A family affair

by ferggirl

Summary

An outbreak in Iowa takes Grant back home, with the team following. But something goes wrong, of course. Ward is cold. Jemma is concerned. Someone is behind all of it.
"Oh, Iowa," she says with a smile, hopping off the Bus behind Fitz. "I’ve always wanted to see it."

Skye shoots her a fond, if incredulous look. "Because you really like corn?"

"Well no," Jemma says, checking that all of her gear is stacked correctly. "But Libbie Hyman is from Des Moines, and her work on invertebrates is really what gave me the idea for my second doctoral thesis."

Coulson leans out of the passenger-side front door to check on their progress.

"Well you’re in luck, Simmons," he says. "Southeast portion of Des Moines is the quarantine."

"Wait," Skye pipes up, no longer amused. "Isn’t that where Ward’s from?"

The car gets quiet. Their specialist’s absence looms large, and his request to go on ahead of them makes so much more sense to Jemma now.

"He called his brother from the plane, got his family to a shelter before the area was sealed," May says, cutting through the guilty silence. "He just wanted to check in with them before rendezvousing with us."

"Right," Jemma tries to sound relieved. But part of her is processing the fact that he’d left, that he hadn’t told them. Just May and Coulson.

**

She’s quiet as they process the contagion, in part because they have to wear gas masks until she’s sure how it spreads.

Fitz and May have just left to try and determine if the ventilation of the Des Moines children’s hospital has been tampered with. Coulson took Skye and is consulting with the mayor on the status of the quarantine.

But Jemma is sure that this ward, which had housed the highest concentrations of infected patients and the most abnormal readings, is going to give her the answers she needs. She stays, working through her samples.

So she’s alone, her head bent over her field microscope when he walks in.

Jemma holds a hand up to indicate that she’s busy, and he turns back to the door, pacing impatiently.

The microscope confirms her suspicions - they’re dealing with a mutated form of the virus that nearly killed her. The effects seem less dramatic - no floating, or blue shocks of death - but the transference through energy looks hauntingly familiar. She won’t even need to modify her anti-serum to save the 40 people down in the cafeteria.

When she looks up from texting her colleagues the good news, she squints at the tall, dark-haired man in the dooryway.

When did Ward start wearing khakis and button downs? Is that some kind of midwest uniform?
Then he turns, and she gasps into her mask.

That’s not Grant Ward. The eyes above the mask are green, not brown, and lack the cool intensity he generally projects. Otherwise, however, the build, the hair - they could be…

"Grant said I’m supposed to find a girl name Skye, is that you?"

…brothers.

She fumbles for the switch on her mask that will allow clearer speaking. "Um, no, actually, she’s not - she had to go check on the - it doesn’t matter. Who are you, exactly, and why are you inside the quarantine?"

His eyes crinkle in a way that is totally un-Ward, and she realizes he must be smiling.

"British! That means you’re the chemist, right? I guess the microscope should have clued me in. I’m Craig, Craig Ward. Grant’s little brother."

"It’s… I’m a biochemist, actually, but - I’m relatively sure you don’t have the clearance to be in here."

"Yeah, the guys at the front definitely thought I was Grant. Didn’t even ask for ID. I’ve never really thought we look that similar, but…"

"Oh, you do," she says, a little more quickly than she means to. "That is, I see a family resemblance in the, umm, the face." She winces, since of course his face is covered by the large gas mask, and the only part of him she’s gotten much of a look at has been his backside.

Which does bear a striking resemblance to - NO. She will not admit to being able to pick Ward’s bum out of a lineup.

"Ok," he laughs. "I’ll take your word for it. And Grant sent me because he’s a little bit stuck."

"I have to call the team. Why didn’t he call us? Why send you all the way to… oh, I will never understand, I need May or Coulson…"

He walks over and puts a hand over hers on her phone. Another distinguishing feature, she thinks. His hands are large, like Grant’s, but they’re the soft hands of an office worker, a man who does nothing more grueling day to day than typing on an ergonomic keyboard.

"No - wait," he says. "He’s fine, he’s ok, I think he’s just a bit, uh, embarrassed."

"OH." Her mind floods with new possibilities, an absurd number of them involving minimal clothing, "Right, well, and he asked for Skye?"

"Well first he tried to talk me through the wiring of the freezer door he managed to lock, then he cursed a lot, then he was quiet for about five minutes." His green eyes twinkle. There, at least, she sees Grant and his sly humor shine through. "I think she was really a last option."

"Mmmmm, and right now she’s not an option at all," she says. Not if he’s trying to avoid May and Coulson knowing he’s stuck…

There’s a full supply of synthesized anti-serum on the bus. Fitz knows how to use the gadget to deliver it - he built the thing. And Ward has jumped out of a plane after her. “You said it was a
freezer? Let me just check one tiny thing.”

