

# Final Exam

## Jane Lindskold

*Jane Lindskold has both taken and given more final exams than she chooses to remember. Her current life as a full-time writer frees her from this necessity. She is the author of many novels, including Changer, Legends Walking, and Through Wolf's Eyes, and more than forty short stories. "Final Exam" is her fourth story featuring the Albuquerque adepts.*

IT'S not easy having your entire family think you're a goof off. Then again, easy isn't really what I want or need. It's taken me—Danny Bancroft—a long time to learn that. Now that I have, though, I still have a few ghosts to lay to rest.

I was born with Talent, raw Talent, gifts so strong that they killed my mother as I was being born. It happened like this:

Prenatal me had a hole in one of the big arteries that feed the heart. When I was being born, the strain tore open that hole. My heart pumped as hard as it could, but it wasn't enough. I was dying as I was being born.

I remember it.

It felt like smothering. I'd never breathed, but that's what it felt like. I knew I couldn't get enough air.

For the first time ever, I started thinking—up till then, everything had been unfocused. I'd heard, felt, moved, swam in the warm darkness, but I didn't really think. Now I did. They weren't brilliant thoughts, more like emotion given construct. I was scared and I knew it!

That's when my Talent snapped into focus. That makes it sound like it was a separate part of me, but it wasn't. My Talent is as much a part of me as an arm or a leg. Just like an arm or leg will catch you when you're falling—sometimes even before you know you're falling—so my Talent reached out to catch me.

It pulled those artery walls together, tried to suture them, to make them hold blood. But an infant not yet born doesn't have much Power and that mending took more than I had to give. So my Talent reached out and sucked. I was still connected to my mother then. I pulled the life right out of her and into me.

I never knew my mother, but I sure knew when that warm comforting haven which had been my world went away.

They tell me that it was a miracle I survived that strange labor, for my mother was dead before I was born. The doctors had to do an emergency Caesarean, hauling me back out of the birth canal I'd already slid partway down.

My mother's death certificate gives her cause of death as heart attack. It's true. I attacked her to save my heart.

I grew up spoiled rotten.

Two years after I was born, my father married my mother's sister. Auntie Mom, as I called her, had come to take care of me when her sister died. Pictures of her and my mom at the same age show them as looking much alike. I guess it's not really surprising that my father fell in love with her.

Auntie Mom gave me at least as much love as she did her own children—my half brother and sisters. Maybe she even gave me a bit more, to make up for the fact that I wasn't completely hers. My dad lavished even more love on me, grateful that if fate had to take my mother, he hadn't lost me. I was his miracle boy, his darling. He even called me his Cupid, because of how he and Auntie Mom had got together.

To me, all that love was a stolen sweet. I knew I didn't deserve it, because I never forgot that I had killed my mother. I figured if they knew what I'd done, they'd stop loving me.

Despite this fear, unable to bear the guilt, I tried to tell them the truth, first when I was about three, again when I was ten. They didn't understand. Another attempted confession, this one when I was fifteen, got me put into counseling. The counselor was a thoughtful, gentle man. He was also one of the Talented.

An aside here.

There are all types of levels and kinds of Talent, lots of groups that initiate, rank, teach. Lately, they've got sort of affiliated, but they're not all friendly. It's like professional sports. The teams play together, agree to rules together, even set up boards to arbitrate disputes, but that doesn't mean they're not competitors.

Just like with sports, there are scouts, those who go out there and seek the Talented. One of the better ways to find them is by getting into counseling. This is because there are two things that activate Talent. One is stress. The other is adolescence—which now that I think about it is sort of a biologically programmed megastress.

Obviously, not everyone becomes Talented at adolescence, but more dormant powers awaken then than at any other time. In modern society, adolescents who get out of line—bad temper, drug use, lack of focus, whatever—are quite likely to be offered counseling, even if all that's available is some well-meaning high school guidance person.

And if those kids are lucky and their problems are associated with awakening Talents, there will be someone present who will understand.

