

THE
JACKAL'S
HOUSE

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About The Jackal's House

Something is stalking the Aegyptian night and endangering the archaeologists excavating the mysterious temple ruins in Abydos. But is it a vengeful ancient spirit or a very modern conspiracy...

Rafe Lancaster's relationship with Gallowglass First Heir, Ned Winter, flourishes over the summer of 1900, and when Rafe's House encourages him to join Ned's next archaeological expedition, he sees a chance for it to deepen further. Since all the Houses of the Britannic Imperium, Rafe's included, view assassination as a convenient solution to most problems, he packs his aether pistol—just in case.

Trouble finds them in Abydos. Rafe and Ned begin to wonder if they're facing opposition to the Temple of Seti being disturbed. What begins as tricks and pranks escalates to attacks and death, while the figure of the Dog—the jackal-headed god Anubis, ruler of death—casts a long shadow over the desert sands. Destruction follows in his wake as he returns to reclaim his place in Abydos. Can Rafe and Ned stand against both the god and House plots when the life of Ned's son is on the line?



Deleted Scenes

Not everything makes it through the editing process. Sometimes things are cut because while they may be fun, they slow down the pacing of a story or just don't tell us anything new about the characters. When you're looking at a text and want to tighten it up, often these sorts of little scenes just have to go no matter how much you love them.

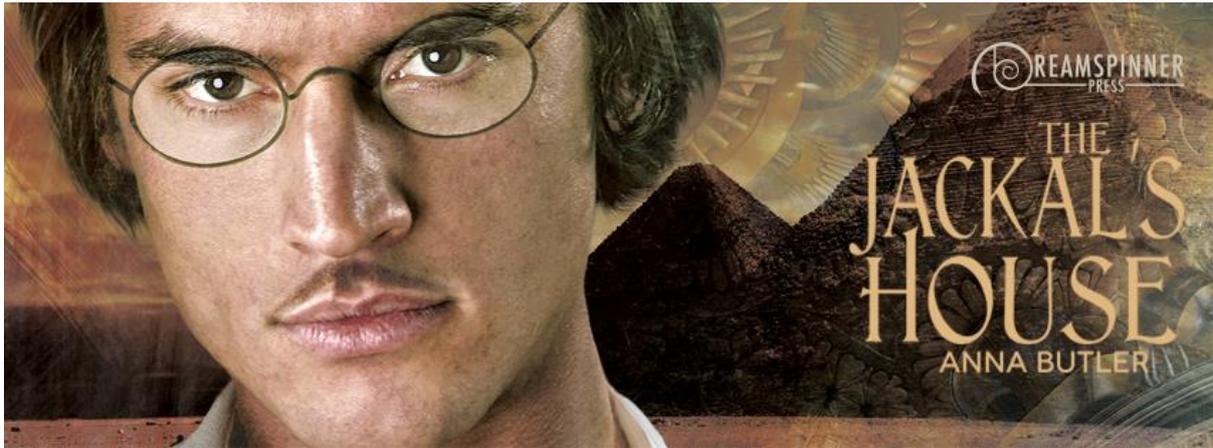
Here are four such outtakes from *The Jackal's House*. I was able to reuse a section or a line or two here and there, but most of this won't appear in the published book.

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The Coffeehouse, August 1900

These two little scenes are set (or start, at least!) in Rafe's coffeehouse in the late August of 1900, the same day as the visits from the Stravaigor, his First Heir John Lancaster, and Rafe's elder brother, Peter.

This first scene deals with the immediate aftermath and the precautions Rafe takes to protect himself and his staff, Hugh and Alan. Ned has arrived, in the company of Sam Hawkins, his guard, and his elder son, Harry.

Hugh was now buttering up Mrs. Deedes over by the fireplace, but his gaze was on me and his expression, no longer smug, showed his anxiety in his frown and set mouth. Alan had taken the tray across to Hawkins and was bent over, talking rapidly and quietly in his ear. Well, that was no surprise. Alan was an ex-Gallowglass guard, and his loyalties had always been clear as crystal. Sam Hawkins listened to Alan, but his gaze was on the scene outside the doors, where Rosens and Matthews were interrogating a young man with a parcel. I did hope they didn't intend to body search every one of my customers, but it seemed only suspicious-looking malcontents with parcels were being held to scrutiny. A gentleman and his lady, who turned out to be tourists from Württemberg, managed to slip past the Rosens-Matthews blockade with no trouble.

Serving them offered me a moment of respite from Ned's steady gaze, but he was right. Everyone's nerves were on edge and there didn't seem much point in denying it. All I could do was sigh and bend my neck to the whims of Fate. I directed my customers to a seat with my most winning smile, and held up both hands to Ned in defeat. But before I could

speak, the street door was flung open and the customer with the parcel entered. Behind him, Rosens slid through the doorway and leaned up against the jamb, gaze never wavering as he watched.

The young man appeared to me to be an undeniable specimen of the shop-boy variety. Most of his species have two main forms of locomotion: the dawdle or the bounce. This young man, however, seemed addicted to a stiff-backed stalk while scowling in the fearsome manner I'd expect from a South Sea Islander performing his traditional war dance. He was pinch-mouthed with resentment. If I had to hazard a guess at his mood, it would be that his amour-propre was well and truly outraged.

He tossed his packages onto the counter and un-pinched his lips enough to speak. "Delivery from Purdey's to Captain Lancaster." He snapped the words out, like solid bullets from the sort of old-fashioned gun one occasionally sees in museums.

"Thank you. That's me." I pushed the packages to one side.

"Sign 'ere." The young man thrust a batch of papers in my face.

"Rafe?" Ned had one hand outstretched in my direction. "Rafe, what's going on?"

"Give me a moment." I pulled my fountain pen from an inner pocket and inscribed my name on the gun licenses Athol Purdey had sent in duplicate, keeping one copy for my own records. I'd filled out the draft to my bank earlier, and had only to hand it over with the receipted invoice and Athol's copies of the licenses. "Here you are. Give my thanks and my regards to Mr. Purdey, please."

