambulance. Having just set off to return to base, it was redirected to the moor at Grinton and was in sight within 4 to 5 minutes, circling above the figures of Freya and Gemma, the latter frantically waving her arms to indicate her position. Within moments, the crew had landed and were jogging across the rough grass towards Freya and Gemma and the mine entrance.

In the castle garden, the egg rolling was just about to begin. Goodwife Sue and Master David had joined the families and were giving final instructions to the competitors. The first group of children were just about to roll their eggs when the sound of sirens could be heard to the east. Although not visible from the garden, it was clear that several vehicles were racing up Hargill Lane out of Redmire, heading towards Grinton and Reeth. Having already been distracted by the sound of the emergency vehicles, the crowd then became aware of the noise of a helicopter which could be seen momentarily hovering over Grinton Moor before it dipped and vanished from their sight. Many were wondering what was going on, but their attention was quickly returned to the garden as the first group of eggs, accompanied by much screaming and shouting, began their descent of the slope. The competition was a huge success, and Alfraeda enjoyed watching the faces of the children who were winners as they received their prize of a chocolate egg.

It was as the crowd began to disperse, heading back into the castle or looking to enjoy the rest of the garden and the bird of prey display, that the figure of Carol from the ticket office could be seen at the top of the steps, looking quickly around and finally fastening on the figures of Goodwife Sue and Master David. Having located them, she raced down the steps, people stepping to one side for her, the urgency of the situation obvious by her manner.

“Carol, what on earth is the matter?” enquired Sue, seeing her strained and white face. “Are you OK?”

Holding out Dave’s phone, which he had left behind the counter in the ticket office, mobiles not being a good look for a Medieval man, Carol told him: “It’s your niece, Gemma, something has happened on the moor; there’s been an accident.”

“Thanks, Carol,” said Dave, taking the phone from her hand. “Gemma, what’s the matter?” he continued. “What’s going on?”

Gemma had been overwhelmed by the quick response and the support given her by the aircrew, and the sirens of the rapidly approaching emergency vehicles were another encouragement to make her believe everything was going to be fine. A quick explanation on her part led the rescuers to the mouth of the mine, but it was immediately apparent to them that there would be no easy solution to this problem, and that they were in for a long haul. The emergency vehicles were arriving now, and the area was being flooded by a mixture of police officers, ambulance crews and the mountain rescue team.

It was not long before the team leaders had to acknowledge that this would be no simple rescue, and that heavy lifting and drilling equipment was going to be needed. This operation would probably take days, not hours, and that information was quickly imparted to Gemma who was stood nearby with Freya waiting for news. There was another concern, and the leaders were unsure about whether Gemma should be told this or not, but in the end, they decided she had a right to know; how much oxygen was there left in the tunnel? They had no idea of knowing. On hearing this, Gemma knew she would have to stay, but equally she could not keep Freya on the moor overnight, or possibly for a couple of days. She would have to call her Uncle David, and it was all the information above that she gave to his question of:

“What’s going on?”

“Stupid to say, but try not to worry,” he told her, after she had finished explaining. “We will be with you as soon as we can.”

Alfraeda’s hearing, like most animals, was far more acute than ours. She had overheard most of the conversation between Master David and a lady called Gemma, who called him uncle, so she must be his niece, but there were some bits she had missed, so she listened very carefully as David explained to his wife and Carol all that had taken place since they had last seen Gemma, Danny and the children that morning.

Alfraeda was shocked. After her near capture those hundreds of years ago, she had spent most of her life upon the moors and knew the mines and shafts well. She also knew how dangerous they could be, having seen many animals and one or two people tumble into them over the years. She could not bear to think of Goodwife Sue and Master David’s family being stuck in one of those shafts, but what could she possibly do to help? There were still many people about, and the garden would not be cleared for another two to three hours. Even then, it would still be light and any movement she might make would be bound to be seen by any number of people. On the other hand, she could not sit idly by and allow Loic and Danny to suffer, perhaps, even though it was a horrible thought, allow them to die.

Sue, Carol and Dave headed swiftly back up the stairs and out of the garden while Alfraeda pondered on her course of action. They needed to reach the moor as soon as possible to give support to Gemma and Freya whilst they waited for news about Danny and Loic. Rushing into the castle, Sue and Dave hastened to change back into their 21st Century clothing.

