

Final Exam by Jennifer Roberson

He was, she thought, a rather ordinary man. Certainly unremarkable in looks, although his eyes were rather nice. Warm, brown eyes, but just a trifle myopic; he peered back at her worriedly. She found this rather amusing, in view of the circumstances.

A distinctly common young man, she thought, nodding to herself. Nice eyes, yes, but then eyes weren't everything, were they? His other attributes, such as they were, were clearly nondescript. Mousy brown hair (clean but in need of cutting); features of a distinctly average cast (although the nose was a bit too long); and the height and weight of at least half a hundred men who inhabited her father's castle, which made him utterly ordinary and not in the least heroic.

But then, he wasn't a hero, so she supposed it didn't matter.

She chewed her bottom lip, thinking of her father. No doubt he would worry, once he came round to it. After all, his youngest daughter had disappeared through no fault of her own. It was entirely likely right at this very moment he was summoning up all the royal armies, since there was nothing else for them to do and setting them to the task of combing the woods for her, threatening whippings for one and all if they didn't turn her up. Well, they wouldn't. He had made sure of that. He. He sat there peering at her myopically, wondering, now that he had her, what to do with her. She sighed. Rearranged her skirts. Crossed her legs beneath the table and gazed straight back at him. He also sighed. He didn't know what to say. And so he said the very first thing he could think of: "You are a virgin, aren't you?" At home she would have been shocked, because being shocked was expected of her. But she wasn't at home at present and therefore the expected responses were completely unnecessary, which meant she could say whatever she felt. What she felt was laughter; this wasn't what she had been warned by all of her chamber ladies to expect from ravishers. Supposedly, ravishers never asked such things, regarding virginity as unimportant, since, if she were one, she wouldn't be for much longer, and therefore it really didn't matter. But he hadn't ravished her yet. She lifted red eyebrows (not auburn; red) in the eloquent manner she had been most carefully taught. The peculiarly feminine language of elegantly arched brows was meant to convey carefully measured, outraged condescension. But she hadn't practiced much, and she wasn't very good at it; besides, her eyebrows always mutinied and remained rebelliously straight. Still, it was up to her to try; her women had labored so hard. "I beg your pardon?" She used the fluting, plummy tones all the other ladies of rank employed. He blinked, reddened, attempted to loosen the high collar of his wheat-colored apprentice's tunic. "I'm sorry. I'm not doing this very well. I'm new at it, you see . . . you're my first victim."

"Am I?" She brightened. She was never first in anything, having four sisters in front of her. He nodded gravely. "But I had to ask, you know. The spell requires a virgin."

"Spell?" She brightened still more. "You mean-magic?"

"Oh, yes." His embarrassment faded, replaced with indulgent self-confidence, which she thought alien to his open, boyish features and therefore looked a trifle odd. "It's all in the books, you know: the virgin daughter of a king."

Ah. Well, she was the daughter of a king. And she was a virgin. But she didn't tell him yet, hoarding it for herself. "A gentleman never asks."

The confidence disappeared. "He doesn't?"

"No."

"Then how does one find out?"

It was a fair question, she thought. But she didn't have an answer. "Perhaps one just knows."

"But I don't know." He was looking worried again. "It has to be a virgin. Otherwise it won't work."

She considered it a moment. Then leaned forward and asked, carefully, "What won't work?"

"The spell," he said testily. "I told you that already."

"Yes, well, you have ... but you haven't told me why." She set an elbow against the table and leaned her chin into the heel of her hand. "I think it's only fair, me knowing why. After all, you did bring me here against my will."

"I did, didn't I?" His tone and expression were glum. "Well, I'm sorry if I frightened you ... but I was only doing what I was told."

"To steal women."

"To steal a woman," he clarified. "Specifically, the virgin daughter of a king." He shrugged. "I might have asked-I'm the sort who would rather ask, really-but the books all said it was quite impossible to find a willing virgin princess, so I'd better be ready to steal one." He sighed. "If I wanted the spell to work."

"Which, of course, you do." She nodded angrily, then leaned farther forward yet. "What is this spell/or?"

He brightened. Apparently even this young man, caught squarely between boyhood and adulthood, enjoyed doing the one thing she'd learned all men liked to do: talk about himself.