That's what happened to me. My counselor was a private guy, hired by my folks. Mr. Wyse had been recommended by a friend of a friend, understood kids, got into their worlds...

Man, did he ever!

I'd like to say that Mr. Wyse looked like Gandalf or Merlin or somebody really cool with a flowing white beard and long hair and all, but I have to be honest. He didn't.

He wasn't short—maybe a finger shy of six feet tall— but he was so enormously overweight that it always came as a shock to realize he had height as well as girth. His hair was dark, swept in a side part, left to right. Even though his eyes were kind of buried in surrounding flesh, their gaze was amazingly intense. I could never remember the color of Mr. Wyse's eyes, though. After a while, I decided he could change it at will.

If Mr. Wyse looked like anyone famous, it was Nero Wolfe, that fat detective Rex Stout created back in the early part of the twentieth century. I think Wyse knew about the resemblance and cultivated it. He'd even adopted Wolfe's habit of closing his eyes when he wanted to think hard, and pursing his lips in and out.

Now it hadn't only been my morbid-sounding attempts to confess to my mother's murder that had got me put into counseling. There had been other stuff, too. Remember how I said I was spoiled rotten? Well, the older I got, the more I thought that getting my own way was my right, not a privilege. I bullied my younger siblings until they avoided me. I acted like a pig to most of my schoolmates. Worst of all, I abused my Talent to get my way.

It's probably for the good of everyone that the prenatal strain of saving my life snapped my Talent into a form from which I couldn't alter it. If I'd been able to throw fireballs or stuff like that, someone would have been killed. As things shaped up, my first gift was altering biological functions. My second was altering moods. My third—and this one is hardest to admit—was siphoning off other people's energy. Basically, I was a psychic vampire.

This has got to be hard to believe for those of you who've met me through my friends' versions of the events we've been through together. They see me as sweet, gentle Danny—maybe a bit of an idiot when it comes to finishing college, but otherwise their leader from behind, the encouraging one. Fixer of

broken ankles and healer of torn souls.

They didn't know me before. I grew up in Colorado. I came to UNM for college on Mr. Wyse's suggestion, but, wait... I'm getting ahead of myself.

Even without fireballs or lightning bolts, I was pretty dangerous. I could make someone's heart beat faster or their breath come up short. Stealing energy from them made them light-headed and vaguely nauseated.

Moods were harder—I think because I didn't really believe anyone other than me had feelings—but I could enhance what a person was feeling. When I was little, I enjoyed making someone laugh really hard or act silly. Later, I learned that making them angry and then having them be blamed for losing their temper could be pretty effective, too.

Then I nearly killed my brother Joel. I was going on fifteen, and maybe the shadow of my birthday—always a hard time for me—made me a bit crazy. Maybe I would have lost it anyhow. I don't know.

I'm not going into the details. That's not part of this story. Leave it that I used my Talent on Joel and after he came 'round, he blamed me. My parents probably wouldn't have believed him, but I knew I was guilty and broke down. I started sobbing that I was damned, I'd killed my mother, now I'd almost killed Joel...

And they sent me to Mr. Wyse.

Again, I'm going to spare you the details of therapy. Mr. Wyse laid a lot of groundwork before letting on that he knew there was something different about me. Funny thing was, he really was a good counselor, not a mere Talent scout. That made a difference—all the difference.

Thing is, the job isn't done. That's what this story is about...

Winter break my third senior year. The last eight months had been hell, literally.\* I'm not going to bother with the details since they don't matter here except in one way. I'd been through a lot, and I wasn't really in the mood for the annual inquisition.

\* See "Hell's Mark" in *Wizard Fantastic*, edited by Martin H. Greenberg, DAW 1997, and "Hell's Bane" in *Battle Magic* edited by Martin H. Greenberg and Larry Segriff, DAW 1998, for the details.

Dad starts it, though, just as he always does.

"Joel's sending out applications to law school."

"Like that's what the world needs," I say. "Another lawyer."

Dad grins.

