

Chasm City (Revelation Space)

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Alastair Reynolds redefines Hell in this award-winning novel that confirms him as "the most exciting space opera writer working today"(Locus).

The once-utopian Chasm City—a domed human settlement on an otherwise inhospitable planet—has been overrun by a virus known as the Melding Plague, capable of infecting any body, organic or computerized. Now, with the entire city corrupted—from the people to the very buildings they inhabit—only the most wretched sort of existence remains. For security operative Tanner Mirabel, it is the landscape of nightmare through which he searches for a low-life post-mortal killer. But the stakes are raised when his search brings him face to face with a centuries-old atrocity that history would rather forget.

Alastair Reynolds is the author of the Poseidon's Children series and the Revelation Space series. Born in Barry, South Wales, he studied at Newcastle University and the University of St. Andrews. A former astrophysicist for the European Space Agency, he now writes full-time.

ONE

Darkness was falling as Dieterling and I arrived at the base of the bridge.

"There's one thing you need to know about Red Hand Vasquez," Dieterling said. "Don't ever call him that to his face."

"Why not?"

"Because it pisses him off."

"And that's a problem?" I brought our wheeler to near-halt, then parked it amongst a motley row of vehicles lining one side of the street. I dropped the stabilisers, the overheated turbine smelling like a hot gun barrel. "It's not like we usually worry about the feelings of low-lives," I said.

"No, but this time it might be best to err on the side of caution. Vasquez may not be the brightest star in the criminal firmament, but he's got friends and a nice little line in extreme sadism. So be on your best behaviour."

"I'll give it my best shot."

"Yeah—and do your best not to leave too much blood on the floor in the process, will you?"

We got out of the wheeler, both of us craning our necks to take in the bridge. I'd never seen it before today—this was my first time in the Demilitarised Zone, let alone Nueva Valparaiso—and it had looked absurdly large even when we'd been fifteen or twenty kilometres out of town. Swan had been sinking towards the horizon, bloated and red except for the hot glint near its heart, but there'd still been enough light to catch the bridge's thread and occasionally pick out the tiny ascending and descending beads of elevators riding it to and from space. Even then I'd wondered if we were too late—if Reivich had already made it aboard one of the elevators—but Vasquez had assured us that the man

we were hunting was still in town, simplifying his web of assets on Sky's Edge and moving funds into long-term accounts.

Dieterling strolled round to the back of our wheeler-with its overlapping armour segments the mono-wheeled car looked like a rolled-up armadillo-and popped open a tiny luggage compartment.

"Shit. Almost forgot the coats, bro."

"Actually, I was sort of hoping you would."

He threw me one. "Put it on and stop complaining."

I slipped on the coat, easing it over the layers of clothing I already wore. The coat hems skimmed the street's puddles of muddy rainwater, but that was the way aristocrats liked to wear them, as if daring others to tread on their coat-tails. Dieterling shrugged on his own coat and began tapping through the patterning options embossed around the sleeve, frowning in distaste at each sartorial offering. "No. No . . . No. Christ no. No again. And this won't do either."

I reached over and thumbed one of the tabs. "There. You look stunning. Now shut up and pass me the gun."

I'd already selected a shade of pearl for my own coat, a colour which I hoped would provide a low-contrast background for the gun. Dieterling retrieved the little weapon from a jacket pocket and offered it to me, just as if he were passing me a packet of cigarettes.

The gun was tiny and semi-translucent, a haze of tiny components visible beneath its smooth, lucite surfaces.

It was a clockwork gun. It was made completely out of carbon-diamond, mostly-but with some fullerenes for lubrication and energy-storage. There were no metals or explosives in it; no circuitry. Only intricate levers and ratches, greased by fullerene spheres. It fired spin-stabilised diamond fl² chettes, drawing its power from the relaxation of fullerene springs coiled almost to breaking point. You wound it up with a key, like a clockwork mouse. There were no aiming devices, stabilising systems or target acquisition aids.

None of which would matter.

I slipped the gun into my coat pocket, certain that none of the pedestrians had witnessed the handover.

