

Part I

LANGUAGE

Chapter 1

At the end, he sat in the hotel room and counted out the pills.

He did not do this with words, nor mathematics, nor did his hands move, nor could he especially blame anyone else.

It didn't occur to him that Death would come; not in the conscious way of things. Death was, Death is, Death shall be, Death is not, and all this was the truth, and he understood it perfectly, and for all those reasons, this ending was fine.

Tick tick tick.

The world turned and the clock ticked
tick tick tick

and as it ticked, he heard the countdown to Armageddon, and that was okay too. No point fighting it. The fight was what made everything worse.

He was fine.

He picked up the first pill, and felt a lot better about his career choices.

Chapter 2

At the beginning . . .

The Harbinger of Death poured another shot of whiskey into the glass, lifted the old lady's head from the dark blue wall of

pillows on which she lay, put the drink to her lips and said, “Best I ever heard was in Colorado.”

The woman drank, the sky rushed overhead, dragged towards another storm, another thrashing of the sea on basalt rock, another ripping-up of tree and bending of corrugated rooftop, the third of this month, unseasonal it was; unseasonal, but weren’t all things these days?

She blinked when she had drunk enough, and the Harbinger returned the glass to the bedside table. “Colorado?” she wheezed at last. “I didn’t think there was anything in Colorado.”

“Very big. Very empty. Very beautiful.”

“But they have music?”

“She was travelling.”

“Get an audience?”

“No. But I stopped to listen. This was student days, there was this girl who . . . People won’t be booking her for a high school prom any time soon, but I thought . . . it was something very special.”

“All the old songs are dying out.”

“Not all of them.”

The woman smiled, the expression turning into a grimace of pain, words unspoken: just you look at me, sonny, just you think about what you said. “A girl who?”

“What? Oh, yes, I was, um . . . well, I hoped there’d be a relationship, and you know how these things sort of blur, and she thought it was one thing and I never really did say and then she was going out with someone else, but by then we’d booked the plane tickets and . . . look, I don’t know if I should . . . I’m not sure I should talk about me.”

“Why not?”

“Well, this is . . .” An awkward shrug, taking in the room.

“You think that because I’m dying, I should talk and you should listen?”

“If you want.”

“You talk. I’m tired.”

The Harbinger of Death hesitated, then tapped the edge of

the whiskey glass, held it to her lips again, let her drink, put it down. "Sorry," he murmured, when she'd swallowed, licked her lips dry. "I'm new to this."

"You're doing fine."

"Thank you. I was worried that it would be . . . What would you like to hear about? I'm interested in music. I thought maybe that when I travelled, I mean, for the work, I'd try and collect music, but not just CDs, I mean, all the music of all the places. I was told that was okay, that I was allowed to preserve . . . not preserve, that's not . . . Are you sure you wouldn't rather talk? When . . . when my boss comes . . ." Again his voice trailed off. He fumbled with the whiskey bottle, was surprised at how much had already been drunk.

"I know songs," she mused, as he struggled with the top. "But I don't think they're for you to sing. A woman once tried to preserve these things, said it would be a disaster if they died. I thought she was right. I thought that it mattered. Now . . . it's only a song. Only that."

He looked away, not exactly rebuked, but nonplussed by the moment, and her resolve. To cover the silence, he refilled her glass. The tumbler was thick, clean crystal, with a clouded band at the bottom where the base was ridged like a deadly flower – one of a set. He'd carried all four up the ancient flagstone road from Cusco, even though only two would ever be used, not knowing what he'd do with the remainder but feeling it was somehow wrong to part one from the other. He'd also carried the whiskey, stowed in the side of his pack, and the mule driver who'd showed him the way across the treeless road where sometimes still the pilgrims came dressed in Inca robes and carrying a blackened cross had said, "In these parts, we just make our own," and looked hungrily at the bottle.

The Harbinger of Death had answered, "It's for an old woman who is dying," and the mule driver had replied, ah, Old Mother Sakinai, yes yes, it was another thirty miles though, and you had to be careful not to miss the turning; it didn't look like a split in the path, but it was, no help if you get lost. The mule driver did not look at the bottle again.

They had camped in a stone hut shaped like a beehive, no mortar between the slabs of slate, a hole in the roof for the smoke from the fire to escape, and in the morning the Harbinger of Death had watched the sun burn away the mist from the valley and seen, very faintly in the dry stone-splotched grass, the tracings of shapes and forms where once patterns miles wide had been carved to honour the sun, the moon, the river and the sky. Sometimes, the man with the three surprisingly docile mules said, helicopters came up here, for medical emergencies or filming or something like that, but no cars, not in these parts. And why was the foreigner visiting Mama Sakinai, so far from the tarmacked road?

