TOOTHLESS AND THE MISSING NIGHTMARE

By: Lev Grossman

Once upon a time there was a dragon named Toothless. Or he wasn’t named that yet – he would one day be named that by a Viking boy named Hiccup, but that hadn’t happened yet, and before that he didn’t have a name, because dragons don’t really bother with names. But for the sake of simplicity let’s call him Toothless.

Toothless was a Night Fury, the rarest and fastest and most agile and most feared of all dragon species. He was sleek and black, and instead of fire he breathed blue fireballs of enormous destructive power. He was pretty terrifying -- but when this story begins he was only a teenager (in dragon years that is), and he was still too young to go along with the rest of the dragons when they went on raids against the Vikings.

Toothless was impatient. He wanted to go on a raid, and he spent a lot of time practicing to get ready. The way he practiced for raids was this: his best friend, who was a Monstrous Nightmare, would fly ahead of him with a handful (or a foot-full or a claw-full) of rocks, and drop them one by one, and Toothless would dive after the rocks and hit them with his blue fireballs, vaporizing them completely. He never missed.

Well, almost never. He definitely hit them a lot of the time. At any rate he was getting pretty good.

But parents being parents, they wouldn’t take him along on raids yet. One day, however, Toothless being Toothless, he went along anyway.

After the flock of adult dragons flew off to the Viking island, he and his friend the Monstrous Nightmare, whom we will call Flameless, waited a few minutes and then followed along behind them in secret. (Yes, I know Flameless wasn’t literally flameless – in fact he had a lot of flame, and frequently lit himself on fire with it -- but Toothless wasn’t literally toothless either, so just go with it.) Flameless couldn’t fly as fast as Toothless, but they wanted to stay together, so Toothless flew loops around his friend in the night air as they went, just because he could.

The raid was well under way when they arrived, and no wonder Toothless had wanted to go so badly, because seriously, it was the funnest thing ever. Dragons were circling and swooping and diving around the village, setting things on fire and snatching up sheep and cows in their claws.

Toothless threw himself into the fray. He’d never fully tested his abilities before, except when he was horsing around with Flameless, and now he cut loose completely. He was amazed at his own power. He never knew how fast and how nimble and how strong he was. Always taking care not to let his parents see him, he swooped low and shot along one of the streets of the village, a foot above the ground, between the buildings, following the road when it branched and curved. With his blue firebolts he shot the steeple off a church. He shot the bell out of a belltower. He shot the weathervane off a barn. He shot the helmet right off a Viking’s head! He was that fast, and that good.

He was so fast the humans could barely even see him—by the time they turned their heads to look he was already gone. No wonder they were so scared of Night Furies. Night Furies were awesome.

It was the greatest night of his life. He was so happy, he didn’t even notice that he hadn’t seen Flameless for a while, and by the time he figured out where his friend was, it was too late.

The humans had set up a net, stretched across a narrow canyon, and Flameless had flown right into it. It wrapped around him and sent him crashing down onto the grass, his wings hopelessly tangled up. For a long minute he was too stunned to even move.

Come on, Toothless thought. You’re a Monstrous Nightmare. Set yourself on fire! The net will burn up, and you’ll be free!

It was almost as if Flameless could hear him. Oh right, he seemed to say. I completely forgot, I totally am a Monstrous Nightmare. Flameless set himself on fire, and in a second the net was burning and falling away.

Unfortunately the humans had thought of that too. They were ready with a huge tank of water, and they doused Flameless with it and put his fire out. Then they threw another net over him. Toothless watched in horror as a big Viking jumped onto Flameless’s back and bonked him on the head with a hammer, knocking him unconscious.

Then they put him on a cart and wheeled him away.

Toothless didn’t know what to do. All the other dragons were going home. But Toothless couldn’t leave his friend. He just couldn’t. He winged his way over to a quiet clearing in a dark forest to think.

And this is the part in the story where we have to change the point of view, just for a page or two. Because in that clearing was a girl named Lily, who was about the same age in human years as Toothless was in dragon years. And I have to stop the story and explain what she was doing there.

Lily’s father was the village blacksmith, and he was a very good blacksmith too. She was his only child, and he loved her. Lily liked to hang around in her father’s workshop while he crafted swords and axes and other useful things for the Vikings, pounding away on the red hot metal on his anvil. It was nice and warm in there, and she would sit in the corner and read a book, and sometimes he let her help him with some of the fine, detailed metalwork, because with her nimble little hands she was better at it than he was.