"I told you I'd sort you out with something tasty," Dieterling said.

"It'll do."

"Do? Tanner; you disappoint me. It's a thing of intense, evil beauty. I'm even thinking it might have distinct hunting possibilities."

Typical Miguel Dieterling, I thought; always seeing the hunting angle in any given situation.

I made an effort at smiling. "I'll give it back to you in one piece. Failing that, I know what to get you for Christmas."

We started walking towards the bridge. Neither of us had been in Nueva Valparaiso before, but that didn't matter. Like a good many of the larger towns on the planet, there was something deeply familiar about its basic layout, even down to the street names. Most of our settlements were organised around a deltoid street pattern, with three main thoroughfares stretching away from the apexes of a central triangle about one hundred metres along each side. Surrounding that core would typically be a series of successively larger triangles, until the geometric order was eroded in a tangle of random suburbs and redeveloped zones. What they did with the central triangle was up to the settlement in question, and usually depended on how many times the town had been occupied or bombed during the war. Only very rarely would there be any trace of the delta-winged shuttle around which the settlement had sprung.

Nueva Valparaiso had started out like that, and it had all the usual street names: Omdurman, Norquinco, Armesto and so on—but the central triangle was smothered beneath the terminal structure of the bridge, which had managed to be enough of an asset to both sides to have survived unscathed. Three hundred metres along each side, it rose sheer and black like the hull of a ship, but encrusted and scabbed along its lower levels by hotels, restaurants, casinos and brothels. But even if the bridge hadn't been visible, it was obvious from the street itself that we were in an old neighbourhood, close to the landing site. Some of the buildings had been made by stacking freight pods on top of each other, each pod punctured with windows and doors and then filigreed by two and a half centuries of architectural whimsy.

"Hey," a voice said. "Tanner fucking Mirabel."

He was leaning in a shadowed portico like someone with nothing better to do than watch insects crawl by. I'd only dealt with him via telephone or video before—keeping our conversations as brief as possible—and I'd been expecting someone a lot taller and a lot less ratlike. His coat was as heavy as the one I was wearing, but his looked like it was constantly on the point of slipping off his shoulders. He had ochre teeth which he had filed into points, a sharp face full of uneven stubble and long black hair which he wore combed back from a minimalist forehead. In his left hand was a cigarette which he periodically pushed to his lips, while his other hand—the right one—vanished into the side pocket of his coat and showed no sign of emerging.

"Vasquez," I said, showing no surprise that he had trailed Dieterling and me. "I take it you've got our man under surveillance?"

"Hey, chill out, Mirabel. That guy doesn't take a leak without me knowing it."

"He's still settling his affairs?"

"Yeah. You know what these rich kids are like. Gotta take care of business, man. Me, I'd be up that bridge like shit on wheels." He jabbed his cigarette in Dieterling's direction. "The snake guy, right?"

Dieterling shrugged. "If you say so."

"That's some cool shit, hunting snakes." With his cigarette hand he mimed aiming and firing a gun, doubtless drawing a bead on an imaginary hamadryad. "Think you can squeeze me in on your next hunting trip?"

"I don't know," Dieterling said. "We tend not to use live bait. But I'll talk to the boss and see what we can arrange."

Red Hand Vasquez flashed his pointed teeth at us. "Funny guy. I like you, Snake. But then again you work for Cahuella. I gotta like you. How is he anyway? I heard Cahuella got it just as badly as you did, Mirabel. In fact I'm even hearing some vicious rumours to the effect that he didn't make it."

Cahuella's death wasn't something we were planning on announcing right now; not until we had given some thought to its ramifications-but news had evidently reached Nueva Valparaiso ahead of us.

"I did my best for him," I said.

Vasquez nodded slowly and wisely, as if some sacred belief of his had just been proved valid.

"Yeah, that's what I heard." He put his left hand on my shoulder, keeping his cigarette away from the coat's pearl-coloured fabric. "I heard you drove halfway across the planet with a missing leg, just so you could bring Cahuella and his bitch home. That's some heroic shit, man, even for a white-eye. You can tell me all about it over some pisco sours, and Snake can pencil me in for his next field trip. Right, Snake?"