“I’m the Harbinger of Death,” he replied. “I’m sort of like the one who goes before.”

At this the mule driver frowned and sucked on his bottom lip and at last replied, “Surely you should be travelling on a feathered serpent, or at the very least in a four-by-four?”

“Apparently my employer likes to travel the way the living do. He says it’s good manners to understand what comes before the end.” Having said these words, he played them back in his mind and found they sounded a bit ridiculous. Unable to stop himself, he added, “To be honest, I’ve been doing the job for a week. But . . . that’s what I was told. That’s what the last Harbinger said.”

The mule driver found he had very little to give in reply to this, and so on they walked, until the path divided – or rather, until a little spur of dark brown soil peeled away from the stones laid so many centuries ago by the dead peoples of the mountains, and the Harbinger of Death followed it, not quite certain if this was indeed a path used by people or merely the track of a wide and possibly hungry animal, down and down again into a valley where a tiny stream ran between white stones, and where a single house had been built the colour of the dry river bed, timber roof and straw on the porch, a black-eyed dog barking at him as he approached.

The Harbinger of Death stopped some ten feet from the

dog, crouched on his haunches, let it bark and dart around him, demanding who, what, why, another human, here, where no people came except once every two weeks Mama Sakinai's nephew, and once every three months the travelling district nurse with her heavy bags not heavy enough to cure its mistress.

"You'll want to learn how to deal with dogs," the last Harbinger had said as he shadowed her on her final trips. "Ask any postman."

Charlie had nodded earnestly, but in all honesty he wasn't bothered by dogs anyway. He liked most animals, and found that if he didn't make a fuss, most animals didn't seem to mind him. So finally, having grown bored of barking, the dog settled down, its chin on its paws, and the Harbinger waited a little while longer, and when all was settled save the whispering of the wind over the treeless ground and the trickling of the stream, he went to Mama Sakinai's door, knocked thrice and said, "Mama Sakinai? My name is Charlie, I'm the Harbinger of Death. I've brought some whiskey."

Chapter 3

In a land of forests . . .

. . . in a land of rain . . .

There had been an aptitude test.

Reading, writing, general knowledge.

- Q1 Rank these countries in order of population, from most populated to least.
- Q2 Who is the director of the United Nations?
- Q3 Name five countries that were previously British colonies in the period 1890–1945.

Q4 “Man is no more than the sum of his experience and his capacity to express these experiences to fellow man.” Discuss. (500 words.)

And so on.

Charlie did better at it than he’d expected, not knowing what he should have studied in advance.

There weren’t any other candidates in the room as he answered the questions. Most of the time it was a classroom for students learning to teach English as a foreign language. On one wall was a cartoon poster explaining how adverbs worked. An overhead projector had been left on, and whined irritatingly. He finished with twenty minutes to spare, and wondered if it would be rude to just walk out before the time was done.

There weren’t any other candidates in the reception room for the psychiatrist either, as he sat, toes together, heels sticking out a little to the sides, waiting for his interview.

“Associations. I say a word, you say the first thing that comes to your mind.”

“Really? Isn’t that a little—”

“Home.”

“Family?”

“Child.”

“Happy.”

“Sky.”

“Blue.”

“Sea.”

“Blue.”

“Travel.”

“Adventure.”

“Work.”

“Interesting.”

“Rest.”

“Sleep.”

“Dreams.”

“Flying.”

“Nightmares.”

“Falling.”

“Love.”

“Music.”

“People.”

“ . . . People. Sorry, that’s just the first thing that . . . ”

“Death.”

“Life.”

“Life.”

“Living.”

When he got the job, the first thing he did was phone his mum, who was very proud. It wasn’t what she’d ever imagined him doing, of course, not really, but it came with a pension and a good starting salary, and if it made him happy . . .

The second thing he did was try and find his Unique Taxpayer Reference, as without it the office in Milton Keynes said they couldn’t register him for PAYE at the appropriate tax level.

Chapter 4

And the world had turned.

. . . in a land of mountains . . .

. . . in the land of the vulture and the soaring eagle . . .

. . . the Harbinger of Death ordered another coffee from the café across the street from his Cusco hotel, and looked down at the black-eyed, black-eared dog that had followed him out of the mountains, and sighed and said, “It’s not about what I want, honestly, but there’s no way you’re getting through customs.”