A stiff-necked nod while the youth folded the papers into precise quarters and stowed them into his breast pocket. "Thank you, Captain. He sends his compliments."

He turned on one heel and marched to the door, aiming directly for Rosens, who stepped aside at the last possible second to avoid a collision and waved the young man out with a flourish I don't hesitate to describe as sardonic. Given how the door rocked on its hinges, I considered charging Gallowglass a fee for repairs.

Mrs. Deedes' substantial bosom swelled visibly, which was a sight I'd have given a sovereign to have expunged from my memory. "Well, I never!" She glared at me while she collected together parcels and umbrella. "Dogs and a delivery boy! That would never have happened in Mr. Pearse's day. He was a gentleman. He'd have sent the boy to the tradesman's entrance."

She didn't say what Mr. Pearse would have done to the poor dog, but sneered down her nose at us all as she left, and whatever dudgeon may actually be, hers was high. The door clanged shut behind her. At this rate, I'd need a new door by the end of the week.

The couple from Württemberg stared, coffee-cups half raised to their mouths. I gave them a conciliatory smile and tried not to laugh. But honestly, it was that or cry.

Hugh, however, frowned. “We don’t have a tradesman’s entrance.”

Hawkins gave a nod and a jerk of the head to Rosens, who retired to his spot outside. Thankfully without clashing the door until it reverberated. “What set her off?” Sam asked.

“It doesn’t take much.” Alan’s snort was a very undignified noise, but his analysis was spot on.

“I think she had a tendre for Mr. Pearse.” I made sure my customers had returned to their Kaffeeklatsch, their attention on each other, and turned over the packages on the counter before pulling off the brown paper. One short-barreled musket and two more hideaway guns. All primed and charged, as per my order.

Hugh, Alan and I exchanged glances when I put the musket on the shelf under the counter, and Alan smiled. I think I detected slight approval in Sam’s expression. He gave me a grim nod, anyway.

Ned eyed the two hideaway guns, frowning when I pushed one along the counter toward Hugh and the other to Alan. Both pocketed their guns without comment. “I think you’d better explain, Rafe.”

In this second scene, Rafe is preparing for an evening at Margrethe’s with Ned. It’s notable mainly for the rather sweet exchange with Hugh.

We closed up the coffee house at eight sharp. Alan went off home, his new gun in his pocket, and Hugh and I trudged up two flights of stairs to the flat above the shop. I just about had time to bathe in the luxurious canopy shower-bath installed by my predecessor at the coffee house—an unexpectedly hedonistic note for old Mr. Pearse, I must say—while Hugh, who couldn’t quite shake off his old role as my batman in the Aero Corps, polished up my evening clothes the way he used to polish up my uniform. His own plans were to dine at the Plough, the pub on the corner, and follow up its famous cottage pie and peas with another shot in his campaign against the landlord’s dominance of the game of dominoes. Winning the heart of the landlord’s fair daughter was, of course, his secondary target.

“You don’t have to wait on me, you know.” I struggled into my waistcoat as I spoke. Was it a little tighter than before? Surely not! Yet the buttons were harder to fasten. This new life was not active enough. If I didn’t do something about it, drinking too much coffee and

eating too many of Will Somers' cakes would have a deleterious effect on my previously svelte and lithesome figure. I needed to exercise to stop my waistline ballooning farther.

"It's my job, sir." Hugh helped me into my coat, flicked fluff or some such off my shoulders and looked me over, head to foot. "You'll do."

"I don't know how late I'll be, so don't wait up. I've got my key." I picked up my Malacca cane, giving the handle a quick twist to test it. The hidden blade inside slid out with an oiled smoothness. Good. Always a useful thing to have handy. People—those of the unsavory House persuasion, at least—anticipated a gentleman would carry a hideaway gun. A sword-stick, however, was unexpected. Old fashioned. It was likely to throw attackers for a loop, and I'd take any advantage I could get. "Oh, and Hugh?"

He paused, looking up from folding up my ordinary day wear. I swear, my life is much neater all round with Hugh there to tidy it. "Yes, sir?"

"About today. I'm sorry. You should not be caught up in the ridiculous actions of my House. Or any other House, for that matter. After the business with Professor Meredith kidnapping Ned... Well, I should have thought about increasing our security. I'll be damned if I let the Houses walk all over us like that again. They can make a bloody appointment next time."

Hugh laughed and pulled his hideaway gun a few inches out of his trouser pocket. "All set, if they come back, sir."

Which was all very well, but a hideaway was a pea-shooter compared to the double-barreled harquebus we'd seen earlier that day. We were out of our depth, sadly, and I'd give a great deal never again to risk his life like that.

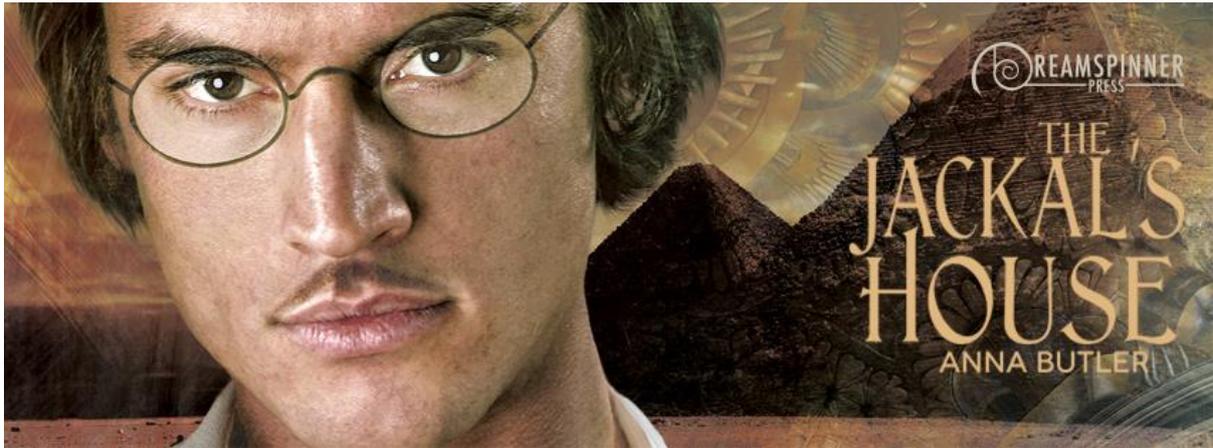
But Hugh shrugged off my concern as easily as he shrugged into his own coat. We walked downstairs in a companionable silence. Our way lay together to the corner of the street, where he'd veer off into the Plough and I'd saunter on to reach Margrethe's in Covent Garden. We went out the street door at the end of the long passage at one side of the coffee house. Hugh locked, checked and rechecked the door. It had as much heavy security as the coffee house front and back doors.