We continued walking in the general direction of the bridge. "I don't think there's time for that," I said. "Drinks, I mean."

"Like I said, chill." Vasquez strolled ahead of us, still with one hand in his pocket. "I don't get you guys. All it would take is a word from you, and Reivich wouldn't even be a problem any more, just a stain on the floor. The offer's still open, Mirabel."

"I have to finish him myself, Vasquez."

"Yeah. That's what I heard. Like some kind of vendetta deal. You had something going with Cahuella's bitch, didn't you?"

"Subtlety's not your strong point, is it, Red?"

I saw Dieterling wince. We walked on in silence for a few more paces before Vasquez stopped and turned to face me.

"What did you say?"

"I heard they call you Red Hand Vasquez behind your back."

"And what the fuck business of yours would it be if they did?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. On the other hand, what business is it of yours what went on between me and Gitta?"

"All right, Mirabel." He took a longer than usual drag on his cigarette. "I think we understand each other. There are things I don't like people asking about, and there are things you don't like people asking about. Maybe you were fucking Gitta, I don't know, man." He watched as I bridled. "But like you said, it wouldn't be my business. I won't ask again. I won't even think about it again. But do me a favour, right? Don't call me Red Hand. I know that Reivich did something pretty bad to you out in the jungle. I hear it wasn't much fun and you nearly died. But get one thing clear, all right? You're outnumbered here. My people are watching you all the time. That means you don't want to upset me. And if you do upset me, I can arrange for shit to happen to you that makes what Reivich did seem like a fucking teddy bears' picnic."

"I think," Dieterling said, "that we should take the gentleman at his word. Right, Tanner?"

"Let's just say we both touched a nerve," I said, after a long hard silence.

"Yeah," Vasquez said. "I like that. Me and Mirabel, we're hair-trigger guys and we gotta have some respect for each other's sensibilities. Copacetic. So let's go drink some pisco sours while we wait for Reivich to make a move."

"I don't want to get too far from the bridge."

"That won't be a problem."

Vasquez cleaved a path before us, pushing through the evening strollers with insouciant ease. Accordion music ground out of the lowest floor of one of the freight pod buildings, slow and stately as a dirge. There were couples out walking—locals rather than aristocrats, for the most part, but dressed as well as their means allowed: genuinely at ease, good-looking young people with smiles on their faces as they looked for somewhere to eat or gamble or listen to music. The war had probably touched their lives in some tangible way;

they might have lost friends or loved ones, but Nueva Valparaiso was sufficiently far from the killing fronts that the war did not have to be uppermost in their thoughts. It was hard not to envy them; hard not to wish that Dieterling and I could walk into a bar and drink ourselves into oblivion; forgetting the clockwork gun; forgetting Reivich; forgetting the reason I had come to the bridge.

There were, of course, other people out tonight. There were soldiers on furlough, dressed in civilian clothes but instantly recognisable, with their aggressively cropped hair, galvanically boosted muscles, colour-shifting chameleoflage tattoos on their arms, and the odd asymmetric way their faces were tanned, with a patch of pale flesh around one eye where they normally peered through a helmet-mounted targeting monocle. There were soldiers from all sides in the conflict mingling more or less freely, kept out of trouble by wandering DMZ militia. The militia were the only agency allowed to carry weapons within the DMZ, and they brandished their guns in starched white gloves. They weren't going to touch Vasquez, and even if we hadn't been walking with him, they wouldn't have bothered Dieterling and me. We might have looked like gorillas stuffed into suits, but it would be hard to mistake us for active soldiers. We both looked too old, for a start; both of us pushing middle age. On Sky's Edge that meant essentially what it had meant for most of human history: two to three-score years.

Not much for half a human life.

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Ⓜ Ⓜ Ⓜ Ⓜ Ⓜ . After getting a Ph.D. in astronomy he moved to the Netherlands to work for the European Space Agency. ... *Revelation Space* was shortlisted for the BSFA and Clarke awards, and his second novel, *Chasm City*, went on to win the BSFA."