"It's for my final exam," he explained. "I'm only an apprentice wizard, you see ... but I'm behind all the others. If I

fail this time, they'll dismiss me from school and I'll never graduate." She frowned; she herself disliked lessons, preferring instead to sit in a window seat and dream. Or to read a book, which, she had been told numerous times, was really quite the same. "Would it be so bad if you were dismissed? I mean, what kind of a school expects young men to steal young women simply to satisfy graduation requirements?" He sighed heavily. "This one does, I'm afraid. It's stated clearly in the catalogue: 'in order to graduate, all spells must be completed according to the requirements of the various courses included in the student's specific curricula.'" She nodded; an exacting requisite. "Which course is this one you've stolen me for?" He drew himself up on his stool. "I am not allowed to say." She was astonished. After all, he'd stolen her--the least he could do was say why. Explicitly, she told him so. He was visibly deflated and visibly depressed. "You have a point," he agreed, "but it says nothing at all in the books about the virgin princess knowing about the spell."

"Well, this princess wants to know," she declared, purposely leaving out the word virgin, which she was, but now thought it a distinct disadvantage, in view of the circumstances. "You really are being quite unfair, you know, regardless of what it says in the books. I mean, a lady likes to be prepared. She likes to know who-whom-she might be meeting, or where she might be going ... will it be an intimate dinner, or a full-blown festive feast?" She smiled, trying not to sound terribly pompous; he was not the sort of young man who would know about feasts or intimate dinners. "You must understand, of course, that a princess has to know these things. It just isn't fair to surprise her, because she can't do her job." He sighed. "But if I told you, and you didn't like it, what would I do then?" She thought about it. "Well, you could put a binding spell on me so I couldn't run away. Or perhaps make me temporarily mute." She shrugged. "That's a popular spell, particularly with mothers-in-law."

He considered it, nodding thoughtfully. Then sighed dolefully. "It's a Dragon Summoning."

That set her back on her stool. "What?"

"I need you to summon a dragon. You know, like in all the stories." He nodded encouragingly. "Virgins are gourmet items where dragons are concerned. The spell is guaranteed."

This really was too much. "I've read those stories, too," she said. "The dragon devours the virgin!"

He refused to look at her. "Yes, I'm afraid so. That's the way it always works."

She drummed fingers on the tabletop. "I'd really prefer not to be devoured."

His expression was apologetic. "I'm afraid you have no choice. It's only after the dragon's eaten that it's safe to take a tooth, because then he's deeply asleep."

She frowned. "Why do you want a tooth?"

"To prove I summoned the dragon." He spread his hands ruefully. "The professors don't really want a

whole dragon, you see-he wouldn't fit in the dorms and we can't keep feeding him people-but they need proof the spell worked."

"And so they want a tooth."

He nodded, saying nothing.

She sighed, frowning in irritation. "I really don't want to be devoured. I'm game for a lot of things, but that's not one of them." She saw the look on his face; a combination of dismay and determination. "Of course, it's all academic anyway."

Mouse-brown eyebrows lowered. "Why?"

Coyly, she batted lashes. "Because I'm not a virgin."

He was horrified. "Not?"

"Not."

"At all?"

"At all; either you are or you aren't." She began to smile, caught up in embroidery. "It was quite a scandal, you know. Here I was, the youngest of the king's daughters, and no virginity. My father threatened to beat me blue, but my mother said to ignore it." She shrugged. "I'm only a fifth daughter, which means they can marry me off to some liquorish old man who wouldn't know the difference between a virgin ewe and a virgin woman." She sighed dramatically. "It was really quite a to-do."

"Yes, I can imagine." He was plainly agitated. "What about your sisters? Four of them, you said?" She scowled. Lying, she saw, didn't always have the desired results. And as much as she resented her four sisters for being born before she was (the hand-me-downs were already so badly worn), she didn't really want any of them devoured any more than herself. "They're all married," she lied, "and some of them even have babies." He sank into deep despair. "I'll never graduate." She shook her head. "There may be another way."

"How?" he inquired glumly. "Bring me this book of spells." Aghast, he said, "I can't."

"Can't, or won't?" She stabbed the table with a finger. "Bring it here, now. I know you must have homework ... well, then, you must have a textbook as well." He sighed. Got up and went to a shelf. Brought back a battered book. "Used," he said. "All the new ones were gone."