"You know, sir, I can't help thinking the Houses are a dangerous sort of thing to have around," Hugh said, as we walked. "Like a firecracker, if you get my meaning. One of them Jumping Jacks, where you can't tell which way it will jump next and you can't dance out of the way fast enough to stop getting burned." He paused at the door of the pub. "I'm glad I'm not a gentleman. At least, I don't have that to worry about."

There he stood before me: loyal, discreet, intelligent, staunch in the face of danger, steadfast and trustworthy. Not to mention, indispensable for my comfort. A bare month ago he had come to the realization of just how confirmed a bachelor I am. Despite his initial quiet thoughtfulness while he digested the information, while society would have certainly condemned me, he did not. If he was still uneasy about the state of my soul, he hid it well. He accepted Ned's presence in my life and in the flat with a faint blush, perhaps, but with great equanimity.

Not a gentleman? Be blowed to that!

I offered him my hand, man to man. "Don't be a fool, Hugh. You are the greatest gentleman I know."



Leaving for Aegypt, November 1900

This outtake is set in Londinium in the early November of 1900, as Ned Winters' archaeological expedition sets off for the winter digging season in Aegypt, transported there by Rafe Lancaster.

Hugh pounded on the door of the room he grandiosely called my library, jerking me from sleep. I jackknifed up, having one of those *Where am I? Who am I? What the HELL time is this?* moments as the subdued light from the hallway chased away the pitch dark. Hugh lit a lamp on a nearby table, the little screw-valve at the side of the globe squeaking as he turned it clockwise to open the pipe. The luminiferous aether hissed louder than a snake at the Zoo when you tap the glass sides of its terrarium, but lit instantly. Hugh adjusted it to a warm glow inside the big glass globe and passed his hand over it. The lightning in the globe sprang into life, crackling and spitting as it followed his palm.

He was already dressed and looked deplorably wide awake. “All right, sir? The autocar will be here in thirty minutes. Breakfast is almost ready.”

I managed to grunt a response and rolled out of bed, groaning. I hadn't slept well, not least because the bed-sofa was not as comfortable as my own bed. Having Mr. Pearse there to look after things came at a high price when I felt compelled to be a gentleman and hand over my bedroom to him. I was too used to my comforts, that was the problem. I can't say I thought I'd see much of them in Aegypt, mind. I knew I had better accustom myself to privation, so I was up and dressed within ten minutes. Getting in some practice as it were.

In the kitchen downstairs, I choked down bacon and eggs, trying to talk about normal, everyday topics with Mr. Pearse and Alan, who'd risen to see us off. Mr. Pearse was disgustingly perky, Alan's eyes were bare slits and his yawns almost split his face in two, while Hugh glided about being efficient with bags and baggage and nagging me to check and double check that I had all our papers. He seemed slightly reassured when I waved a leather satchel at him. It held letters of credit to two English banks operating in Aegypt, my pilot's license, and the passports that travel beyond Europe's borders might demand. The latter two documents bore more red seals swinging on the ends of grosgrain ribbon than did the Magna Carta.

We'd been outfitted at the Army and Navy stores. Apart from my new evening suit in a tropical-light silk-wool mixture, the clothing was simple and practical. I had two large kit-bags full of riding breeches and white linen shirts to be worn open-necked under a cotton twill jacket. Two pairs of leather gaiters and three pairs of boots were stuffed in there too, the gaiters made to buckle over the breeches from the knee down and over the top of my boots--all the better to stop unwelcome fauna from running up my trouser legs, according to Ned, although I thought this explanation was suspect. He just liked the rather raffish look the gaiters gave to a man's well-turned calf. He didn't deny the charge, by the way. We'd had rather a lot of fun modeling our expedition clothes, and Ned had been very eager to get me out of my breeches. I was just as eager to be got.

Both Hugh and I were dressed in linen suits suitable for Cairo, and desperately unsuitable for Londinium in November. But there was no point in traveling in our ordinary clothes. We'd have no use for them while we were out there. We both wore belts with deep pouches sewn into them to hold the money we were taking with us for immediate use, with pistols holstered at our hips. The guns made me feel like one of the desperadoes I imagined lived in the American wildernesses of the far west, but at least reminded me we were off on An Adventure. A pity adventures always seem to start at the crack of dawn. In a better regulated world, a gentleman would be able to rise at an hour more in keeping with his dilatory habits and have time for a leisurely breakfast before facing unimaginable peril. Alas! We live in unheroic times.

It was well before daybreak, the early November pre-dawn bleak with damps and fogs. We stood shivering at the street door as the clock struck five, just as the first in a small convoy of Gallowglass autocars drew up. Ned leapt out of the first autophæton, coming to speak quietly to us while a couple of guards took our bags and secured them into the second phaeton's luggage space. The third and fourth vehicles, both of them larger autolandaus, went on past us to collect the rest of the team and Ned's students from the Museum gates at the top of the street.

“All set?” Ned was beaming, thrumming with excitement. He too wore casual clothes most unsuited to a prim Londinium. His particular affectation was a broad-brimmed, low-crowned leather hat, jammed any-old-how onto the back of his thick fair hair. He looked delectable in it. Schoolboyish. He gave me the special smile that made me weak at the knees even at that ungodly hour of the morning.