Two carefully vague phone calls later, she’s sure that the crowd downstairs will be properly looked after. Fitz has video capabilities and full medical instruments available, and has promised eight times to call her the second anything goes wrong.

"But really, Jemma, you should just tell us what this thing is you have to do," he says for the fourth time. "Can’t it wait?"

She bites her lip, avoiding the amused green eyes tracking her pacing back and forth. Of course it could. But who knows when hypothermia might set in…

(She knows. Almost to the minute, actually, based on Ward’s body fat and the usual temperature of walk-in freezers. And there’s lots of time.)

"I won’t be a minute," she promises hopefully. "I might even beat you back from the Bus."

He mutters something unintelligibly Scottish at her, and she smiles, hanging up.

"Right, Craig. Let’s go defrost your brother. Quietly, of course."
Grant Ward has been in cooler predicaments. He shakes his head at his own pun, glaring uselessly around at the several man-sized bags of frozen corn and chicken nuggets.

He’s never hated school food more.

At least he’d been following up a lead, checking his nieces’ school after seven of their classmates had contracted the strange disease. Grant tends to be single-minded when children are in the line of fire. He’d broken the handle so he could jimmy his way into the freezer, and had completely neglected to have a contingency plan in place. Not to mention leaving his bag of gear and thumbprint-locked phone just outside the freezer.

Of course he hadn’t expected one of the principals to close him in, thinking they were saving in heating costs while the school functioned as a shelter for evacuees. Thank god Craig had wandered by.

All things told, today has not been his finest hour.

He’s wishing, upon an hour of further reflection, that he’d told Craig to get a crow bar and bash the door through, instead of going to get Skye. She is probably going to show up with a camera and a quip about ice in his hair, before sharing with the whole team.

But Craig’s not really the violent type. (Something that makes Grant endlessly proud of his brother.) And besides, Grant has tried being violent with the door from his end, to no avail.

Fitz is the more obvious call, with his array of gadgets that could probably cut a hole through the door in about ten seconds. But he and Fitz are still working out where they stand, and Fitz would never come without Simmons.

And for reasons he’s not keen to analyze closely, Grant really would rather not have Jemma Simmons watching him emerge from a grade-school freezer.

He shakes his head and does a quick check of his vitals, out of habit more than worry. His temperature is falling, but slowly, and he’s still got full use of his extremities. His nose is pretty damn cold, though.

**

It’s another half an hour before Craig bangs on the door.

"Grant, you still kicking in there?"

"Nice to know you worried," he yells back. "Did you find her?"

"Well, uh, sortof," his brother answers. There’s some indistinguishable murmuring and Grant sighs. He should have known the rest of the team would follow Skye and her hacker bracelet.

"Right, Agent Ward?"

Grant’s stomach does a funny swoop. That’s not Skye, that’s most definitely the stubborn biochemist with the tendency to take foolish, heart-stopping chances. Well, she’s stopped his on more than one occasion, at least.
"Simmons," he says finally. "So my brother is a terrible listener."

"Oh, not at all," he can almost hear the bright smile muffled by two inches of insulated steel. "But Skye is with Coulson and Fitz and May are busy curing the… ah, yes, that’s the ticket."

Then she gets quiet, save for some banging and one or two colorful British curse words that he can’t quite picture come from her lips.

Not that he pictures her lips a lot. It’s just the cold, starting to go to his head.

He hears his brother cheer and the door falls forward, landing with a loud clang on the tile floor. When his eyes readjust to the bright light, he sees Craig with his arm around Jemma. His jaw hardens just in time to look up and catch a knowing look in his baby brother’s eyes.

Craig has always been able to read him better than he’d like.

Then she’s hurrying over, Craig forgotten, sliding on the icy door so he has to stand and brace her with his cold hands. She slips and winds up with her face in his chest and for a weak second he leaves her there, shooting a look that is absolutely nothing like triumph out at his brother’s raised eyebrows.

"Oof, right," she says, steadying herself against him. "Well you don’t seem to be impaired in any way, not that I expected you to be." She eases back a step and looks down at his cool hands where they are holding her shoulders. "Any numbness? Loss of feeling?" Her voice has gone a bit breathy, and his chest tightens in response.

Craig clambers toward them, offering a hand to Jemma.

"Why don’t we finish this outside the freezer, you two," he says, green eyes laughing at Grant as he helps her back off the slippery door. “I know a nice private-“

He swears later that the phone just slipped from his cold hands - slipped in a perfect arc and landed on his brother’s handsome head.

"-place where you can examine him, Jemma," his brother finishes with a glare over his shoulder, and a mouthed "let me help you."