As they went behind the counter to collect their bags, it was Sue who gave voice to what they and Carol were all thinking.

“You know,” she said, “if there really is a dragon here, now is the time to show herself, because it doesn’t look good for Danny and Loic. It will take ages to move all that rock, and I don’t think they have ages. We need to have something superhuman and get to them now.”

Listening with her acute hearing to the conversation through the open window of the ticket office, Alfraeda was stunned. She knew that Carol, Sue and Dave sometimes exchanged strange looks and made odd comments, but she had no idea that they could believe in her, something no grown-up had done in several hundred years. Grown-ups believing in her, yet making no attempt to chase or hurt her? That was a scary, but at the same time, a reassuring and really uplifting thought. Could it be possible that in

the future she might be able to show herself and not risk danger, especially after all these years of remaining hidden?

One or two incidences of recent weeks now made more sense; the way Master Dave had gently ran his hand along the top of the hedge, and the warning he had given the children not to charge into it, and that guarded look over his shoulder as he led the school party back to the coach. She had sometimes wondered if they knew about her, and though obviously not a hundred per cent sure, it was clear they had a fair idea that something in the castle garden was not exactly as it seemed.

Gripped by uncertainty and hundreds of years of caution, Alfraeda remained disguised as the maze, a number of children and some parents still running round, trying to find the centre, or else enjoying the rest of the garden, whilst unbeknown to them a life or death drama was being played out on the moors only a few miles away.

“What should she do?” she asked this question of herself over and over. If she was to save Loic and Danny, she must act soon while there was still time. To reveal herself to the world, and then to arrive at the mine when it was too late to save them would be the ultimate act of folly. She would go; there was no real alternative, and if it meant she would have to leave her beloved castle and go into exile once more, then so be it, but her first priority was ensuring that the Manning family were safely reunited.

She had to wait a few moments whilst the last of the children left the maze, then taking a deep breath, she gently eased her legs and began to stretch her wings. To describe the people still in the garden as amazed and stunned would be the understatement of the year. In fact, it is really quite impossible to paint a picture as to how they looked as the maze gradually unravelled itself into an enormous creature, huge wings unfurling and beginning to flap as it took one or two steps to steady itself before launching into the air and climbing rapidly up into the sky and heading north towards the moor. For most, the biggest shock was that Alfraeda didn't really match the concept of a dragon learned as children from a multitude of stories; teeth bared, large claws extended, breathing fire in all directions and, most importantly, covered in scales. There was no fire coming from her nostrils, no vicious claws or teeth on show, and definitely no scales. For those who had time to see before she launched herself into the sky, the leathery skin on Alfraeda's back looked as if it actually had what could be a covering of green fur.

Although one or two people had dived for cover, the majority had simply stood, mouths agape, too shocked to even move, and even as Alfraeda moved rapidly away from them, they remained frozen in the postures they had adopted. Then, just as if a button had been pressed, they all seemed to be released at the same time from their statuesque positions, everybody pointing and talking together, rushing to the upper end of the garden to follow Alfraeda's progress.

On the top of the south-west tower, Kate, Dave and their daughters were admiring the wonderful views across Wensleydale, when all of a sudden there was a strong gust of wind, as if the earlier gales had returned, threatening to knock them over. As Alfraeda's huge frame appeared above them, the girls squealed with delight, Kate and Dave looking as stunned as the people in the garden. Watching the beautiful creature climbing into the sky, memories of Alfraeda came flooding back to them, and Sophie and Faye jumped up and down in excitement, waving and calling to her. Surprised to hear her name she glanced over her shoulder, and on seeing Sophie and Faye, she

gave them a huge wink before forcing herself on, desperate now to reach the trapped father and son. She had a feeling that time was running out.

“Did you see her, mum, dad, did you see her? It’s Alfraeda, it’s Alfraeda,” they shouted in unison, almost besides themselves with excitement. Kate, although astonished, quickly joined her daughters, sharing in their delight at seeing something so outrageous and unique. Their father, who was generally used to keeping his emotions in check, in line with his Cumbrian heritage, had to admit that they had been witness to something quite extraordinary and joined in the celebrations with his wife and daughters.