We shook hands all round and said our farewells to Mr. Pearse and Alan in quiet, considerate tones so as not to disturb the neighbors. The farewells had a slight feeling of unreality about them, something forced and cheery. A sort of *entr’acte* to the day’s main events that had to be got through, but delayed and pulled at us when really it was time to be away. It was a relief to climb into the heated cabins of the autophaetons and start out. Ned traveled in the first phaeton with Harry and his guards; Hugh and I were alone in the second.

Londinium’s streets, in the west of the city at least, were well lit with aether globes on lampposts set only a few yards apart. Because of the thick white mist the driver kept the gas flares at the front of the car lit, occasionally illuminating the back of Ned’s phaeton. I hoped the fog would lift soon. I didn’t want our take-off time delayed. Our plan for the first leg would have us landing at Sorrento for an overnight stay, and I didn’t fancy tootling down the Italian coast looking for the damn place in the dark.

Autophaetons are luxurious beasts. This had well-sprung seats in which a man could sink in comfort while it moved silently and swiftly north through Londinium’s streets. This man, at least, didn’t hesitate. I squirmed into the most comfortable position and spent the journey idly watching the scenery pass. Hugh occasionally kicked my foot to stop me from falling asleep. I do not snore. That is a gross calumny.

At that time of day, even Londinium’s ceaseless traffic was a trickle, and the streets had been thinned of their usual denizens. Few people roamed the wintry chill. We passed the odd beggar sitting on a doorstep and once I glimpsed a group of men huddled around a flaming brazier at a corner taking some brief comfort and warmth, the shorter figures among them probably some of the half-feral children who haunted Londinium’s streets. It wasn’t until we joined the Great North Road at Holloway that workmen started to appear in any numbers, hurrying along with caps pulled down hard over their heads and bundled into overalls and thick, rough jackets. By Archway, junior clerks made their appearance, walking toward their offices in the City, white mufflers over their dress coats against the chill. Clerk or artisan, they loomed out of the gloom into the circle of yellow light under each of the gas-flare street lamps only to vanish again on the other side.

It was a fast run out to the aerodrome at Friary Park. It was still dark when we arrived, but huge aether flares on tall pyramidal stands, each easily thirty feet high, lit the 'drome as bright as day, their light slashing through the thinning fog. The autocars deposited us all at the hangar doors, which stood wide open to the stark November cold.

Teeth chattering, I jogged over to join Ned, Hugh at my heels. Ned had Harry by the hand. Sam held Molly's leash. Oh joy. A dog on an aership.

"I am not cleaning up after her." It was imperative to establish that quickly, but still I bent to rub Molly's ears. She wriggled politely and sideswiped my hand with her tongue.

I'd expected Sam to scowl, but he glanced at another House guard hovering nearby and grinned instead. "That's Frank's job. Remember him, Captain? Frank Sutton. He was with us at the museum. Frank's just been appointed Master Harry's personal guard."

Ah yes. The gentleman so skilled with Nobel's blasting powder he could lift a hen from the nest without breaking an egg. A translatable skill, I was sure, when it came to guarding young Harry.

I nodded a greeting. "Whatever you did, Frank, that's cruel punishment. What was it? Barratry? Champerty? Drunk and in charge of a cow?"

Ned turned his head, the corner of his mouth lifting. "Drunk and... What?"

"It's a crime in Scotland, I believe. Never mind. I'm sure Frank considers his new appointment an honor."

Sam snorted. "Well, the pay's better."

Frank was the soul of discretion, and raised a hand to his mouth to hide his smirk. Ned laughed aloud, a bright untrammelled sound that more than anything showed how much the burden of being First Heir was lifting from his shoulders. Harry, though, apparently decided to ignore all the pleasantries, and complained of the cold. I couldn't blame him. I was freezing.

Inside the hangar, all was wild activity. Gallowglass guards had stood a twenty-four hour watch over the Brunel since Ellis's death, but now they hung back to allow the aership to be loaded with the myriad boxes and bundles that an archaeological expedition demanded. Under the harsh light of aether-arc lamps, porters carried everything up a ramp into a portal near the back of the ship. It was all a dance, intricately plotted. The men moved as if choreographed, weaving between each other, catching up bags and running with them, the ones going into the ship never colliding with the ones coming out. They were cheerful souls, too. One touched his cap to me as he ran back, and shouted a greeting.

I laughed and returned it, and had a tip ready when the man reappeared again. Grinning, the porter caught the coin and snatched up my bags next and ran with them nimbly, shouting

his promise to see them safe bestowed. He vanished into the ship just as a huge cloud of vapor hissed out of an emissarium on the ship's port side. The steam and vapor wrapped the running men until they were dark ghosts running in the white cloud, and it caught at the throat and nose to make me cough and grin at the same time. That faint tang of tar and aether... There was nothing to touch it. Nothing.

I took in a deep breath of that aether-y air, and grinned at Ned. "Hugh and I have all the pre-flight checks to do. You'd better make yourselves comfortable in the passenger parlor. We're scheduled take off in two hours, if the fog's cleared."

We all went up the access stairs to the main body of the aeroship. For the next couple of hours Hugh and I ran around the ship from stem to stern as we prepared for take-off while our passengers lounged around on comfy armchairs and sofas having what could only be described as a second breakfast and reading newspapers such as *The Times* or, for the more dashingy unconventional of the students, the non-conformist *Manchester Guardian*. Every time I walked through the lounge Ned glanced at me over the top of his newspaper and smiled. You know. The bone-melting smile. I'd like to say that it sent me on my way refreshed and invigorated, but in truth it made me rather grumpy that I couldn't elbow Harry out of his seat beside Ned and take base advantage of those soft sofa cushions.

Life was decidedly unfair.

But at fifteen minutes to eight, with all of the passengers buckled into their seats and Molly thrust, complaining, into a crate, Hugh joined me in the cockpit. The engines were warming nicely, and if I glanced out the side windows I could see the aether chamber at the stern, fully charged, reflecting its deep cobalt blue glow against the hangar walls. Three steam carts were harnessed in tandem, yoked to the front of the ship, and on Hugh's command over the Marconi communicator they moved us out of the hangar and onto the access road to the runway. The ship moved with stately dignity.

