A Faithful Narrative

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Summary

The real problem all this time had been that she had hurt his pride.

Notes

Set post-series and post-Ori; includes references from Jane Austen's Pride & Prejudice.
Partially an answer to a certain scene in "Unending".

An unexpected voice broke the quiet of Daniel Jackson's office. "We kind of started in the middle of the story, didn't we?"

Daniel looked up calmly; for long acquaintance with Vala Mal Doran, and the similarly inimitable Jack O'Neill before her, had rendered such unanticipated interruptions of his work almost commonplace, and hardly worth objecting to.

"What story do you mean?" he asked.

Vala frowned pensively as she shut the door behind her. "The story," she said. "You know, the one with the ancestress you said was my kind of person."

Concern gathered between Daniel's brows as he focused more of his attention on his teammate. Thoughtful, serious behavior was a warning sign from Vala; long years of enslavement by the
Goa'uld Qetesh followed by harsh years trying to survive after the Tok'ta had freed and abandoned her had left her with a near-impenetrable grifter's facade. She never seemed to mean anything, or take anything, seriously-- except for those moments in which she did, to which Daniel had learned to pay close attention.

"All stories begin in the middle to one degree or another," he said, more to fill the empty air than from any impression that he was addressing her real concern. She'd interrupt him sooner or later to correct him, and then he could address the true heart of the matter. "In order to go back to the real beginning, you'd have to start at the dawn of time. I could have started the story when Fitzwilliam Darcy first met the man who would one day rent the Netherfield estate; or when Elizabeth Bennet was born; or when her father first met the lovely but not particularly well-educated Miss Gardiner; but you would have been bored long before I got to the parts you were interested in."

She made a disgruntled sound as she dropped into a chair next to his working table, propping her elbows upon the scattered leaves of his latest research project. "Dan-iel," she said, dragging his name out several syllables beyond its design. "I'm not talking about all stories, or even that story exactly, and you know it. I meant ours."

He blinked at her, frowning a little behind his glasses. "I must be missing the connection, then."

"You would," she huffed at him. "She didn't see it either, until he waved it in her face."

Mystified, Daniel finally closed the book he'd been holding and set it next to his laptop, out of range of both unwary elbows and the half-filled mug of coffee left over from his last break. "You're-- drawing parallels between our lives and the story I told you?" he hazarded, then closed his eyes in resignation. "Of course you are." Knowing Vala, she might even have thought he'd presented it as parable as much as to distract her from her fears.

"Well, it only seemed natural," she said, her tone sharp with defensiveness. "Practically the first thing you told me about Elizabeth Darcy was that she was a lot like me-- and the next was that she and her suitor had a very antagonistic beginning, but after facing several obstacles together ended up living 'happily ever after.' Which is a rather strange way of putting it, like all your Tau'ri idioms-- after what, I ask you?-- but a very appealing idea, nonetheless."

Daniel opened his eyes again, frowning at her cautiously. "Happily ever after? That's what you've been after all this time? You could have fooled me." He could not quite keep a note of resentment out of his voice; though he'd admired her to one degree or another since the day he'd met her, that admiration had never been without an admixture of distrust due to her flighty behavior and obviously mixed motivations, not to mention a certainty that she'd leave him behind one day as she'd left so much else. As so many others scarred by the iron heel of the Goa'uld had left him behind them.

The corners of her mouth turned down unhappily. Vala usually looked far younger than the age he knew she must be, if she'd been Qetesh's host for any length of time, but in moments of displeasure the lines around her eyes and mouth hinted at the true depth of her experience. "And this is all the reply which I am to have the honour of expecting," she said, with a lightness betrayed by the pain in her eyes. "You see? All this time I've been thinking of myself as the Elizabeth to your Darcy, but I'd forgotten how it all started: with my being the means of ruining, perhaps forever, your chances of going to Atlantis."

The familiar words, half-quoted in such an unfamiliar situation, startled Daniel. He'd never thought of his first encounter with her in quite that way before. "Vala...."

"No, I'll never have the courage to finish if I don't say this now," she told him, smiling faintly, raising a hand in a request for forbearance. She took a deep breath, then swallowed visibly, then
said: "I'm sorry."