The dog stared up at him, sitting stiff and patient on its haunches, no collar round its neck, ungroomed but well fed. It had followed him from Mama Sakinai’s cabin without a sound,

waited in the pouring rain outside the stone hut where he slept, until at last, guilt at its condition had made Charlie push open the wooden door to let it inside, where it had sat a few feet off from him without a whimper, to follow after him as he walked back down the ancient way to the city.

“Look,” he had said, first in English, then in cautious Spanish, not knowing Mama Sakinai’s favoured tongue. “Your mistress isn’t dead.” He’d stopped himself before adding “yet”. Somehow the word felt unclean.

The dog had kept on following, and the next night, as they lay together by the ancient path, Charlie thought he heard a figure pass in the dark, bone feet on ancient stone, heading deeper into the mountains, following the paths carved by the dead, walked by the living. And he had shuddered, and rolled over tight, and the dog had pressed its warm body against his, and neither had slept until the moon was below the horizon.

The next day he’d come to Cusco, and wasted the best part of a day when he should have been sorting transportation trying to find a home for the persistent animal. He finally succeeded by chance, bequeathing it to a car repairman and his teenage daughter, she already dressed in mechanic’s blues over her football shirt, face coated in grease, who at one look at the dog had exclaimed, “I got your ear!” and grabbed its ear, and it had pulled free, to which she had laughed, “I got your tail!” and grabbed its tail, and it had pulled that away, at which point she got its ear again, then tail, then ear, then tail, then . . .

. . . until the pair of them were rolling on the ground, panting with delight.

“Who did the animal belong to?” asked her somewhat more circumspect father, as he and the Harbinger of Death watched them play.

“An old woman in the mountains.”

“Ah – she is dead?”

“Yes. She is dead. Old age took her.”

“You were her family?”

“No. I was sent as a courtesy. She said that she was the last of

her people, and spoke a language that no one else knows. My employer likes to show respect.”

“I see!” Understanding bloomed in the mechanic’s face. “You are an anthropologist!”

The Harbinger of Death nodded and smiled, briefly relieved, and filed that excuse in the back of his mind in case he needed it later.

“Your T-shirt,” he said to the mechanic, as the girl laughed on the floor with her new best friend. “Local team?”

“Yes, just a small side, but we’re doing all right. Runners-up in Region VIII national division last year.”

“Where would I find the shirt?”

Chapter 5

“Problem about supporting Arsenal is they play great first half of the season, then blow it and finish fourth . . .”

“Cricket fans aren’t like your rugby lads . . .”

“*The train will be delayed. This is due to a shortage of crew.*”

“Do you have anything vegetarian?”

“Proud to announce my new transport policy, fairer prices for a more environmentally friendly and socially conscious London!”

“It’s now been four months of emergency powers. *Four months.* Remind you of any other great political coups in world history much?”

“Darling, you’re making a scene.”

“ . . . humidity in the winter when you’re drying your clothes, and then you get the black mould and that’s really the one to look out for, the black one, it’s the one which can . . .”

“A man dies twice. Once when he dies, and once when he is forgotten.”

“How’s the new job? Oh, I see. So . . . not really like insurance at all?”

On the plane from Lima to LA, a woman sat next to Charlie in premium economy class (Death didn’t think it proper that his Harbinger travel economy, but neither did he believe in business class) and said, “Oh wow, oh Jesus! And you’ve been doing this job for how long?”

“A bit over a week.”

“And have you seen people *die*?”

“No.”

“You’re the Harbinger of Death and you haven’t seen people *die*?”

“No. I go before.”

“And isn’t that terrible? Isn’t that the worst thing ever, meeting all these people and knowing they’re going to *die*?”

Charlie thought about it for a while, airline wine rolling around the plastic cup in his hand, airline pretzels stuck between his teeth. Then he said, “So far, no. So far it’s been . . . I think it is . . . So far it’s been okay.”

Her jaw dropped, and then she turned away, and deliberately didn’t look at him for the rest of the flight. That made Charlie a little sad, but it was, he supposed, a not entirely unfair reaction, all things considered.