A watery November sun had been enough to burn away the fog, but was already sliding away behind a bank of dull gray clouds. Rain threatened here, where we started; the other end of our journey promised warmth and bright sun.

We were ready to go.

I pulled my watch from its pocket in my waistcoat and nodded at Hugh. "Time."

His answering grin threatened to split him ear to ear.

The chugging of the steam engines below decks increased in volume, and once or twice over the course of the next minute the aeroship gave a tiny shudder that I felt through my feet where they rested on the deck. When the control tower gave us permission to launch, I sent her

rumbling down the runway, feeling every shake and shudder, compensating for the slight sluggishness that came from her being fully laden. Power at optimum... Joystick back... And up we go.

Up we go...

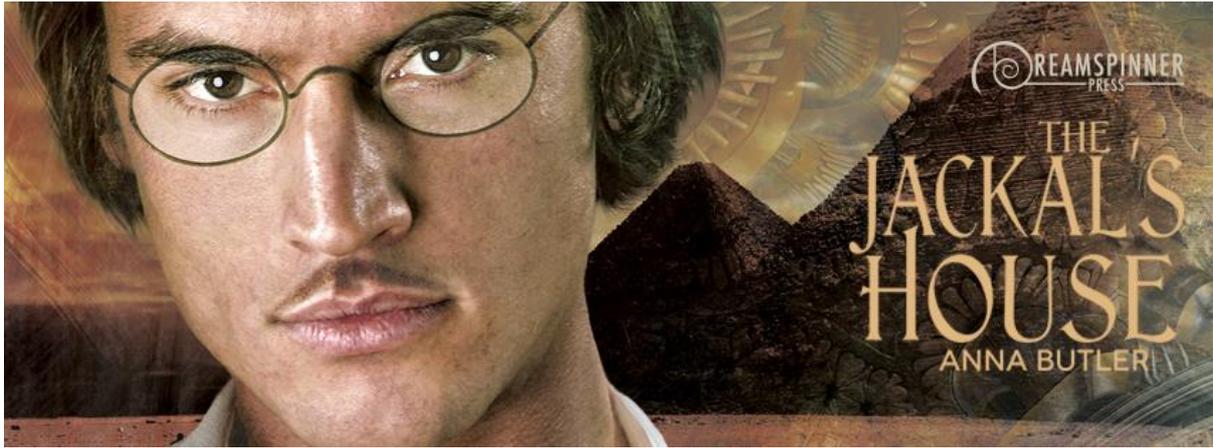
The earth was falling away beneath us and we were already two or three hundred feet high. The dark, close-built houses rolled away, tipping onto their sides as I banked and turned the ship east. A faint cheer came from the passenger cabin.

We were on our way.

Hugh punched my arm lightly and, of course, respectfully. "Reminds me of old times, sir."

When I turned to him, his eyes were shining. He caught my gaze and his smile was wide, unforced. I smiled back. "Yes. Yes, it does. Only without being shot at."

Hugh laughed out loud. "Well, give it time, sir," he said, with all the echo-y cadence of the Delphic Oracle. "We've only just started."



CAIRO, November 1900

This outtake is set a day or two after Rafe has transported Ned Winters' archaeological expedition to Cairo by aeroship. While they're waiting for their formal expedition permissions from the Antiquities Service, they explore Cairo and the surrounding necropolises.

We had an encounter in the Ezbekieh Gardens just after dawn. Molly needed her constitutional before we set off for the Giza plateau and we were all stumbling about in the gardens before God was awake: Ned and me, Sam and Hugh, and Harry with Frank watching over him. It was barely light.

At least we'd grabbed an early breakfast. Just as well, according to Hugh, who told everyone I snapped and snarled in the mornings while trying to wake myself up with black coffee so strong it could glue aeroships together. He exaggerated, although I'll admit I'm a trifle subdued at that time of day. I was awake enough to join the excursion to the gardens at any event, and as the sun brightened in the east, we even grew quite jolly as we sauntered along the path. Ned was telling us something about his plans for our day, when a large shiny beetle, black as Newgate's knocker, tock-tock-tocked its way to the middle of the path. I swear it stopped dead and stared me right in the eye.

A scarab. A real life scarab. Just like the one on the coffee roaster back in my coffee house—only bigger and not made of brass, obviously. And, with the trifling difference of color, just like the scarlet enamelled scarab watch I'd destroyed in the summer. That was not a consideration to make me rejoice. I forced myself to think only of the positive.

My first real scarab beetle!

Somehow, that made Aegypt seem more real, more substantial than anything else I'd seen so far. When I picked up the scarab, it almost filled my palm. Its feet tickled as it sought some purchase.

Harry came to look at it, but refused my offer to transfer it to his smaller hands. He was very polite about it. "No thank you, sir. It may bite."

Being eaten by scarabs was not a thought that had occurred to me, but my scarab proved to be a well-mannered beetle and refrained from employing its mandibles to masticate on my fingers.

Hugh followed Harry's lead and refused to touch the scarab. He put his hands behind his back, out of the beetle's reach. "I can see it very well from here, Captain." A measurable pause. "Thank you all the same."

"Sam told me you'd destroyed your scarab watch."

Ned's words made me look at him sharply. His tone was expressionless, his face sombre. I hadn't seen him look so serious since Ellis's death. It caught at my heart to see his smile fade.

"Yes. I haven't seen you wear yours."

"I destroyed mine too."

Ah.

The watches had been given to us by Daniel Meredith, once Ned's lover and once mine. They were more than mere timepieces, but tiny clockwork spies. Warped by envy and jealousy, Daniel had used the watches to spy on us, and his abduction of Ned early in the summer had ended in his death.

I transferred the scarab to my left hand and held out the right for him to grasp. "I'm not like Daniel."

By which I meant that I loved him, but didn't want to own him. That I understood his regret at how his relationship with Daniel had ended, and shared it. That waking up next to him was the closest to heaven I'd ever reach and it was enough.