Back in the mine shaft, Danny and Loic sat quietly in the darkness. Danny had realized they were going to be there for a long time, and that light might be essential later. Although fully charged, the battery on his phone would not last for ever and it was better if he could conserve power now. Consequently, he had turned it off and hence the absolute darkness that surrounded them. No light could make its way into there, but it was not the lack of vision that was worrying Danny; the temperature appeared to be rising and the musty smell of the air seemed to be getting worse. He was hoping that help would be with them soon, otherwise....

On the surface, there was the complete opposite to the inside of the cave. More and more people were arriving, and busying themselves setting up equipment: generators, lights, shovels, picks and other digging equipment, all of which had been airlifted in from the nearby army base at Catterick. Everyone there was aware, however, that much more would be needed, especially cranes, large pneumatic drills and possibly, even explosives. The mood of the group was grim.

Away to one side, Sue and Dave were stood talking to Gemma and Freya, who was cuddled in her great uncle’s arms. There was nothing they could do except watch and wait, hoping for some sort of miracle.

It was at that moment that a large shadow passed over them. Thinking it to be another helicopter, few people bothered to look up, but a part of Dave’s brain had made a connection that the usual loud clattering noise that generally accompanied such an arrival was conspicuous by its absence, so he craned his neck to stare upwards. His gaze was met by the most extraordinary sight he had ever seen, and he nudged both Gemma and Sue, pointing upwards with his one free arm.

The gasps and the looks of pure astonishment of all those on the moor reflected what had taken place in the castle gardens just a few minutes before. Nobody could quite believe what they were looking at, and many of the rescuers were turning to each other, the majority with the same question on their lips:

“Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

It was a question that was repeated again and again.

Looking down from above, Alfraeda was considering what her next move must be. She could see the entrance to the mine, a number of people in helmets nearby, like the knights of old used to have, although not in such bright colours, and wearing those shiny jackets that many of the teachers visiting the castle with the school groups had started to use. Her initial concern was not to hurt anyone, as the wind created by the beating of her wings, especially when landing could easily knock people over. She also wondered what she might do if some of them tried to attack her in the same way as they had done in the past. She was here to rescue Danny and Loic, and she didn’t

want to waste time having to defend herself. She also didn't want to give grown-ups the opportunity to renew those stories of old about dragons being fearsome creatures, ready to attack and eat people, stories that children knew just weren't true.

Taking another deep breath, she angled her wings to slow her on her approach, then beating them furiously backwards to bring her gently to the ground 30 metres or so from the mine entrance. She looked anxiously around, but for the moment it was like looking at a tableau. The helmeted figures had disappeared as soon as it became obvious what Alfraeda intended to do, running away from where she was obviously intending to land, retiring to what they hoped would be a safe distance. Once there, they joined with the others, standing and staring at the incredible scene before them.

"A dragon, seriously, a dragon?" was the thought running through all their heads.

The man in charge suddenly noted movement to his left and turned to see four figures running towards the dragon, not away from it.

"Hey, what are you doing?" he shouted, "Get back there! You don't know what that thing might do!"

He signalled to the other men around him, and they all began to look around for anything that would act as a weapon, picking up spades and pickaxes and beginning to move towards Alfraeda.

As Alfraeda had settled on the ground, Sue had turned to Dave and Gemma, and said: "Come on, we need to reach her before the others can. Look at them, they're scared and capable of anything. Hurry!"

And saying that she grabbed Gemma's hand and rushed towards Alfraeda, Dave following close behind, still holding onto Freya. As they neared the enormous shape of the dragon, she tensed and looked around her, but Sue spoke quietly to her, calling her by name, which seemed to calm her. Amazing, they both thought to themselves; those stories they had occasionally heard the children tell about a dragon called Alfraeda were true. Both had dared to hope, which is why Dave often looked at the maze in an enquiring way, and now they were seeing the evidence with their own eyes.

"Are you here to help?" Sue enquired of the huge face above her, "because we do need help if we are to reach Danny and Loic in time," she added.

A shout from behind caused all three of them to turn, and they could see the men moving cautiously towards them, spades and pickaxes in their hands. Quickly putting Freya down next to her mother, Dave walked towards the men. He turned to the leader, a man called James, whom he had been introduced to earlier.

"It's fine James, nobody is going to be hurt. You can put the weapons down," Dave told them, indicating towards the other men. "Believe me," he added, seeing the look of disbelief on their faces. "She's here to help. If you could just keep everybody away from the entrance, that is all that will be needed."