"There's some truth to that," he admits. Then the grin fades. "At least he's planning on graduating, though. How long do you plan to stay an undergraduate, Danny?"

"What does it matter to you?" I retort with a rudeness that would shock my friends. "It's not costing you anything."

It isn't, either. Mr. Wyse has friends who've arranged a scholarship that covers my tuition and basic expenses. I've learned to live pretty well between that and what I earn summers.

"It's not costing me anything," Dad says, "but it's costing you, Danny. It's costing you years and opportunities."

Our argument has a ritual quality, like a ballet. We've had this argument three times a year ever since I was a junior. I don't think either of us even hears the words anymore. It doesn't do any good either—except that maybe Dad thinks he's done his job as a parent.

That afternoon I make my usual visit to Mr. Wyse. By now it's a friendly thing, not a professional thing. I drop in at his home rather than his office, slouch on a sofa rather than sit up straight in a hard-backed chair. At least I like to think of it that way. Today, I feel a difference in the air.

I can't figure it out. Mr. Wyse greets me in his usual, friendly manner, offers me a drink, sets out a tray of these wonderful gourmet cookies he and his cook make every year, leans back in his enormous

custom-built chair and smiles.

We shoot the breeze for a bit. He wants to know about my friends. They're an unusual group—all magically talented in one way or another. The existence of this group in its continually mutating form is why Wyse wanted me to go to UNM. I finish telling Wyse about what happened to us that past term and he expresses suitable awe and admiration, then he asks:

"And how is Vanessa?"

"Good, I guess. She's gone to California to grad school. I haven't seen her for a while."

"And Tony?"

"In Tibet studying something—meditation, I think."

"And Ian?"

"Don't know. Last I heard he was in Africa."

"And Danny?"

I stare at him, confused, thinking for a moment that he means someone else, someone who was in the group before I joined it. Those colorless eyes pin me like a bug on a card.

"Huh?" I ask.

"And Danny?" he repeats remorselessly. "How's he?"

I try to believe he isn't doing the Dad thing. I grin and thrust the fingers of my right hand up under my hair, casual-like.

"Well, I don't know what to do about Lucy. She's got a big-time crush on me, but I don't think we'd work out long-term, and I don't think it'd be fair to break her heart."

"That's kind of you," Wyse says. Is there a trace of mockery in those level tones? "You're very handsome in a long-haired rock-star kind of way. The leather bomber jacket and dark colors you wear really add to the effect."

I shrug. I'd be denying what I know if I said I couldn't understand why women like how I look. I've got dark brown hair that I wear long, a bit past my shoulders. Dark eyes, dark brows—firm and strong but not really big or bushy. Good skin, thanks to sunscreen and an end to rioting hormones. A decent build—not skinny, not beefy, kinda like the eyebrows, masculine without being overbearing or threatening.

The dark clothes and leather jacket go with the look. It's easier, too, to match things when you don't overdo the color thing.

I expect him to say something about Lucy, something about girls, or my looks. Maybe that's because that's what I want him to say. What he does say shocks me in a way my arguments with my father never do.

"Inertia, Danny," Mr. Wyse says. "I wanted you to know what peace felt like—you who had fought yourself since before you saw light. You've taken it too far."

I stare at him disbelieving. He goes on.

"Your scholarship will not be renewed after this year."

"It won't?" The words tumble out before I can stop them. "But what will I do!"

"You got yourself out of the womb once," Wyse says. "I guess it's time to see if you can do it again—without exacting the same price."

That hurts. That hurts worse than hell. If I hadn't ever forgotten, I'd felt... I don't know what... forgiven?

Mr. Wyse clears his throat. For the first time in this increasingly awkward interview he looks uncomfortable.

"I'm afraid that's not all," he says. "There was a condition on your taking that scholarship."

"I don't remember any conditions," I say in increasing panic.

"The condition," he shifts, a mountain moving, "wasn't so much on you as on me. I didn't think I needed to mention it to you."

"Yeah?"

"I never expected the terms to be activated," he says and I realize with a trace of shock that he's pleading with me.