Enough.

His mouth curved up and the light came back into his eyes. His hand in mine was warm. "I know."

And that, my friends, is men talking about their feelings. Quite enough discomfort for one morning.

Releasing Ned's hand, I stooped to return my scarab to ground level. A sideways tip of my palm, and the scarab ran free. It had skittered about a foot along the path ahead of us when something lithe and fast darted out from the cover of a bush, snatched up the beetle, and leapt back to safety again. My scarab ended as a lizard's breakfast.

To have such a graphic illustration of how death is the defining characteristic of this country was unexpected. Possibly symbolic, too, and given how memories of Daniel had stirred, not necessarily symbolic in a good way. Ned and I stared at each other in consternation.

Harry, however, was philosophical. "I expect that lizard likes crunchy things to eat. Can we go and see the pyramids now?"

A luxurious autolandau waited for us outside the gates, complete with chauffeur.

Ned coughed rather self-deprecatingly. "A loan from the Khedive. He was most insistent."

"Fancy that." I ran a hand over the crest emblazoned on the autolandau's door. "To be pitied, I believe you said yesterday? You scions of a noble house. Pitied."

I pitied him all the way to Giza until he threatened to make me get out and walk, at which point discretion was very much the better part to take. Despite the short delay occasioned by our trip to the Gardens, it was still early when we reached Giza and the sun had yet to burn the sky to the color of molten copper. Our plan was to cast aside our roles as 'archaeologists'—even if most of us were clinging to Ned's coat tails in that regard—and enjoy the pyramids as a spectacle, the way the average excursionist would.

We wandered the tombs of the necropolis for a while before toiling to the top of the Great Pyramid, pushed from behind by willing guides and pulling ourselves up with ropes. Frank was in charge of Harry, who spent the entire experience worrying about Molly, who'd been left in the care of one of the locals at the foot of the pyramid in exchange for a generous amount of baksheesh.

It was a tough climb. Many of the blocks in the lower levels were four feet or more deep, and I, for one, was grateful for the ropes the guides held to help us.

Ned couldn't put his training aside. "It's not meant—" pause to clamber up onto the next block "—to be climbed all—" pause to push himself up to the next level "—over by every Tom—" soft swearing (in case Harry overheard, I expect) as he grabbed the rope and hauled

himself up “—Dick and Harry.” He grinned down at Harry who had an easier time of it, being lifted from block to block by Frank. “Not you, my son. Any old Harry, I mean.”

Harry shook off any doubt he may have felt about it and peered down to where Molly was waiting over a hundred feet below us. A thin barking, muted by the distance, reached us. “I don’t think Molly likes us being this high, Papa. P’rhaps I should’ve stayed to keep her company.”

We were about a third of the way up by then and stopped for a rest, sitting on the blocks with our feet swinging against the stone. Frank anchored himself securely with a rope and held Harry around the waist.

“It was faced with sheer limestone once.” Ned’s sombre mood over Daniel appeared to have evaporated with the sunshine. He was smiling when he pulled his dreamy-eyed gaze from the far horizon to focus on me. “It would have caught the light to shine across the desert like a beacon, night and day. Can you imagine it under a full moon?”

I could. It must have been an arresting sight. “I wonder what the peasants thought of it. If they thought it was worth all their hard labor.”

“Their reward was eternal life for their king.”

Things hadn’t changed much then, in a couple of millennia. The top dog still got all the meat.

Ned grinned when I mentioned this. “No. Things don’t change much, except these days Tom, Dick and any old Harry can troop all over the shop and no one says us nay. Still, don’t you think it’s a form of *lèse-majesté* to clamber all over a king’s tomb like this?”

I glanced over to the other pyramids, taking in the sphinx and the dozens of tombs half-buried in the sand. “What I think is that Aegypt’s one vast cemetery. I’m going to be treading on someone’s grave every time I venture out of doors. Doesn’t matter to me whose. And given how dead the occupant is, it won’t matter to him either.”

Made Ned laugh, anyway. And more to the point, stopped him complaining. He was pretty cheerful as we resumed our ascent.

The views from the top of the pyramid were breathtaking. Cairo was spread before us, the Sphinx nearby, and beyond was the green valley of the Nile and, in the far distance, more pyramids and burial grounds. Ned looked so happy I got a glow watching him. It was clear he found a peace here he couldn’t find at home. He belonged here, not in a business suit in the Treasury counting the contents of the Imperium’s coffers.

“It’s worth the climb, that view.” Ned swept an arm out toward Saqqara.

“Yes. It is.” But I wasn’t talking about the scenery. Ned’s profile etched against a sky of such clarity that the light was fractured glass, was vista enough for me.

When we’d tired of the views, getting down was as much fun as the ascent. Once safely back at ground level, Ned bartered with the site guards to allow us inside, happily agreeing to pay an entrance fee. Harry balked at the dark and stayed outside with Frank and Molly. So only Ned, Sam, Hugh and I crawled up the steep narrow tunnels with a brimstone flashlight to chase away the pitch dark and illuminate our way, struggling on to reach the burial chamber. Good lord, but those tunnels were steep, the walls close around us, pressing on us; and the very air was warm and heavy on the chest.

It was atmospheric. That was the word. Atmospheric.

Well, it would have been if not for Sam. The pyramid should have been silent, heavy with ponderous stone and the weight of all those centuries, but Sam’s muttered curses and imprecations rolled up to echo in the narrow space as he scrambled up the steeply inclined tunnel behind Ned. His guns kept catching on the walls.

Hugh wasn’t too impressed by the King’s chamber when Ned held his brimstone aloft to illuminate it. “Is this it?” He peered into the sarcophagus. “Where’s his nibs, then?”

The huge rose granite sarcophagus was imposing, impressive and empty. The care Cheops had taken to preserve his immortality had all proved in vain, a fitting moral lesson on the futility of earthly power in the face of Time’s onslaught.