Still uncertain at the right course of action, the men responded to Dave walking towards them, outstretched arms forcing them back, taking one of the pickaxes and dropping it on the floor to the side. The rest gradually followed suit, discarding whatever they had in their hands, then joined the rest of the watchers who had huddled together without knowing they were doing it. All were now silently observing, waiting to see what would happen. Most of them, recovering from the shock, were sharing another thought:

“This is something I will be able to tell the grandkids, if I ever get any.”

They could see Sue whispering into the ear of the creature, which had bent its head down so she could reach. There was a collective gasp as Alfraeda lifted her huge foot, looking as if she was about to swing it down and squash Sue with it. Sue, however, made no move, and leaning closer pointed towards the entrance, pushing her hands down and then puffing out her cheeks. Most afterwards agreed on the fact that the dragon then appeared to smile, if it's at all possible for a dragon to smile, but there seemed to be no other way to explain it. She then nodded her huge head and walked across to the mine.

What no-one had been able to hear was Sue explaining to Alfraeda what had happened, showing her where they thought Loic and Danny were. Unable to speak, but able to understand many words she had heard over the centuries, Alfraeda was trying to show Sue how she thought she might be able to rescue them. With her large claws, she mimed digging into the roof of the tunnel, but Sue had shaken her head, and said that might inadvertently bring more rocks down on Danny and Loic. Could Alfraeda use the intense heat from her breath to slowly melt the rock?

While all this had been going on, other members of the castle staff had arrived, to help if they could, but otherwise to offer moral support. Visitors to the garden had raced back inside, all trying to speak at once and describe what they had seen. Like Sue and Dave, Carol also had an inkling that something might not be exactly what it seemed, and though the news came as a surprise, it wasn't a complete shock. Reacting quickly, she went through to the café to inform Paul and Sue and Lorna as to what had happened. They agreed with her that they needed to be at the moor with Sue and Dave, and immediately began clearing the visitors from the castle, using the old standby of 'Health and Safety' to explain the closure. Within 15 minutes, the castle was locked and the four of them were driving rapidly through the village on their way to the moor.

Standing in the shelter of her mighty wings, Sue and Dave watched as Alfraeda clawed away soil and rubble from the entrance. She needed somewhere for the molten rock to go, running away from the mine and not into it. The channel into the 'hush' took only moments to create, and then she bent her head towards the entrance and the blockage within, glanced towards Sue who gave her an affirmative nod, then gently breathed a tongue of flame onto the obstruction. For a moment, it appeared as though nothing would happen; then, at first slowly but quickly gathering speed, a hissing, steaming flow of molten rock could be seen, a kaleidoscope of colour, reds, yellows and browns just like the magma from a volcano. The trickle became a rush and Sue and Dave had to retreat from the heat, even though they had been protected by the size of Alfraeda's wings.

There was a communal “Aaaah,” from the watching crowd, who were all keen to see clearly what was happening but who were still intimidated by the bulk of the dragon and the obvious heat of the outflow from the mine. Even from a safe distance, though, it was obvious that things were beginning to develop and most of those present began to pray that they would not be too late. Their shared experience at rescues had led them to believe that without some sort of miraculous intervention, Danny and Loic would never be reached in time. That miracle had arrived, and in a form that not one of them could have envisaged, not even in their wildest imaginations.

Alfraeda, meanwhile had pulled back from the mine and looked enquiringly at Sue and Dave. Making their way cautiously forwards, they once again appeared to whisper in her ear, and after a few more nods and gestures she returned to the entrance. This time, though, her breath was like a zephyr compared to previously, and the flow of molten rock was reduced to a trickle.

Propped against the wall of the tunnel, a dozing Danny suddenly jerked awake. Something was happening, although he was uncertain as to what. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he switched on and turned on the torch. He could smell burning, although he could see no obvious source of the fire, even after he had flashed the beam of the torch several times around the walls of rock which surrounded them. Waking Loic, who had fallen completely asleep, he took his hand and led him away from the debris from the roof fall which was acting as their prison. Danny had been all too aware the air was running out, which is why he had kept both himself and Loic as still as possible to conserve what oxygen was left. He had thought from the beginning there was little chance they would be rescued in time, but now he believed there was, perhaps, a cause for hope.