"Yeah?" I say again, but more gently.

"There are members of the board, Danny," Mr. Wyse goes on, "who insist that you haven't proved yourself sufficiently to be trusted with..."

He trails off. I'm getting really weirded out. This isn't like him.

"With..." I prompt.

"With your Talent," he says. Then he finishes in a rush. "When you came to me, you were more dangerous than you knew. The only way I could secure you the scholarship to UNM and some of the special education you've had since was to agree to place a binding on your Talent. It's rather like a posthypnotic suggestion, and if I speak the key word..."

He clears his throat, forces himself to meet my eyes.

"Your Talent and power will be sealed."

"Sealed?"

"Cut off. Effectively, you won't be able to do magic anymore."

I can't even argue. What he's saying is that someone wants to blind me. Maybe it would be more like having skewers thrust into my eardrums so that I couldn't hear anymore.

Involuntarily, my mouth opens in a silent scream.

"There may be a way around it," Mr. Wyse says quickly. "Not everyone agrees with the assessment of the board. Your friend Lucy's mother, for one, insists you be given a chance to prove yourself—sort of a final exam."

"And you," I ask angrily, "did you insist?"

His anguished expression is too much. I relent.

"Of course you did," I say.

I try to make light of the whole damnable thing.

"So, do I get time to study or is this a pop quiz?"

"Pop quiz," he replies, adopting my tone. "It's more like a practical than a written. Do you remember when you were tested for your initiate's rank?"

I nod.

"This will be similar. However, that time they sought to press you so hard that any and all Talents you possess would be forced to their limits by the stress. This time, you will need to survive by not using all of your Talents."

I stare at him with an inkling of what's coming.

Mr. Wyse frowns, then continues with the delicacy of someone discussing a terminal illness, "The board worries that we have no proof that under stress you will not revert to old habits."

I didn't ask what he meant. We both knew. It's dangerous letting a vampire loose—especially one that drains power rather than blood. The bloodsucker, at least, drinks in order to survive.

"So," I say, trying to make light of it, "all I need to do is get through whatever obstacle course they set up for me without using any other power than what I already have in reserve. I can deal with that."

But I wonder if I can. There'd been no such restrictions on the last test. They'd *wanted* to see everything I could do. I'd done it, too, knowing there were controls so that I wouldn't kill anyone the way I'd nearly killed Joel... the way I'd killed my mother.

I get to sweat for a few days while arrangements for this final exam are made. It's to be back in New Mexico, since that's where those who have been observing my training—or as some of them see it, my lack of training—in the mystical arts are located.

Mr. Wyse and I drive down there together, our excuse being that he's going to talk to the dean and

see what we can do to work out a schedule that'll let me graduate at the end of this term. My folks are so astonished that they don't even protest my leaving before Winter Break has ended.

Although Mr. Wyse doesn't share Nero Wolfe's aversion to travel—actually, I think he enjoys it, especially when he doesn't need to drive—he doesn't have a lot to say as the hours unroll the blacktop in front of us. A couple of times he comments on the weather, like wondering if we'll get through Raton Pass or if it'll be blocked with snow, but mostly he's quiet.

I glance to the side from time to time, see his lips doing pushups in and out, and keep quiet. If he's thinking that hard, I doubt it's about whether we can get the dean to accept an anthropology credit in place of a philosophy one or whether I can test out of the remaining language requirements.

The weather's not too bad, and at about eight in the evening I pull Mr. Wyse's big panel van into the parking lot of the apartment complex near campus where I have my digs. The lot is half empty, traces of snow clinging to the empty spots showing that most of the student residents haven't yet returned from holiday.

Ominously, though, several cars are clustered near my building. One has a bumper sticker that reads "My Other Car is a Broom." A second's license plate says "WZRD." A third, a beat-up little sedan, is lacking these embellishments, but looks vaguely familiar. After a moment I realize why—it's Lucy's car.

Mr. Wyse turns his pale gaze on me.

