

PETER F. HAMILTON



THE
NEUTRONIUM
ALCHEMIST

The Neutronium Alchemist

Night's Dawn Book 2

Peter F. Hamilton

Warner Aspect

Also by the same author

THE NAKED GOD
THE NEUTRONIUM ALCHEMIST
A SECOND CHANCE AT EDEN
THE REALITY DYSFUNCTION

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Neutronium Alchemist: Consolidation

Chapter 01

It seemed to Louise Kavanagh as though the fearsome midsummer heat had persisted for endless, dreary weeks rather than just the four Duke-days since the last meagre shower of rain. “Air from the devil’s cookhouse,” the old women of the county called this awful unbreathable stillness which blanketed the wolds. It complemented Louise’s mood perfectly. She didn’t feel much of anything these days. Destiny had apparently chosen her to spend her waking hours doing nothing but wait.

Officially, she was waiting for her father, who was away leading the Stoke County militia to help quell the insurrection which the Democratic Land Union had mounted in Boston. The last time he’d phoned was three days ago, a quick, grim call saying the situation was worse than the Lord Lieutenant had led them to believe. That had made Louise’s mother worry frantically. Which meant Louise and Genevieve had to creep around Cricklade manor like mice so as not to worsen her temper.

And there had been no word since, not of Father or any of the militia troops. The whole county was crackling with rumours, of course. Of terrible battles and beastly acts of savagery by the Union irregulars. Louise tried hard to close her ears to them, convinced it was just wicked propaganda put about by Union sympathisers. Nobody really knew anything. Boston could have been on another planet as far as Stoke County was concerned. Even bland accounts of “disturbances,” reported on the nightly news programs, had ceased after the county militias encircled the city—censored by the government.

All they could do was wait helplessly for the militias to triumph as they surely would.

Louise and Genevieve had spent yet another morning milling aimlessly around the manor. It was a tricky task; sitting about doing nothing was so incredibly boring, yet if they drew attention to themselves they would be given some menial domestic job to do. With the young men away, the maids and older menservants were struggling with the normal day-to-day running of the rambling building. And the estate farms outside, with their skeleton workforce, were falling dismayingly far behind in their preparations for the summer's second cereal crop.

By lunchtime, the ennui had started to get to Louise, so she had suggested that she and her sister go riding. They had to saddle the horses themselves, but it was worth it just to be away from the manor for a few hours.

Louise's horse picked its way gingerly over the ground. Duke's hot rays had flayed open the soil, producing a wrinkled network of cracks. The aboriginal plants which had all flowered in unison at midsummer were long dead now. Where ten days ago the grassland had been dusted with graceful white and pink stars, small shrivelled petals now skipped about like minute autumn leaves. In some hollows they had drifted in loose dunes up to a foot deep.

"Why do you suppose the Union hates us so?" Genevieve asked querulously. "Just because Daddy's got a temper doesn't mean he's a bad man."

Louise produced a sympathetic smile for her younger sister. Everyone said how alike they were, twins born four years apart. And indeed it was a bit like looking into a mirror at times; the same features, rich dark hair, delicate nose, and almost Oriental eyes. But Genevieve was smaller, and slightly chubbier. And right now, brokenly glum.

Genevieve had been sensitive to her moodiness for the last week, not wanting to say anything significant in case it made big sister even more unaccountably irritable.

She does idolize me so, Louise thought. Pity she couldn't have chosen a better role model.

"It's not just Daddy, nor even the Kavanaghs," Louise said. "They simply don't like the way Norfolk works."

“But why? Everybody in Stoke County is happy.”

“Everybody in the county is provided for. There’s a difference. How would you feel if you had to work in the fields all day long for every day of your life, and saw the two of us riding by without a care in the world?”

Genevieve looked puzzled. “Not sure.”

“You’d resent it, and you’d want to change places.”

“I suppose so.” She gave a sly grin. “Then I’d be the one who resented them.”

“Exactly. That’s the problem.”