Hugh stared at Ned when he made this philosophical comment. “You don’t say, Mr. Edward, sir.” He turned to glance back at the dark tunnel we’d just traversed with such labor. “Seems a long to come when the old gentleman isn’t even at home to receive visitors.”

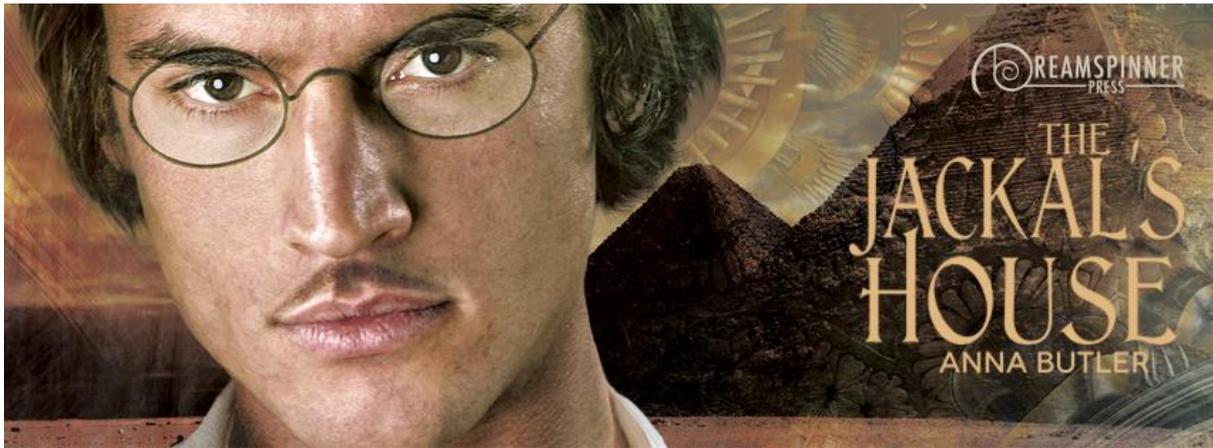
I wondered where the mummy was. I sniffed in the air, but even here no scent of perfumed oil or unguent remained. It was most likely that Cheops’ dust floated in the blade of light from the brimstone flashlight, filming over our faces and hair and hands. Eternal life was mere dust and ashes, it seemed.

No more than I expected.

A glance at Ned’s rapt face as he ran gentle fingers over the empty tomb drove the point home. *Carpe diem*, and all that, as that wise old bird Horace has it, and trust tomorrow e’en as little as you may.

Live now, and live well. Savor every moment of Ned that you can.

Carpe diem.



Returning to Aegypt, February 1901

We returned to Aegypt on 4 February. The night before, Ned came to the coffee house to collect Hugh and me. We were to stay at Gallowglass House—an honor I felt most keenly, I assure you.

It being a Sunday, we were closed to business. I returned to the coffee house from making my farewells to Will Somers next door, to find two generations of House Gallowglass ensconced in my sitting room upstairs. Ned had brought Harry, an unmistakable nanny in plain dress who in appearance alone could give Genghis Khan tips on how to be forbidding, Sam Hawkins, Molly, and a very small child, still in short frocks, who sat upright on Ned's knees and surveyed the world through wide brown eyes.

I risked a grin at Harry, who had been eating one of Will's pink-iced fairy cakes while they waited for me. Well, he must have been. He had the evidence spread from ear to ear and pink icing plastered on one eyebrow. "Good evening, Harry. I like your eyebrow decoration."

"Hello." Harry was prim. Well as a prim as a child could be with icing in his eyebrow. He pointed to the very small boy on Ned's lap. "That's my brother Jack."

"John, Master Henry," the nanny said, repressing poor manners as a good nanny should.

Harry shrugged this off. "He's awfully small and a nuisance. Papa says we have to be patient until he's big enough to like the things Papa and I do." He looked at his brother with a dispassionate eye. "Jack's too little to know anything about bones. That's why Papa didn't take him with us to Aegypt."

Little Jack gave me a beatific smile and reached out a small paw to filch the rest of Harry's fairy cake. He didn't appear too downcast at Harry's damning assessment.

Evidently, Harry had appointed himself master of ceremonies. "This is Captain Lancaster, Nanny. He's Papa's friend."

The little glow I got at that was perfectly ridiculous. To cover it, I gave Nanny a beautifully judged, correct bow and told her I was pleased to make her acquaintance. I got a brief nod back and while I would swear her glance took in the state of my fingernails, she didn't inspect the back of my neck and tell me there was enough dirt there to grow potatoes. Evidently, the standards of nannying had fallen since I was Harry's age.

I was astonished we all fitted into the autolandau. After our farewells to Mr. Pearse and Alan, I found myself seated beside Harry and Nanny on the seats facing backwards, opposite Ned, Hugh and Sam Hawkins. Molly scrambled in after me. Ned still held Jack. Harry, ever an officious child, insisted on me wearing a seat belt because, he said, Mr. Hawkins liked the driver to go fast. He watched me for a moment or two after the autolandau started off, his head tilted to one side.

"Grandpapa was talking to my Grandmamma and Aunt Nell the other day, after we got back," he announced.

"Was he? Which grandpapa is that?"

"The one who's the Gallowglass. The other one's the Huissher."

"Ah. Good bloodlines in the stud book there, Harry."

Ned choked and grinned. Hugh stared up at the landau's roof, his mouth twitching, and even Sam Hawkins looked amused.

"I've met your Gallowglass grandpapa several times." I added. "He likes me, I think."

Or did, until I'd surprised him and everyone else by standing with my House.

Harry frowned. "Molly likes you too," he said, as if he didn't quite understand the dog's tastes. "Anyhow, Grandmamma Gallowglass said that it was time Papa had someone to keep him company."

"Did she, now?"

"Yes. Grandmamma said she doesn't like it when Papa's sad and lonely, and that he needs someone to look after him. I said Papa isn't sad these days and he has me for company." Distinct pause and an unenthusiastic, "And Jack, I suppose."

Hugh's mouth twitched again. I saw it.