"It seems you have company," he says so dryly that I realize that this is a surprise to him, too.

"Well," I reply, determined not to show how scared I really am, "you *did* say this would be a pop quiz."

They're waiting inside my apartment. That doesn't really surprise me—after all, it's cold outside and magic can make minor obstacles like locks no obstacle at all. What surprises me is the flare of anger I feel. This violation of my space seems a prefiguring of what they plan to do to me, a casual dismissal of my rights.

I manage to keep my cool, at least on the surface, but I wouldn't be surprised if none of them are fooled. Mr. Wyse, at least, is not. He looks back over his shoulder—I'd gestured him through the door in front of me—and gives me a warning look.

I don't say anything, don't even nod, just try to summon up that sleepy calm that had been so habitual a few days before. It comes easily, maybe because this is the place where I first learned to cultivate it. As I turn to inspect my guests, I feel a lot closer to the me I like being.

My guests number five: three women, two men. One of the men I recognize right off—a slightly bent, wiry little man who affects a cane and a scruffy, completely inadequate beard. He goes by the craft name Lord Whatsis. I happen to know that his real name is the much less impressive Dicky Jones.

The other man and two of the women are strangers. The third woman—a stout, rather heavysset woman of obvious Hispanic extraction—seems familiar, but for a moment I can't place her. Then memory and car come together, and I realize who she must be. I haven't ever met her, but... A spontaneous grin lights my face and I thrust out my hand.

"You must be Lucy's mom," I say, folding her warm hand in mine. "She talks about you all the time. You're the *curandera*, right?"

Mrs. Sanchez smiles back at me.

"Better *curandera* than *bruja*," she answers with a slight chuckle, automatically translating in case I don't know the Spanish terms. "Better a good witch—a healer—than a bad witch. *Si?*"

I nod. Her words are underlaid with a musical Spanish accent, something Lucy lacks entirely. I wonder at that, filing it away as something to ask. Suddenly I'm struck by how little I've bothered to learn about people—like Lucy—who I consider my closest friends. I've been content to know them in the context of their relationship to me, but haven't bothered to learn much about their lives beyond where we meet.

A chill twists my guts. Is this part of that failure to learn my scholarship board had detected?

I don't have time to think further. Lord Whatsis, stuffy and affected, has risen from his chair and is waiting to introduce the remaining three.

"In order to be completely fair and unbiased, this examination board was drawn from both the local area and from outside."

Mr. Wyse, still standing a few paces inside my front door, clears his throat in protest.

"Dick," he says, "I realize there's a certain advantage to taking the candidate off-balance, so I didn't say anything, but since it's clear you're not launching immediately into the test, how about giving Danny and me a moment to take off our coats and get comfortable."

Lord Whatsis frowns, but he can't deny the reasonableness of Mr. Wyse's request. There's an intermission of maybe fifteen minutes while we get settled. Someone—I'd bet anything it was Lucy's mom and maybe the guy I don't know yet—brought refreshments. I have the makings for coffee.

By the time Lord Whatsis starts again, we're all a lot more relaxed and the air in my apartment, rather than smelling stale and flat, is warm with the scent of fresh-brewed coffee and rich chocolate cake.

"This examination board," Lord Whatsis says, beginning about where he'd left off, "was drawn from both the local area and from outside. Mr. Wyse is already familiar with all of them and has agreed as to their fitness to participate in this test."

Mr. Wyse, now comfortably ensconced in the huge recliner I'd bought at a secondhand shop so he'd be comfortable when he visited (though I've got to admit it makes a great place to watch TV or read), nods around the room. He looks much happier with a thick slab of chocolate cake balanced on a plate in one hand and a mug of coffee at one elbow.

"The gentleman on your right, Danny," Lord Whatsis continues, "is Gerard Ruvola. He is visiting from Wyoming and has graciously given up part of his vacation to be part of this."

Gerard Ruvola looks exactly like my idea of a ski instructor. He's big but lean, muscular without being the least bit bulky. His fair hair might have been bright gold once, but is now faded to a shade somewhere between blond and white. As Lord Whatsis finishes speaking, Ruvola thrusts out a long-fingered hand.