One day Lily’s father sat her down for a talk. He looked grave.

“Lily, I have something to tell you. You know I’m a blacksmith.”

“Yes, I have noticed that, daddy.”

“My father was a blacksmith.”

“Noticed that too,” Lily said.

“And his father was before him.”

“I think I get the picture.”

“We have never had a girl blacksmith in this family,” Lily’s dad said, very seriously. “In fact I’ve never heard of any blacksmith ever being a girl. I don’t even know if it’s possible. But I’ve given it a lot of thought, and I’m willing to train you to be a blacksmith.”

“That’s very nice of you,” Lily said, “but I don’t actually want to be a blacksmith.”

“It won’t be easy, but with some hard work…wait, what?”

“I said, I don’t want to be a blacksmith,” Lily said, enunciating clearly to avoid any further confusion. “I want to be a warrior. And maybe a veterinarian too, because I like animals. I’ll be a warrior-veterinarian.”

“Oh.” Lily’s dad took a deep breath. He seemed relieved. “Well, in that case, I’d better make you a sword.”

And he did. He made her a bright, sharp, beautiful sword that fit her hand perfectly. He was, as I said, a very good blacksmith, even if he didn’t know much about little girls.

Lily loved her sword, and she kept it clean and polished and razor-sharp, and she practiced with it night and day. The boys just practiced by day, but Lily planned on being better at swordplay than the boys, which is why she practiced at night too. Also she loved it so much, she didn’t want to stop. In fact she was practicing in that very clearing in the forest, the very night of the raid, when Toothless landed there.

They stared at each other. Lily got into her fighting stance and pointed her sword at Toothless. Toothless bared her teeth at Lily and growled. They watched each other for a long minute. Each one wondered if they were going to have to fight the other. Lily had never actually faced a dragon in single combat, let alone a Night Fury. She knew her chances weren’t good.

But freaking out about it wasn’t going to help matters, so she set herself and got ready to fight.

The truth was, Toothless was very hungry, and he considered taking Lily on, but when it came to eating he actually preferred fish to humans. With all the legendary speed of a Night Fury, he struck—but not at Lily. He struck at the picnic dinner that was sitting next to her on the grass, which was a broiled swordfish.

He defeated the broiled swordfish, which was in no condition to fight anyway, considering that it had been broiled. He swallowed. Not bad. Although he wondered why humans ate their fish cooked instead of raw. Why would you do that to a perfectly good fish?

He watched Lily, waiting for her to attack.

“That was my dinner,” Lily said. “You useless reptile. Now are you going to fight me or what?”

They circled each other. But all of a sudden Toothless felt very tired. He had flown very far today, and he’d had a lot of excitement. Now his belly was full, and he thought he might have a little sleep. Ignoring Lily, he breathed blue fire in a circle on the ground, until the grass was burning and the rocks were glowing red, then he lay down on it. Ah. That was just the thing.

He would fight the human tomorrow. She could wait. He fell asleep.

Meanwhile Lily was thinking: huh. That didn’t go the way I expected at all.

Furthermore the Night Fury didn’t look like what she expected. He was kind of cute. Sort of like a cat. A giant black dragon-cat. And she wasn’t about to kill something so cute and kitty-like. She patted Toothless’s sleeping head and then went off to her own bed, though not before stealing some bread and jam from the pantry to replace her lost supper.

She would wait until she actually saw the dragon do something bad before she told people about him. It only seemed fair.

The next day Lily went back to the clearing. Toothless was prowling around restlessly. He couldn’t decide whether to stay or go. They would be worried about him back home, but Flameless had to be around here somewhere, and he couldn’t abandon his friend. He only left the clearing once, just for a quick plunge into the ocean to get some fish.

He brought a fish back for the human, too, a nice fat sea bass. It only seemed fair. He even lit a fire for her, with his breath, so she could broil it. Though again: he really didn’t see the point.

Lily sat on a rock and cooked her fish and watched Toothless and thought, why is he here? There must be something on this island he needs. Not food, he can get that anywhere. So it’s something else. Could it be -- ? She’d heard they’d captured a Monstrous Nightmare last night, to use in training the young Vikings. Could that be why he was staying?

Working carefully, Lily drew a picture of a Nightmare in the dirt with a stick. She thought it was a pretty good likeness. Toothless watched her, looking very skeptical. He growled and shook his big dragon head.