I wasn't in the least above buttering up Harry. We understood each other quite well, these days. "I think you're a very good companion, Harry."

“I know.” The child appeared impervious to sarcasm. “I said it would be nice for someone to live with us to look after me and Jack while Papa’s busy digging things up in Aegypt, but then Grandmamma does that. We’re going to stay there, you know.”

I knew. Harry wasn’t going back to Aegypt with us; Ned wanted to give him time to recover and Harry hadn’t protested at being left behind. The child needed a little female coddling until the events of the previous month faded from his memory.

“Grandpapa and Grandmamma don’t have any ideas about who we should get. I asked them, but all Grandpapa said was he’d forgotten I was there and that I wasn’t to say anything to anybody, especially Papa—”

“And yet you just did,” I pointed out.

Harry’s gaze was unblinking. “I tell my Papa everything.”

“I am honored to have your confidence, my son,” Ned said, gravely. “What else did your grandpapa have to say?”

“He said he couldn’t talk anywhere around me because I had such big ears. Grandmamma gave me some cake and Aunt Nell laughed. That silly laugh girls do. You know. Then Uncle Theo came and played cricket with me in the garden. He bowls too fast and he won. Do I have big ears, Papa?”

Ned waved one hand in the air. “They flap about like a big fat elephant’s ears.”

Harry giggled. It was a rather frightening sound. “I don’t! I don’t have elephant ears. Do you want to know what else I said to Grandpapa?”

We all nodded. There was no way, I felt, we’d escape Harry’s abnormally confiding mood.

“I told him you didn’t need anybody else to look after you, Papa, because you have Captain Lancaster to do it. He keeps you company and stops you being lonely.”

Ned’s ears went pink and Sam Hawkins chuffed out a laugh that sounded like a strangled owl hoot.

What a delightful child Harry was! I beamed at him. “And what did your Grandpapa say to that?”

“He said if he knows anything at all, he knows you’d look after my Papa.” Those gimlet-sharp eyes met mine. “You will, won’t you, Uncle Rafe?”

I smiled down at the little demon, rather touched at my sudden promotion to honorary uncle-hood. “Of course I will, Harry. It will be a privilege, an honour and my greatest pleasure. Your papa is quite safe with me.”

Ned smiled and quirked an eyebrow in a style very reminiscent of his father.

Oh yes, he was safe. Very safe with me.

I smiled back at him.

Perhaps, though, not quite safe *from* me. But then, a risk-free life is a tedious one and I'm all for some excitement.



About My Books

And that's it! I hope you enjoyed the taster chapter and the outtakes. Here's some info about the rest of my books:

The Taking Shield Series

A classic space opera, military sci-fi series.

Earth's a dead planet, dark for thousands of years; lost for so long no one even knows where the solar system is. Her last known colony, Albion, has grown to be regional galactic power in its own right. But its drive to expand and found colonies of its own has threatened an alien race, the Maess, against whom Albion is now fighting a last-ditch battle for survival in a war that's dragged on for generations.

Taking Shield charts the missions and adventures of Shield Captain Bennet, scion of a prominent military family. Bennet, also an analyst with the Military Strategy Unit, uncovers crucial data about the Maess to help with the war effort. Against the demands of his family's 'triple goddess' of Duty, Honour and Service, is set Bennet's relationships with lovers and family—his difficult relationship with his long term partner, Joss; his estrangement from his father, Caeden, the commander of Fleet's First Flotilla; and Fleet Lieutenant Flynn, who, over the course of the series, develops into Bennet's main love interest.

Over the Taking Shield arc, Bennet will see the extremes to which humanity's enemies, and his own people, will go to win the war. Some days he isn't able to tell friend from foe. Some days he doubts everything, including himself, as he strives to ensure Albion's victory. And some days he isn't sure, any longer, what victory looks like.

For more information on the Shield universe, visit www.annabutlerfiction.com

Taking Shield books are available at the following outlets:

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Taking Shield 04: The Chains of Their Sins

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Taking Shield 05: Day of Wrath
(Expected publication, December 2017)

Taking Shield e-books and paperbacks are available. Follow these links to my website for information and for signed paperbacks:

[Taking Shield 01: Gyrfalcon](#)

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The Lancaster's Luck Series

A classic m/m romance with the added twist of a steampunk world where aeroships fill the skies of Victorian London and our hero uses pistols powered by luminiferous aether and phlogiston. Published by Dreamspinner Press, the first book of the series, *The Gilded Scarab*, was a finalist in the Romantic Times Reviewer's Awards in 2015.

When Captain Rafe Lancaster is invalided out of the Britannic Imperium's Aero Corps after crashing his aerofighter during the Second Boer War, his eyesight is damaged permanently, and his career as a fighter pilot is over. Returning to Londinium in late November 1899, he's lost the skies he loved, has no place in a society ruled by an elite oligarchy of powerful Houses, and is hard up, homeless, and in desperate need of a new direction in life.

Everything changes when he buys a coffeehouse near the Britannic Imperium Museum in Bloomsbury, the haunt of Aegyptologists. For the first time in years, Rafe is free to be himself. In a city powered by luminiferous aether and phlogiston, and where powerful men use House assassins to target their rivals, Rafe must navigate dangerous politics, learn to make the best coffee in Londinium, and fend off murder and kidnap attempts before he can find happiness with the man he loves.

The Gilded Scarab is available at:

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The Jackal's House

(coming October 30 2017 from Dreamspinner Press)

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The Jackal's House

~*~

Passing Shadows

If you enjoyed the Taking Shield books, why not take a look at the series prequel, *Passing Shadows*? It tells the story of the destruction of Earth, ten thousand years before the events of Gyrfalcon and the following books, in a trilogy of short stories narrated by Li Liang, a pilot and first officer on a ship caught up in the destruction and the immediate aftermath as the few surviving humans run for their lives.

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FlashWired

A novella depicting an even earlier period in Earth's history, as humanity first starts moving out to the stars, founding colonies on new planets. In it, scouts from a coloniser ship come across an alien society that has a disturbingly practical use for the other races it encounters.

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