"Call me Gerry," he says.

"Sitting beside Gerry," Lord Whatsis says, clearly not liking the informality, "is a new resident to our area. She is called Moonshine Yarrow."

Moonshine Yarrow—no way that's her real name—looks a whole lot less flaky than her craft name might indicate. She's of medium height, neither old nor young. Her silver hair is cropped in that short, almost mannish cut that it seems about half the women I've seen get into when they get older. I'd bet anything that when Moonshine Yarrow was young her hair flowed down past the middle of her back and she wore tie-dye.

She doesn't offer me her hand, but her nod is polite and correct, not warm, but not cold either. I settle for a friendly bob of my head, not a bow, a polite acknowledgment.

"Completing the circle," Lord Whatsis says and something in his tone says that even his pomposity is impressed, "is Indira Yansi. Like Gerry Ruvola, she's visiting from out of state."

Indira Yansi is the perfect movie Indian—not like Native American—like from the continent. She's wearing a red sari embroidered with the colors of flame and even has a caste mark on her forehead. I can't come close to guessing her age. Her long hair, swept up into some complicated knot, is jet black, but her eyes hold wisdom that wasn't learned over any short period of time.

I don't look for Indira Yansi to put out a hand, but offer a deep bow so automatically that I don't even feel weird about it. As I'm rising from it, I hear the ringing of bangles and see her slim brown hand is extended toward me.

She smiles.

"Such old-fashioned manners," she says and her voice has that wonderful music that is British English transformed by ears that hear all the vowels slightly differently than they're heard anywhere else.

I don't have time to ponder this, for when her fingers touch mine, the world as I know it swirls and

is transformed. I have neither time nor focus to think about what is happening to me, certainly no time to wonder or analyze. All I can do is react, and react I do.

A field filled with wildflowers, a stream running down one edge spreading into a beaver pond overflowing at the dam. Someone is sprawled on the dam, hung up along with the bits of drifting bracken and trash.

Face up, though, face up, and I wade out into water so cold that it neuters me and immediately removes my feet from consideration. Stumbling, I haul the person—a really ugly mountain-man type—onto the bank. He's breathing, barely, and I use artificial respiration first, but nothing in the modern medical kit is going to warm him in time.

The meadow's damp, anyhow, I don't have anything with which I could kindle a fire. There's a fire in me, though, and I tap it, channel the heat into the man, feel satisfaction as color flows back into that ugly face under that untrimmed grizzled beard.

A suburban shopping mall, the parking lot in the evening. A boy right on the edge of being a man. He's lying on the ground, his leg crushed and bleeding. A car has backed over it and the driver is standing to one side alternately making panicked excuses—"God, I didn't see him! I didn't see him!"—and shaking the cell phone he holds next to one ear as if he can make someone answer his call faster.

I can see that even if his 911 call goes through in record time, it's going to be too late for the boy. Craft rules, drilled into us until we're ready to vomit, say that you don't use your Talent where anyone can see you, where anyone will know. If I do, I'm destined for review, for censure, maybe some huge penalty. If I don't, this boy is going to die.

I kneel down and wrap my fingers around that bloody mess, willing the veins and arteries to mend, the worst of the fractures to close. Energy flows out of me even as the blood does out of the boy. Still, I can feel my Talent working. He'll make it.

If I'm lucky, they'll say it was a miracle.

That same parking lot. Even in my vague, dream state I feel slightly confused, like someone has made a mistake.

I'm coming out of the mall, my arms full of packages. In the back of my mind I'm aware that it's late and the place is pretty empty. I'm relieved when I hear the tapping of hard-soled shoes behind me and see a man walking crisply toward his Mercedes Benz. I turn away to where my own car is parked.

Out of the corner of my eye I see a shadow loom silently from behind one of the concrete pylons, a lithe figure, hand raised to strike, but not at me, at the man with the Mercedes. The mugger misjudges something out of my sight. Maybe he slips in pooled oil or water, but his blow falls short and his momentum brings him down onto the ground.