"Why?" he couldn't help but ask; though in truth, he meant 'why now?' She'd done much over the course of their acquaintance that was worth apologizing for, without ever expressing contrition; for what could she have chosen to offer regret now?

She looked down, clasping her fingers together before her. "For turning into a Mr. Collins without meaning to," she said, quietly.

As off balance as he was, Daniel's mouth ran on without his conscious input. "Oh, you're not anywhere near as boring as he was," he said.

Then he winced. He knew what Vala meant: that she'd been a pushy suitor, trampling over his feelings in favor of trumpeting and exaggerating her own. Which he'd taken as self-protective behavior as she'd settled into her new environment, rather than anything meant in earnest. It had been so easy to imagine what might happen if he'd taken her up on it: the rejection that would follow, if not immediately, then soon after. As soon as she grew tired of him. He'd healed, since losing Sha'uri; but not enough to bear even the thought of that sort of humiliation.

"But just as obnoxious," she replied. Then she looked up again, searching his face. "It wasn't because I was bored, though, or because it was expected of me; at least, not since returning from the Ori galaxy. Tomin-- Tomin was my Collins, to be as loyal to as I could because he provided me with care and safety, but I never quite forgot the-- the fine eyes that I'd left behind."

She chuckled a little and reached out to remove his glasses, then laid one hand upon his cheek.

He blinked, and wondered when he'd come around the table to sit beside her; he didn't recall moving. Reluctantly, he had to admit the parallels in the situation; when viewed at from certain angles, portions of their acquaintance did resemble pages from his ancestress' tale.

Reluctantly, because-- if he admitted that, he had to admit the role she'd cast him into, also.

It had never been Darcy at fault, not entirely; the woman who'd recorded the tale for posterity in her letters and family writings had later admitted to at least half the blame for the misunderstandings that had delayed their betrothal. Elizabeth Bennet had hardened her heart against the man after one clumsy encounter and never admitted, until confronted by proof she could not ignore, that she may have been wrong to do so; that she did, in fact, admire him already beneath the cloak of her expressed disdain.

Studying Vala's face as she'd studied his, he took a moment to replay the events of their acquaintance in his mind. She was strong, independent, and fiercely protective of both herself and what she deemed hers; willing to do whatever was necessary to survive and further her purpose. If those actions had sometimes run counter to what he expected or wanted-- well, he had only to ask Jack about his own actions when Ba'al had held his friend prisoner to know he was no different. She was more extroverted in her efforts to shield herself, and he more reserved, which did not quite fit the analogy she was drawing-- but her flirtatiousness and his obsession with his studies could be said to amount to the same thing.

No; all those objections could have been overlooked, he knew, if it hadn't been for one more thing. The real problem all this time had been-- that she had hurt his pride.

Daniel smiled at the thought, a tight, self-depreciative curve of mouth that nevertheless lit a spark of interest in Vala's eyes.

"What was that?" she asked, straightening in her chair. "What were you thinking, just now?"
"Oh, nothing," he said lightly, taking the hand still resting against his cheek in one of his own and stroking the palm gently with his thumb. "It's just-- you better not be messing with me."

Her mouth dropped open, and she stared at him in disbelief for a long moment before shifting into a blazing smile. "I'm not," she said. "Oh, I've never been more serious in my life."

Daniel basked in that smile, taking the time to consciously let go of the doubts and denials and assurances he'd used to rebuff any attempt at deepening their relationship over the last several months, and felt the brilliance of it creep in to warm the cold and empty places in his heart.

Maybe there was no future for them; but then again, they might be able to build something just as amazing as his ancestors had two hundred years before. Too different on the surface to meet in peace; too alike underneath to coexist in tranquility; too volatile in combination to do anything but set the world on fire. Really, how different was that from what they'd already been doing, as two-fifths of SG-1?

Only this: that they would be far happier for it.

"So if we're supposed to be Elizabeth and Darcy, who are Bingley and Jane?" Daniel asked, teasingly.

Vala laughed. "Why, it should be obvious! It's--"

He leaned forward and stopped her mouth with a kiss.

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