"Show me the spell," she told him. "Maybe there's something you're missing." He peeled back the pages, then pointed to one of the incantations. "That one," he said. "I have everything I need- except, of course, the virgin." Frowning, she read the ingredients. Indeed, it did appear complete. But she thought

there still might be a way. "Throw out the bat," she said. "Replace it with eye of newt." "There already is eye of newt." His finger indicated the ingredient. "Get another eye of newt-don't they have two, after all? But the bat's got to go."

"But that's what the spell calls for... right here. It says, 'one bat, stripped of hair.' " He shrugged. "I guess dragons don't like hair. Her hand strayed to her own. "I've got hair."

"Maybe it's only bat hair." She made a moue of distaste, wrinkling her nose. "Well, anyway it doesn't matter. Get rid of that bat as well as the hair, and bring me an eye of newt."

"I hope you know what you're doing."

"Oh, yes; I'm a very good tutor, and I've already graduated." That too was a lie, but she thought it worth a try. She closed the book and rose. "Collect the things you need and let's go summon a dragon."

They went, but only after she promised not to try and escape. At length she agreed-since she knew he'd put a spell on her if she didn't-which made him happy, since he knew his spell might go awry and turn her into a toad, or something equally distasteful.

Not far from the Wall of Night, which encircled the school buildings and hid them from prying eyes, was a small clearing in the forest. The small clearing boasted very flat ground, withered vegetation, a post adorned with chains, and a carpet of gritty ash. It was a lab used expressly for Dragon Summoning, since not even the professors wanted a dragon inside the Wall of Night.

She stamped around the clearing, raising choking grayish clouds, and held up embroidered skirts. "This place could use a woman."

He looked pointedly at post and chains. "This place has used many women."

"Yes, well, you know what I mean." She ignored the post entirely, looking instead at his lumpy bag. "Shouldn't you get about it?"

He sighed and knelt, untying his bag with a spoken word that did the work for him. That spell he knew very well. And then, laboriously, one by one, he drew from the bag various bottles and packets containing ingredients.

"-and two eyes of newt," he said, then paused. "Or is it eye of newts?"

She waved her hands. "Just do what you have to do."

He thought about it. "Well, first of all I have to put you in chains."

"Skip that part," she said hastily. "Go on with the summoning."

He frowned doubtfully. "But these things have to be done just so. In a special way, and in a specific order. If I skip anything . . ." His voice trailed off dolefully. "All right, very well-if it's that important to you ..." She marched over to the post, slipped her wrists into the chains, pointedly left them unlocked. "This will do, I should think. The dragon will never know." He scratched his head and began to assemble the ingredients in their proper order, putting them into the mortar. He chanted as he did it, pestling carefully, but she couldn't be certain if he was performing the ritual or just going over things by rote. At last he was satisfied. Carefully he transferred all the litter to his bag, being inherently a neat person, then poured the mixture into an enameled bowl, which he then placed in the center of the clearing. "It should work," he said, more for his own benefit than for hers, she thought. "I've followed directions carefully. Of course, I'm not certain about that second eye of newt-

"Never mind the eye of newt." Loudly, she rattled her rusty chains. "Just finish the silly spell so I can get out of here."

"It seems odd that an eye of newt can substitute for a royal virgin," he murmured. "I mean, if it were true, you'd think the professors would be more interested in saving lives than in saving face." He really was a stubborn individual. She rattled her chains again. "Just cast the spell, will you? I'd like to be home in time for dinner."

"Well, all right." He backed up, knelt, prepared himself. Then began chanting words she'd never heard. The requisite dragon appeared on cue, astonishing them both. A large, lumpy dragon, appropriately green, blinking at them in a mild, dragonish way, clearly as surprised as they were. "Well," the dragon observed. "I'd planned on going to bed." The girl observed him closely. Something, she thought, was wrong. "You're not smoking," she said. "Oh, no-not anymore." The dragon shook his head. "The ordinance, you know." The apprentice wizard sighed. "Then I did do everything right."

"Wellll..." The dragon tilted his head from side to side, "that depends on what you intended. "I am a dragon, yes, but not quite a normal one."

The apprentice wizard froze. "Not?"