The man backs his Mercedes over the mugger's leg. The boy's leg is crushed. I run over, drawn by the screams as if by an unbreakable nylon cord. As I slide to the pavement next to the boy, I see his mugger's weapon, a tire iron. If he'd hit, he'd have killed the man. For what? An expensive car, maybe?

I kneel, thinking of the risk I'm taking, wondering if this nasty, vicious creature—this weasel in human form—is worth it. Then I wrap my hands around his leg, willing the injury away, feeling my energy drain from me like it's flowing down a drain, wondering all the while if I'm doing the right thing.

It's dark, perfectly dark. Wet, close, and warm. A contradictory sense of silence and noise. My ears feel closed, like when you fold the lobes to plug them, but I'm still aware of noise, a rhythmic beating—lub-dub, lub-dub—and a gurgling, and other sounds not so easy to define, some close, some muffled.

I'm being crushed. My head is being squashed so hard that my skull is bending. My neck is scrunched and my chin is thrust into my chest. Forced by unseen pressures, my shoulders are twisted to



fit into an opening that is too tight.

I stick in place and my panicked heart beats rapidly. I have an uncanny awareness of my own innards—like they're all I really know and all I have ever known. With that awareness I realize that something has burst a leak.

I'm being crushed, but this time from inside. A faint trickle of life is being fed to me from my center, but what I need to carry that life through me is broken.

Something within me stirs. It's a part of me that's been there, but, like so much of me, has never been used. It shifts, moving along my interior landscape, trying to fix what's broken.

It almost succeeds, doesn't have enough energy. I reach back through me, to my center, to that point where life trickles into me and pools, unable to feed my dying system because the way into my heart is broken. I tap the pool. There isn't enough here. Enough to restore some energy, not enough to mend the broken part.

There's more energy there, through that link. I course along it, begin to suck...

A frozen moment. I'm two Dannys, the dying baby, the twenty-four-year-old. For the first time since Indira offered me her slender hand, I am aware that this is a test.

Yet it isn't a test, not only. If I refuse to save that baby, I could die for real. That happens in situations like this. The body doesn't know what's a hallucination. To the body, this is all too real.

I don't want to die, but Danny-now realizes what Danny-then had not. Just because I have the ability, it's not right to steal life to preserve my own.

"What about self-defense?" something in me argues.

"Who's attacking?" I respond. "That pain-racked young woman who thinks that in a few minutes the pain will have vanished and she'll hold her baby in her arms? Is she attacking?"

"She'd want me to live," that other part argues. "Mothers always want their babies to live."

"We're losing him! We're losing him!"

I don't really understand the words, but I understand the panic. Life is there, right on the other side of the umbilical cord.

This time, I don't reach up it. This time, I die.

"We're losing him! We're losing him!"

It's Mr. Wyse's voice. I hear a crash as an end table goes over, feel a splash of coffee lukewarm against my cheek. From all sides there's a confused babble of voices, cutting through it all, a thin, wailing chant.

Someone is pounding on my chest. Even in my pain, I realize that mere CPR isn't going to be enough. Then a hand, impossibly hot, grasps my wrist. I feel raw energy in that touch, even recognize the technique. It's a *curandera* one that Lucy has often borrowed. Mrs. Sanchez is trying to feed me energy, trying to jump-start a heart that believes it has died.

Like the CPR, it isn't going to be enough. My Talent clamors to snake up through that warm contact, to borrow more power. Mrs. Sanchez is stronger than my mother. She can spare the power. She's trying to bring me back. Is there anything wrong with helping her?

I don't know, but I don't want to take the risk. Once again, I die.

Death has many faces. There's that classic, the cowled skeleton. There's a cute girl with Egyptian eyes. There's a pale woman in evening dress, a crocodile monster with dripping fangs, a withered old man with a ragged beard, a woman with four arms, infinite others. The faces and forms buzz past, like the images on playing cards barely glimpsed when you shuffle.