“But the things people are saying the Union is doing . . .” Genevieve said uncertainly. “I heard two of the maids talking about it this morning. They were saying horrible things. I ran away after a minute.”

“They’re lying. If anybody in Stoke County knew what was going on in Boston, it would be us, the Kavanaghs. The maids are going to be the last to find out.”

Genevieve shone a reverent smile at her sister. “You’re so clever, Louise.”

“You’re clever too, Gen. Same genes, remember.”

Genevieve smiled again, then spurred her horse on ahead, laughing gladly. Merlin, their sheepdog, chased off after her, kicking up whirling flurries of brown petals.

Louise instinctively urged her own horse into a canter, heading towards Wardley Wood, a mile ahead. In summers past the sisters had claimed it as their own adventure playground. This summer, though, it held an added poignancy. This summer it contained the memory of Joshua Calvert. Joshua and the things they’d done as they lazed by the side of the rock pools. Every outrageous sexual act, acts which no true well-born Norfolk lady would ever commit. Acts which she couldn’t wait for them to do again.

Also the acts which had made her throw up for the last three mornings in a row. Nanny had been her usual fuss the first two times. Thankfully, Louise had managed to conceal this morning’s bout of nausea, otherwise her mother would have been told. And Mother was pretty shrewd.

Louise grimaced forlornly. *Everything will be fine once Joshua comes back.* It had become almost a mantra recently.

Dear Jesus, but I hate this waiting.

Genevieve was a quarter of a mile from the woods, with Louise a hundred yards behind her, when they heard the train. The insistent tooting sound carried a long way in the calm air. Three short blasts, followed by a long one. The warning signal that it was approaching the open road crossing at Collyweston.

Genevieve reined her horse in, waiting for Louise to catch up with her. “It’s coming into town!” the younger girl exclaimed.

Both of them knew the local train times by heart. Colsterworth had twelve passenger services a day. This one wasn’t one of them.

“They’re coming back!” Genevieve squealed. “Daddy’s back!”

Merlin picked up on her excitement, running around the horse, barking enthusiastically.

Louise bit her lip. She couldn’t think what else it could be. “I suppose so.”

“It is. It is!”

“All right, come on then.”

Cricklade manor lurked inside its picket of huge geneered cedars, an imposing stone mansion built in homage to the stately homes of an England as distant in time as in space. The glass walls of the ornate orangery abutting the east wing reflected Duke’s brilliant yellow sunlight in geometric ripples as the sisters rode along the greensward below the building.

When she was inside the ring of cedars, Louise noticed the chunky blue-green farm ranger racing up the long gravel drive. She whooped loudly, goading her horse to an even faster gallop. Few people were allowed to drive the estate’s powered vehicles. And nobody else drove them as fast as Daddy.

Louise soon left Genevieve well behind, with an exhausted Merlin trailing by almost a quarter of a mile. She could see six figures crammed into the vehicle's seats. And that was definitely Daddy driving. She didn't recognise any of the others.

Another two farm rangers turned into the drive just as the first pulled up in front of the manor. Various household staff and Marjorie Kavanagh hurried down the broad steps to greet it.

Louise tumbled down off her horse, and rushed up to her father. She flung her arms around him before he knew what was happening. He was dressed in the same military uniform as the day he left.

"Daddy! You're all right." She rubbed her cheek against the coarse khaki-green fabric of his jacket, feeling five years old again. Tears were threatening to brim up.

He stiffened inside her manic embrace, head slowly tipping down to look at her. When she glanced up adoringly she saw a look of mild incomprehension on his strong ruddy face.

For a horrible moment she thought he must have found out about the baby. Then a vile mockery of a smile came to his lips.

"Hello, Louise. Nice to see you again."

"Daddy?" She took a step backwards. What was wrong with him? She glanced uncertainly at her mother who had just reached them.

Marjorie Kavanagh took in the scene with a fast glance. Grant looked just awful; tired, pale, and strangely nervous. Gods, what had happened in Boston?

