

Warnings: None

Disclaimer: Other people own them; I just play with them when they aren't looking

Feedback: Please, please, please

Archiving: Penemuel's Nest, anyone else just ask first.

Summary: Stephen Rayner contemplates artifacts and his possible downfall.

## Ruminations by Leviathan

*Daniel was right.*

Those 3 little words bombarded Stephen Rayner over and over as he moved like an automaton, packing crates, marking inventory sheets, tenderly laying the artifacts into the straw to return to their land of origin. He still felt incredibly weak after his beating at unknown hands, but he couldn't leave this task to just anyone. The Egyptian government had been gracious in their understanding that the items would not arrive at the original deadline date, but they had certainly made it clear that their new deadline would be met or Dr. Rayner would not be allowed back in the Land of Pharaohs for the rest of his life. His new assistant, a pleasant enough young lady, was certainly not up to doing this job on her own.

*Daniel was right.*

Just 3 weeks ago, his life had been on the course he had set it upon - a book on the best-seller list, a project that interested and challenged him and everything and everyone in their proper places. Then Dr. Jordan was killed in a mysterious explosion and his life went to hell.

Enter Daniel Jackson. Once upon a time, his friend and friendly rival, Daniel had disappeared from all of his old colleagues' lives after he was abandoned for his wild theories. With no grants, no support, Stephen had expected him to vanish to some out-of-Stephen's-way university as a little-known, not missed professor, printing his crackpot theories in any rag that would have them. Maybe get a little cult of like-minded weirdoes who every once-in-a-while made an obscure appearance just in time to get laughed back under their rocks by Those Who Knew Better.

Hadn't happened. Daniel had completely vanished after his disastrous lecture. Like Sarah, though he'd never admit it, he had looked for anything from Daniel to see if his own vision of Daniel's future had been fulfilled. When the years of silence stretched, he had thought that, perhaps, the world had seen the last of Daniel Jackson. Perhaps he had abandoned the academic world all together. It had saddened Stephen a bit. He had really been Daniel's friend once, but he had found himself unable to forgive Daniel for making them all look bad. Fortunately for himself, crackpots who don't keep preaching are easily forgotten and his own life had maintained its course.

*Daniel was right.*

The man who had appeared at his old professor's graveside was not the Daniel Jackson Stephen remembered. He'd nearly done a double-take at the man, even as he had slammed him in the eulogy. Daniel had recognized the hit for what it was, but had said nothing. Had remained silent. This certainly was not the Daniel he knew.

Even physically, Daniel no longer resembled the disgraced wreck Stephen had witnessed in LA. His shoulders and chest were broader, fit snugly in the tailored suit he wore. His ubiquitous handkerchiefs were nowhere to be seen - not a single sneeze the entire time that Stephen delivered his eulogy. And his hair...

His hair was shorn. In all the years that Stephen had known Daniel, it only took dire threat or mats to convince Daniel to cut even one hair. He remembered Dr. Jordan once threatening that he wouldn't be seen with him unless he kept it at a reasonable, if not professional, length. The short hair suited Daniel's face nicely, but the fact that he could now see more of Daniel's face than he ever had before shocked Stephen. It was military short which surprised him even more.

He was working for the military. That much Stephen knew now. He had suspected it when he'd finally gotten some time to talk to Daniel, when Daniel refused to tell him anything about why he had reappeared and why he was "helping". The new Daniel spoke with much more confidence than he had ever held in all those years. Stephen had tried to get the police down Daniel's back to get him off his own, but Daniel had answered all of their questions smoothly and precisely as if he had become intimately acquainted with interrogation. Add the sarcastic humor that he had never displayed before and Stephen wondered if this changeling actually was Daniel Jackson.

The clincher had been the 2 women who had accompanied him to Egypt - the pretty doctor and the blonde he heard referred to as 'Major Carter'. Although Daniel had called them 'Janet' and 'Sam', Stephen had overheard a conversation at the hospital between them and the authorities where their ranks had been revealed. 'Sam' had spoken to them with an air of someone who was used to being in charge. The conversation had been short and sweet, but it had filled in a few of the gaps as to where Daniel had been hiding.

The frequent flyer miles should have clued him, too, he thought bitterly. Not 48 hours after he had arrived, Daniel had jumped over to O'Hare and vanished for another 24 hours. Only to reappear again to have a conversation with Stephen where he had talked lots and said nothing before they had found the dead curator. No obscure little university could have afforded that much air travel.

His inability to foist Daniel onto the police had only been the start of the miseries yet to come. The carbon dating on the organic pieces of the artifacts had proven Daniel right. Stephen, though, had already figured out that the amulet was actually a key. He had been so certain that Daniel had resurfaced in order to prove his wild theories, he had stolen the key and headed to Egypt to be the first to uncover the secrets that he was sure Daniel was ready to reveal. He found...what? A strange bracelet, maybe a bracer. Whatever it was, it was gone now.

Just like Daniel.

From the point he'd been beaten to when he had woken to find Daniel sitting at his bedside, his memory was cut in pieces. He had never seen his assailant, but knew the guy had to be damned strong to throw him like he had. He remembered Daniel suddenly being there, asking him who had assaulted him. One of the women's voices had said something about Stephen not being a ghoul, whatever that had to do with their situation. Next was the image of Daniel on his hands and knees, obviously in pain, with a burn mark on his forehead he never explained to

Stephen. A strange voice, threatening, but he couldn't recall the words. The 2 women at Daniel's side obviously concerned for him while Daniel wondered what "story" they were going to tell Stephen.

His bits and pieces at the hospital were even smaller and more disconnected. The lovely doctor shouting orders while Daniel translated. Major Carter giving the gimlet stare to someone who had sounded rather officious again while Daniel translated. Mostly he remembered Daniel's voice, sounding much more like the Daniel Stephen had known for so many years. He had smelled coffee. *Well, Daniel's set for the day*, he had thought, then almost laughed at how easily he had fallen back into old times.

Full awakening had been unpleasant. He had hurt everywhere. Daniel's eyes, though, scared him. Not only were the eyes that had once been full of naive optimism completely erased, but what had shown in the old eyes awaiting him had spoken of horrors that Stephen never wanted to see. In the scant seconds between Stephen's hyper-awareness fading into drugged wakefulness and Daniel's open soul to the mask dropped in front of his face, Stephen had seen something he never wanted to. Daniel had been scarred and Stephen, much as he had tried to deny that he ever cared for this man, had been moved to compassion. He had weakly reached for Daniel's face - anything to make that hurt go away - and Daniel had gently intercepted his hand. He told Stephen all about his injuries and what the doctors expected.

Then he had shut up.

And remained that way, unless he had to, all through the preparations to return home, through the plane ride, the trip through customs, the drive to his apartment. The Daniel of old would have chattered away the entire time, oblivious to whether or not he was annoying anyone. The new Daniel waited until he had tucked Stephen into bed, then told him the preposterous tale that he knew from the way Daniel's eyes wouldn't meet his was completely fabricated. But he had let him believe that the story was received as gospel and had let Daniel leave the apartment with his secrets intact to disappear once again.

*Daniel was right.*

And Stephen knew with certainty that one day Daniel would ride through the academic world and splatter all of them with the knowledge that he was right and Those Who Knew Better were completely wrong. Stephen's hungry intellect screamed for the truth and railed against his part in continuing the lie, but his own practicality squashed it down firmly. One day Daniel would return, but it wasn't today. He continued to pack the mysterious crates that had ruined his life, hoping never to see them again.

The End