With Loic safely hidden behind him, his torch fixed firmly on the rock pile, and the smell of burning growing ever stronger, Danny waited on events. He thought at first he must be imagining things, and ran his hand across his brow to wipe sweat from his eyes, but his vision was not playing tricks on him; the air around the rock was shimmering and there was a hissing, bubbling sound accompanying it. He pressed his son and himself as close to the mine wall as they could get, watching anxiously for what would happen next.

Before his incredulous gaze, the huge pile of rocks and boulders seemed to shrink in on itself, slowly collapsing and then, within 30 seconds or so, disappearing altogether. The inrush of air that accompanied it smelled strongly of burning, but at the same time was incredibly sweet. Not yet daring to make a move, Danny held on tightly to his son and watched the space where light was now showing and through which fresh air was flowing.

On the surface, Alfraeda turned back towards Sue and Dave. She pointed with one of her feet towards the entrance, and a smile lit up her face, one that was seen by all the watchers there.

“It’s all right, you can come over now,” Dave said to James. “It’s perfectly safe.”

Along with three of his companions, James walked cautiously forward, one eye kept on the dragon who had settled herself down on the floor. The sight of Freya leading her mother across to snuggle against the dragon’s neck gave him confidence.

“If a youngster isn’t frightened, then I’m not going to shame myself by looking scared,” he told himself.

“Come on guys, let’s see what’s happened,” he said to the woman and two men who had followed him, gesturing with his arm towards the mine.

The last of the molten rock had disappeared along the hush, and although still hot, the ground was rapidly cooling, and the thick rubber soles on their boots allowed them to make their way slowly into the entrance. Although inching forward cautiously, they had to move as quickly as possible, as another roof fall was quite likely. The large beams of their torches flashed off the walls of the mine, and as they turned the corner

to go deeper into the tunnel, it was with the greatest relief that they saw four white eyes staring back at them through grime-darkened faces.

Moments later, the anxious onlookers began cheering as the group emerged from the entrance, paramedics rushing across to wrap Danny and Loic in blankets and waiting to lead them to the ambulances for a check-up. First, though, they were reunited with Gemma and Freya, arms wrapped around each other, and tears making streaks through the dirt on their faces. So engrossed were they in their huddle that it was several moments before Danny looked up and became aware that only a few metres away was an enormous creature that looked to all intents and purposes like a dragon. He could only stand and gape, his mouth wide open, at this extraordinary sight. He was too shocked to even think about preventing Freya from taking Loic's hand and leading him towards the huge shape, wanting to introduce him. Breaking from his reverie, he was about to step forward when he felt Gemma's hand pulling him back.

"It's all right, she's a friend. It's thanks to her that you two are here now." Seeing Danny's puzzled expression, she added:

"I'll tell you all about it later, but first of all, let's have the doctors check you out," and calling to Freya to bring Loic, who was very reluctant to leave Alfraeda, his first ever dragon, she walked across with him to the waiting ambulance.

Dave, Sue and James were stood beside Alfraeda, talking quietly, as she listened intently to what they were saying. James had to admit to himself that she still made him uncomfortable and he was a little overawed by the sheer size of her; but there was something strangely reassuring in her presence, and the way she had affected the rescue was absolutely amazing, and he had told her so just a few minutes before. If anyone had told him this morning that he would be having a conversation with a dragon later that afternoon, he would have thought them completely mad.

Carol, Paul, Sue and Lorna had come across to join them. They had noticed that more and more people were arriving, alerted by social media, and wanting to see this new phenomenon for themselves. The authorities were not unaware of what was happening, and extra police officers were being called up to keep the crowds away and to make sure the narrow country roads weren't blocked. It was turning into quite a circus. Unsure of what the best course of action would be for the future, Sue and Dave were clear that Alfraeda must leave the area now, and the others were in complete agreement.

Sue leant forward to whisper in her ear, and nodding that she had understood, Alfraeda rose to her full height and began to stretch her wings. Dave called across to James who had moved away to confer with a couple of the police officers, indicating that they needed a clear path for Alfraeda to take off. There were only a few people in the way, and these were quickly moved to a safe distance. Sue, Dave and the others also moved well back, and giving them a parting smile, Alfraeda took a few steps forward and once more launched herself into the air, climbing rapidly away from the moor, and heading over Arkengarthdale, moving north.