As must be, as was foretold, Death came unto Mama Sakinai. He sat by her side, and they talked a little while, and Death said,

Of course I’ve had many Harbingers in the past. It is appropriate that the Harbinger is mortal, a bridge between this world and the next. In the old days I used eagles, but people stopped paying attention to them after a while – just birds in the sky – and I went to this party in Ithaca where the eagles soared and the prophets spoke and the suitors thought they knew better. But Odysseus had been through some tough times and it seemed polite to lend him a hand, though to be honest, it was at Penelope’s bidding I came, though not her commandment that I obeyed. By the

shores of Te Waipounamu the whales surfaced and rolled their bloody eyes before the coming storm – but the priestly classes, you see, the priestly classes always do feel the need to interpret a perfectly well-established sign the newest way, and never like speaking truth to power, and so these things strayed off message. Do you mind if I . . . Thank you. Terrible habit, I know, but . . . You're very kind.

I switched to humans a few thousand years ago. One must move with the times. There were some good days. Egypt, the rain of blood, the frogs, the locusts – I was impressed, it was a spectacular piece of work. The four of us stood by the shores of the Red Sea and were just like, wow, seriously, that's taking the job to the next level, but Pharaoh ignored it as always and so night fell and where there was not fresh blood by the door, I came, just like the guy said. When the Mongols rode west, my messenger came before on a black horse, and said, "When I say big, I mean *really big*," but there's a listening issue with the human race, who have never understood when such things are fair warning and when they're merely courtesy before the storm.

One quit the job when they burned the books, saying that before it had only been people, and now it was all of humanity that died. Another refused to leave Nagasaki, saying it was apt that this was his end, and I suppose it was, and I was careful to ensure that he lodged at the centre of the blast, and stayed with him until he was ash on the wall. There was one who had a blue tattoo on her arm from the camps in the north, but people didn't want to listen, didn't understand what it was she had to say, and another who said, "The war will begin for greed, but it will become murder in the name of God," and they laughed in her face and I don't like that sort of behaviour, not when I am showing such . . . courtesy.

The desert can either preserve a body for millennia, or turn it quite to dust, depending on its condition. I am never sure which outcome I prefer, until the moment comes. Sometimes even I am surprised by who you meet again, when the sands move.

He took another drag on his cigarette, flicked ash into the tray

and, stretching, said, I hope I don't bore you with all of this, but as you asked . . .

"No," croaked Mama Sakinai, her breath wheezing through her cracked and curling lips. "You aren't boring me."

Death nodded, his great red horns scraping the ceiling above his head, his bright scarlet face and spinning yellow eyes opening and closing into something that might have been a smile. She had not imagined that Death might smile upon her, but in all other respects he was the figure she had known would come, the god of the underworld, exactly as the stories had said he would be.

She said, "Your Harbinger – Charlie – gave me whiskey and talked about music."

Ah, he is fond of music, yes. I'm told he also collects obscure football T-shirts.

"T-shirts?"

He likes the odd clubs, the fourth division of the Calabrian league kind of teams. I believe he used to support Aston Villa, mused Death, rolling the cigarette between a great talon of boiling bloody skin and shifting paint, dots of white rolling like maggots over and into his flesh, sometimes bursting into new patterns, sometimes vanishing altogether into the churning colours of his flesh.

Supporting Aston Villa can induce resentment in almost anyone, even a man as phlegmatic as Charlie. The game changes; one form dies and another is born. But the game goes on.

Mama Sakinai nodded slowly at this, her liver-spotted skull resting deep back into the pillows when the motion was finished, never to rise again, and with her last few breaths whispered, "He wanted to hear the songs of my people, but they are not the same when sung in a stranger's mouth. It was good of you to send him ahead. I haven't had much conversation . . . for a very long time."

Death smiled again, and leant in close, holding the old woman's hand gently within his taloned grasp, twisting his head to the side a little so that his mighty horns might not tear the window above her head. Then, in her language – in the ancient tongue of her peoples, the ones who had hunted until the settlers came,

the ones who had died in the human hunts, the ones who had forgotten their names – he murmured in her ear, There is a place waiting for you behind the setting moon, Mama Sakinai. There are the spirits of your ancestors, living anew in the rivers of the sky. They call to you, they call to you, in your own tongue; they are waiting to tell the stories again, the stories that will never more be told in this land of burning sun. They hear your footsteps on the golden way, they catch you as you fall. Your people all are dead, Mama Sakinai, and your language too, and your stories and your lives, but only the world of the living is changed, never the world of the dead.

So saying, he kissed her gently on the lips, to seal up the last of the language that would never again be heard on the surface of the Earth, and Mama Sakinai died, and her body was given to the vultures, to be buried in the sky.