Maybe it needed something else. She added some squiggly lines around the edges, to show the fire. That did it. Toothless padded over and rubbed his cheek against the picture, nuzzling it affectionately. Then he went back to his side of the clearing.

So that’s it, Lily thought. He wants to rescue his friend. Maybe she would help him do it.

It was a strange idea, helping a dragon, but let’s face it, the Night Fury was a lot nicer to her than some of the other kids she knew. There weren’t a lot of girls who wanted to be warriors, and she got teased about it sometimes. And some of the teachers didn’t take her seriously. Well, she would show them.

“OK,” she said. “Let’s go get your friend. But we have to wait till tonight. And also, I want a favor.”

There was a night watchman who guarded the dragons that were kept locked up for training, but Lily knew he wasn’t very brave, and furthermore he often fell asleep on the job. So that night she and Toothless crept through the streets of the sleeping town together, toward the arena. Toothless wasn’t very quiet, and the streets were very narrow, and he kept bumping into things with his wings, and she kept having to shush him.

Lily crept into the cabin where the night watchmen was asleep, and she slipped the keys off the hook they hung on. Unfortunately she wasn’t quite quiet enough, and the watchman woke up.

“What on Earth are you doing?” he asked.

“Um.” Her mind went blank. “I really like keys? And I need these for my key collection?”

“Put those back!”

At that moment Toothless, who wanted to know what all the excitement was about, poked his entire head into the booth. The night watchman immediately fainted.

Lily took the keys.

She opened the door to the arena and crept inside, with Toothless following close behind. Then she tried the door to the cell where the dragons were kept, but it was locked. She tried all the keys, one by one, but none of them fit. Hm. She must have grabbed the wrong set.

Over her shoulder came a bolt of blue flame, which immediately exploded the lock into nothingness.

Humans, Toothless thought. And she called ME useless.

Immediately the door opened and out flew three Gronckles, a Deadly Nadder, a Zippleback, and no fewer than six Terrible Terrors.

Oops, Lily thought. Well, there’s always more dragons where they came from.

Last of all came Flameless, who actually frisked around the arena in a circle and lit himself on fire just for the fun of it, he was so happy to be free and to see his friend. They flew up out of the arena and into the main town square, Toothless gently carrying Lily in his claws.

Suddenly Lily felt sad. Just like that, it was time for Toothless to go. They’d only known each other a short time, but already Toothless felt like the best friend she’d ever had. She did what she’d been wanting to do for a while, which was to throw her arms around Toothless’s neck – or as far around as she could get them -- and hug him. Toothless growled, but it was a nice growl, a happy growl, almost like a purr. Humans, he thought. He wasn’t sure about them in general. But this particular human, he liked.

Lily let him go.

“Now, Toothless. You remember about the favor.”

Oh, right. He’d forgotten. He’d kind of hoped she’d forgotten too.

“Toothless.”

Toothless sighed. He rolled his eyes.

“Toothless!”

OK. Just this once. And only because he liked her.

“Hey everybody!” Lily yelled. “There’s a Night Fury here. Night Fury! Look, everybody! Here it is! Night Fury!”

Flameless cocked his head at her, as if to say, ‘what about me?’

“Oh, uh, and a Nightmare! There’s a Monstrous Nightmare too!”

Soon Vikings came running out of every house in the village, clutching their weapons. Some of them were still in their pajamas. What they saw, of course, was Lily, sword out, in the middle of the town square, facing two dragons singlehandedly. It was the bravest thing they’d ever seen

“Go!” she said, in her most impressive warrior voice. “Go, dragons, and never return!”

She winked. Toothless winked back. Then Toothless and Flameless sprang up and winged away into the night together. And forever after Lily was famous as the girl who faced down two dragons all by herself, and nobody ever dared to tease her again, and the teachers took her very seriously indeed.

As for Toothless and Flameless, their parents were so glad to see them that they didn’t even get in trouble for having sneaked along on the raid. They kept on fighting Vikings, of course – that wouldn’t stop until Toothless met Hiccup, which was years later. But they never touched Lily’s village again. And every once a while, when he was flying past, Toothless would bring Lily a nice fat fish for dinner.

And sometimes, if it was around Lily’s bedtime, and he was feeling a little lonely, Toothless would even land and stick his head in her bedroom window, and she would pet him, and he would purr for her until she went to sleep.