Oh. A private exam does sound like just what the doctor ordered.
It’s a third grade classroom, replete with construction paper hand-turkeys and pilgrim hats. Not exactly the place Jemma imagined when Craig said “private” - no that had been darker, more bedroom-y.

…Because she needed a flat surface to examine him on, of course. In a totally non-sexual way.

Mostly.

Well.

"Jemma?" He’s got an expectant eyebrow up.

"What! Yes, right." She blinks away the fantasies and points him to the teacher’s desk, which has been cleared off with a precision she can appreciate.

He looks at the desk for a minute before saying, “You know, I’m fine.” She thinks his voice is a little huskier than usual, and when he pauses to clear his throat she bites her lip. “You don’t have to -“

"Of course I do, it’s my job," she says brightly. He moves his gaze to her face for a minute, and she gives herself a moment to appreciate the friendly warmth in his brown eyes.

Because that’s all that is. Obviously.

Then she looks away, digging a few more gadgets out of her bag. “Besides, you were in that freezer for nearly two hours.” If her voice is a little higher than usual, surely he won’t notice.

"I know," he says, sitting down on the desk so that he’s more on her level. He’s so very tall. Craig is too, she thinks, moving herself past the contemplation of how she normally would only come up to Grant’s shoulder. He’d hugged her in thanks before pulling a chair outside to "guard the door" so Grant could have some privacy.

But she’d noticed the wink he’d sent to his brother.

It has her stomach in a knot and her imagination running wild.

"Yes," she turns and places some of her instruments on the desk right next to him. "Of course you do. I just mean that we need to be sure you’re fit for field work. Seeing as we’re in the field, currently working," she trails off, and bites her lip again.

Grant groans.

"Is something wrong?" She picks up her stethoscope, then realizes she needs him to-

He pulls his shirt off in one motion.

Jemma stops breathing. She’s seen him without his shirt before, of course she has. He trains like that sometimes, and during that awful physical when he was under the influence of the Asgardian berserker staff.

But never when they were alone.
He catches her eyes, and she realizes she’s been staring. She drops her gaze immediately, fumbling with the stethoscope, and he reaches out to steady her hand. His is still cool, but the heady rush she feels when his strong fingers wrap around hers is all heat.

"You have got to stop doing that," he says, his voice rough and low.

"Well I don’t usually drop the medical supplies," she says, a bit stung. She doesn’t warn him before she places the cold metal on his chest, but he doesn’t flinch. He just draws in a breath, then slowly breathes out.

Breathing is something that everyone does, she reminds herself sternly as she listens for anything that should not be there. Breathing is not sexy.

He does it again. Ok, maybe it’s a bit sexy. She bites her lip in an attempt to focus and suddenly the stethoscope is in his hand, which is around her waist while the other is behind her head and pulling her closer until there are only inches between them.

"That," he breathes, his eyes on her lips. "You have to stop doing that. For my sake. Please."

"It - it helps me concentrate," she whispers, focused on the feel of his fingers in her hair and splayed across her back.

He shoots a conflicted look at the door, with its small window, and then leans his face against hers. “I’m going to kiss you now. Any objections to that, doctor?"

All of her breath whooshes out of her. She has time to shake her head once, and then he tugs the last few inches, covering her mouth with his chilled lips.

Her hands finally get involved, sliding up his bare chest to rest on his shoulders. She notes dimly that he’s not nearly as cold after two hours as she might have expected. He growls “I can hear you thinking,” and pulls her flush with his body.

And then she really does stop thinking.

**

Craig notes the time when it goes quiet in the classroom behind him. Eight minutes. Not too bad, Jemma.

His brother has always been the self-sacrificing type, the person who will make sure everyone else is safe and happy before he worries about himself. So Craig tends to worry. Grant tells him the funny and the weird from his job, when he can, to keep his worry at bay and make the girls laugh.

But in his heavily edited stories, the chemist has been quite the star.

So when the panic of the infection had subsided, his girls were safe in the shelter with their friends, and Grant had established that there was no immediate threat to his team, Craig had decided it was about time to meet her.

That freezer hasn’t been unlocking properly for a year. He volunteers here sometimes, and the cafeteria ladies had showed him the trick to jiggling the handle.

He hadn’t bothered to mention that to Grant, who had most obligingly kicked the entire handle off. So he really was stuck when Craig closed him in.

He’d planned to just meet her, get eyes on the woman that warms his brother’s voice every time
she comes up. But then she was so clearly concerned, and then she was coming right along with him, and Grant was shooting him the most hilarious jealous looks.

He’s a single father for God’s sake. Who lives in Des Moines. And is an accountant.

He’s not her type.

It’s still quiet in there. He shrugs, figuring that he could still get some chicken nuggets if he hurry and meets his daughters. He sticks the chair in front of the door, and uses the back of a hand-washing sign to write “Do Not Disturb” in big block letters.

They might be a while.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!