It took quite a while for the area to be cleared. The Mannings had gone to Darlington hospital for a check-up, Gemma and Freya following the ambulance in their BMW. Sue, Dave and the rest of the Bolton staff returned to the castle, ready for a warm drink, a piece of cake and a council of war. They had to somehow figure a way for Alfraeda to return and it was instructions regarding this that Sue had whispered into

her ear. Many of the people who had seen her were asking where she had come from, uncertain about what to believe, especially the story that she had once been a maze. Seeing her heading north, the obvious answer was that an animal so big must live in some sort of wilderness area, and the highlands of Scotland or some of the remote uninhabited islands seemed to fit the bill. There was already a rumour circulating that the creature was an amphibian, could swim under water, and was in fact Nessie the Loch Ness monster. All of this suited the castle staff perfectly and was in fact exactly what they hoped for when they had instructed Alfraeda to fly north. The more rumours and speculation the better, as these would help to muddy the waters and conceal Alfraeda's true location; the staff were the only ones who knew that Alfraeda would be returning after dark. Hopefully, this would help to convince the public that the maze was simply just that, a maze, and not a hidden dragon.

Amazingly, concealing Alfraeda was far easier than they had originally feared. The castle floodlights were turned off to give better cover, and Alfraeda came in from the west, her usual route where there were only a few farmhouses, avoiding the village where she might be more easily seen. She was met by the castle staff and the Manning family, who had returned from the hospital, Danny and Loic having been declared none the worse for their ordeal that afternoon. A hot shower and something to eat had been all that was necessary. Dave and Sue's good friends, Kate and Dave with their daughters, Sophie and Faye were also there, being correct in their assumption that Sue and Dave would ultimately return to the castle.

Once the group had greeted Alfraeda, the children being allowed to climb onto her back as in times gone by, but sadly not to fly with her, they retired to the castle to put their misinformation plan into operation, or 'fake news' as it was often referred as today. Pictures taken of the garden that afternoon were put onto Face book and Trip Advisor, although the times the photographs were taken were altered, making it appear that all was normal with the maze long after the incident on the moor. More stories were put out, with 'anonymous' observers claiming to have seen the dragon come from Semerwater or Malham Tarn, reinforcing the idea that she was some sort of amphibian, but also causing many people to doubt her existence; after all, she couldn't have come from all of those places, so which, if any was true? Lastly, an 'eminent' volcanologist reported seismic activity upon Grinton Moor, where it appears that an almost unique phenomenon had taken place, when a small crack in the earth's crust had allowed a tiny flow of magma to emerge, and this must be what the watchers had witnessed during the rescue. Escaping fumes, which are often toxic, can cause hallucinations.

"Surely," the report concluded, "this is clearly the rational explanation for the wild stories that have been circulating about the events on Grinton Moor. There is no more chance of a dragon appearing and effecting a rescue, than there is of me flying to the moon without a spacecraft," the mocking tone evident against those people who believed the nonsense being written about dragons on the moor.

For those who had been witnesses to the arrival of the dragon, the rational explanation of hallucinations due to breathing in toxic fumes made so much more sense than the appearance of a mythical creature. They gladly settled for this line of reasoning, rather than having to justify what they originally thought they had seen to what, undoubtedly, would be highly sceptical friends and colleagues. The risk of ridicule

would be averted. Within the space of a few days, the fake news had done its job, and only a few people were still talking of dragons and mazes; the laughter and looks of disbelief that accompanied their assertions quickly led them to keep their own counsel, and as in most things, new events quickly led to headline stories becoming footnotes on the inside pages of the papers.

Alfraeda was once again settled, but she realized that things had changed; grown-ups as well as children knew of her existence, and only time would tell if this was a good or a bad thing. For the moment, at least, she would have to trust them.

As for the castle staff, Kate, Dave and their family, plus all the Mannings, they were privy to some unique knowledge; Alfraeda's safety depended on their ability to keep a secret, but all of them were determined that she would be able to remain at her castle home, hopefully for the next 600 hundred years.

And what of Loic, the cause of all the mayhem? Driving back to Surrey three days later, he could still hardly believe all his adventures: trapped in a mine; rescued by a dragon; sleeping in a castle; and then, best of all, sitting on a dragon's back. Could life get much better?