She ignored Louise's obvious hurt and stepped up to him. "Welcome home," she murmured demurely. Her lips brushed his cheek.

"Hello dear," Grant Kavanagh said. She could have been a complete stranger for all the emotion in his voice.

He turned, almost in deference, Marjorie thought with growing bewilderment, and half bowed to one of the men accompanying him. They were all strangers, none of them even wore Stoke County militia uniforms. The other two farm rangers were braking behind the first, also full of strangers.

“Marjorie, I’d like you to meet Quinn Dexter. Quinn is a . . . priest. He’s going to be staying here with some of his followers.”

The young man who walked forwards had the kind of gait Marjorie associated with the teenage louts she glimpsed occasionally in Colsterworth. Priest, my arse, she thought.

Quinn was dressed in a flowing robe of some incredibly black material; it looked like the kind of habit a millionaire monk would wear. There was no crucifix in sight. The face which smiled out at her from the voluminous hood was coldly vulpine. She noticed how everyone in his entourage was very careful not to get too close to him.

“Intrigued, Father Dexter,” she said, letting her irony show.

He blinked, and nodded thoughtfully, as if in recognition that they weren’t fooling each other.

“Why are you here?” Louise asked breathlessly.

“Cricklade is going to be a refuge for Quinn’s sect,” Grant Kavanagh said. “There was a lot of damage in Boston. So I offered him full use of the estate.”

“What happened?” Marjorie asked. Years of discipline necessary to enforce her position allowed her to keep her voice level, but what she really wanted to do was grab hold of Grant’s jacket collar and scream in his face. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Genevieve scramble down off her horse and run over to greet her father, her delicate face suffused with simple happiness. Before Marjorie could say anything, Louise thrust out an arm and stopped her dead in her tracks. Thank God for that, Marjorie thought; there was no telling how these aloof strangers would react to excitable little girls.

Genevieve’s face instantly turned woeful, staring up at her untouchable father with widened, mutinous eyes. But Louise kept a firmly protective arm around her shoulder.

“The rebellion is over,” Grant said. He hadn’t even noticed Genevieve’s approach.

“You mean you rounded up the Union people?”

“The rebellion is over,” Grant repeated flatly.

Marjorie was at a loss what to do next. Away in the distance she could hear Merlin barking with unusual aggression. The fat old sheepdog was lumbering along the greensward towards the group outside the manor.

“We shall begin straightaway,” Quinn announced abruptly. He started up the steps towards the wide double doors, long pleats of his robe swaying leadenly around his ankles.

The manor staff clustering with considerable curiosity on top of the steps parted nervously. Quinn’s companions surged after him.

Grant’s face twitched in what was nearly an apology to Marjorie as the new arrivals clambered out of the farm rangers to hurry up the steps after their singular priest. Most of them were men, all with exactly the same kind of agitated expression.

They look as if they’re going to their own execution, Marjorie thought. And the clothes a couple of them wore were bizarre. Like historical military costumes: grey greatcoats with broad scarlet lapels and yards of looping gold braid. She strove to remember history lessons from too many years ago, images of Teutonic officers hazy in her mind.

“We’d better go in,” Grant said encouragingly. Which was absurd. Grant Kavanagh neither asked nor suggested anything on his own doorstep, he gave orders.

Marjorie gave a reluctant nod and joined him. “You two stay out here,” she told her daughters. “I want you to see to Merlin, then stable your horses.” While I find out just what the hell is going on around here, she completed silently.

The two sisters were virtually clinging together at the bottom of the steps, faces heavy with doubt and dismay. “Yes, Mother,” Louise said meekly. She started to tug on Genevieve’s black riding jacket.

Quinn paused on the threshold of the manor, giving the grounds a final survey. Misgivings were beginning to stir his mind. When he was back in Boston it seemed only right that he should be part of the vanguard bringing the gospel of God’s Brother to the whole island of Kesteven. None could stand before him when his serpent beast was unleashed. But there were so many lost souls returning from the beyond; inevitably some dared to disobey, while others wavered after he had passed among them to issue the