When the shuffling stops, Death has my face. I always knew he did. After all, didn't my life begun

with a death?

Danny-Death leans back against a wall and studies me. He's wearing my leather jacket, but then, so am I. His hands are thrust into the pockets. Mine are resting limply in my lap.

"Want to go back?" he asks.

I don't need to ask where. I know. He's offering me life.

"Sure," I say with a casualness I don't feel.

"You'll need to abide by the rules I set," Danny-Death says, "and sometimes do my bidding. Not everyone can be saved. Hard as it is for the living to believe, sometimes death is a mercy."

I nod. I like the idea of rules. I can guess what form they might take. Heal those you can if you can do it without harm to themselves or to others. Soothe those who are in crisis. Maybe borrow a little power, but only when you aren't going to cause more harm. That last one seems a bit ethically gray, but I'm sure I can learn the refinements. .

"Name your rules," I say.

Death smiles my own sleepy smile.

"No rules but the one," he says, "and that's not a rule, only a reminder. Remember death isn't the worst thing that can happen, and use your gifts to sustain the living when you can't save the dying."

"That's it?" I ask, appalled. "I want..."

"More," Death interrupts. "I know, but you can't have more. The Talent is yours; so is its guidance. You can learn from others, but ultimately the decisions—as with the Talent itself—belong to you alone. Still want to live?"

For a moment I'm not at all certain. Dying was terrifying, but it seems a whole lot easier than facing a life filled with decisions—like coasting along in college is a whole lot easier than graduating...

"Sure." I manage a grin. "I'll give it a try."

"He's coming around!"

The voice is Gerry Ruvola's, and the joy and relief in it is so great that I feel myself tearing up. The hands that have been thumping on my chest stop their rhythm. A warm ear surrounded by silky hair presses against my chest. I don't need the spicy scent of some exotic perfume to tell me that it's Indira Yansi.

"Heart rate is normal once more," she says, those sultry accents making her clinical pronouncement sound like a spell.

"And his life energy is growing stronger," say the very different accents of Mrs. Sanchez. "Thank God!"

They lift me up onto the sofa then, spoon hot milk into me, take turns watching me. One at a time they file off into my study. I don't need to be told that Lord Whatsis is in there along with Mr. Wyse, reviewing my test results.

I'm not really surprised when Lord Whatsis comes out and announces, almost more to the others than to me, that I've passed. He leaves immediately afterward.

The others depart over the next half hour or so, each stopping to chat for a bit. None are as cool as Lord Whatsis, though their moods vary from guilty relief that I pulled through (Moonshine Yarrow) to a sort of bluff welcome to the club manner (Gerry Ruvola). Mrs. Sanchez *is* the last to go, and when I ask if I can come visit her and maybe learn something of *curandera* ways, she smiles a warm welcome.

"I will make enchiladas," she promises. "And Lucia will be so glad to see you."

There's something so knowing in her laughing brown eyes that I have the grace to blush.

One thing really bothers me, though. Each of the board members had told me what part he or she had in designing the tests. Not one of them had admitted to coming up with the Death-thing, even though it had been the most decisive test from my point of view.

I look over at Mr. Wyse who, now that I'm comfortable, has settled into the lounge chair again, a

fresh cup of coffee and a new slice of cake near at hand.

"So what was your part?" I ask. "I know that Gerry was responsible for the drowning mountain man and that Lord Whatsis, Moonshine Yarrow, and Indira Yansi collaborated on the two-part mall story. I was surprised to learn that Mrs. Sanchez came up with the flashback—that was brutal."

"Healers often need to be brutal," Mr. Wyse says. "To answer your question, I didn't design any of the test. I was the moderator only. How could I be more? You have been in my charge for ten years now. I am hardly unbiased."

I stare at him, but there's no guile in those pale eyes, no deception in that smooth round face.

"Oh, my God," I say. "I really died."

Mr. Wyse stares at me, but I don't have any answers for him, just as Death had no answers for me.