"Not." The dragon chewed a toenail. "I'm a bit of a health nut, you know. No red meat for me. Which is why I came, of course-you left out that disgusting bat."

In her unlocked chains, she gasped. "You mean-

"I mean I'm a vegetarian." The dragon chewed another nail. "It's really much better for you. No more brittle bones to worry about, no more unnecessary carnage." Thoughtfully, he smiled. "I should think the virgins particularly would be grateful."

"Well," she said finally, "no more need for these." And she shed her noisy chains and moved away from the post.

The dragon cast her a jaundiced glance. "Tricky virgin, aren't you? But what if I did eat meat?"

The apprentice gaped at her. "You mean you are-"

"Of course," she replied airily. "I'm a very picky, tricky woman."

"Now," rumbled the nonsmoking dragon, "what was it you wanted me for?"

"A tooth," the apprentice answered. "Have you one to spare?"

"Oh, several... at my age I lose a lot. But why do you want one?"

"So I can pass my final exam. I need it to graduate."

"A worthy cause." The dragon twisted his massive jaws a moment, did something with his tongue, spat out a large tooth. "Broken a bit, I'm afraid, but it should be enough."

Carefully the apprentice picked it up and tucked it into a pocket. "Thank you very much."

"Don't mention it. I'm in favor of higher education." The dragon worked on a third toe, spat out excess nail. "Why don't you ask a kiss of the lady? You're due congratulations."

The young man reddened. "Me?"

"It won't kill you, you know."

Startled, the girl shook her head. "I'd really rather not." The dragon stared down his nose. "Too high and mighty, are we? Too good for the likes of him?"

"No, no-it's not like that-"

"Then give him a kiss, my girl. Won't kill you, you know."

"I really don't think-" The graduate scowled at her. "You're only a fifth daughter." She scowled back. "That really isn't the point-"

"Then come here and give me a kiss!" My, but he was domineering. Not at all the polite young man he'd been before they summoned the dragon; she wasn't sure she liked the change. "Very well," she agreed at last, "but remember, I'm still a virgin. I don't really do it right." He crossed the clearing to her. "That's all right. I do." It was not a long kiss. Her kisses never were. The dragon's smile faltered. In shock he forgot the ordinance and blew a crooked smoke ring. "Oh," he said, "one of those." The princess looked down at the frog. "One hundred and four," she sighed.

About Jennifer Roberson and "Final Exam"

I can't claim credit for discovering Jennifer Roberson; that honor, like so many others of discovering writers, belongs to my friend and mentor, Don Wollheim. He was, during my first years in science fiction, one of the few who always tried to publish fantasy, as opposed to the hard-core hard-technology fiction preferred during the forties and late fifties by John W. Campbell, and the (mostly young white male engineering) students who were the majority of articulate readers of science fiction in those days. Of course, many silent non-participating readers and writers of fantasy or weird fiction, as opposed to science fiction, were women; the majority of readers of hard-core science fiction were male, or if female, obsessed or themselves engineers or scientists, or would-be writers. But they didn't usually edit it (excepting the very knowledgeable Cele Goldberg at Amazing Stories, and one or two of John Campbell's assistants).

Don, perhaps freed from fears about his own masculinity by one of the few remarkably stable marriages in the whole of the genre-he alone among the noteworthy editors of his day remained married to his first wife (who is now, with his daughter, at the head of his DAW Books)-Don, like me, never lost his delight in discovering good writers. In the last year of his life, stopping in at DAW to pay my respects, I found him chuckling with delight at something he'd just discovered in the slush. He discovered more writers than anyone else in the field, and while he once spoke very dismissively of a well-known fan publisher, saying that he "was and always would be an amateur," as opposed to a professional, he never tired of discovering new talent. I freely admit that without his belief and help, there would be no such writer or editor as Marion Zimmer Bradley. And if they wanted to tell the truth, a lot of other writers would have to say the same. Of course, almost all of them deserted him for other publishers as soon as they could get bigger advances elsewhere. And I must say that he encouraged them all to spread their wings. So Don, who was a father to all of us in the fifties, must take credit for formally discovering Jennifer. Due to the accidents of the schedule, I actually published her first short story while her first novel was in production at DAW. But it was he who suggested I get in touch with her. I think this is a fun story. I'll bet you will, too, after you read it.