

HIGHER GROUND

by kc wisniewski

CHARACTERS:

ADRIAN (he/him) – Very loud, very gay. Not white.

ARIELLE (she/her) – Not bright but charming. Any ethnicity. Jaime's twin.

JAIME (he/him) – Big and in control until he isn't. Any ethnicity. Arielle's twin.

KIRSTEN (she/her/they/them) – Commanding and sarcastic. Black.

TOPHER (he/him) – A stray. White.

SETTING:

A 3-bedroom apartment on the top floor of a pre-war building in Upper Manhattan, NYC.

JAIME

I had you over for a night. And it was the wrong night. And you never left.

TOPHER

You didn't let me leave.

ADRIAN

Yeah, even I remember that. You didn't let him leave. He bit you.

JAIME

Adrian, you've really never learned when to shut up.

Adrian backs off and walks toward the window.

Adrian is looking away and fiddling with the vines near the window.

TOPHER

We made choices that made sense at the time.

JAIME

But who are you? I don't even know you.

TOPHER

I'm the person who's been living here for a year. I'm the person who held you when your sister left and kept you busy when your job just...disappeared. You know me.

JAIME

I know who you've been for the past year. And maybe I'm grateful. Maybe I was robbed.

TOPHER

Robbed of what?

JAIME

Who were you before? Where did you come from? I know nothing about you.

TOPHER

You're freaking out. Don't spiral.

JAIME

No, this is clarity. I'm seeing clearly right now. You've watched me lose everything I had in my life but as far as I know, you've lost nothing. You gained an apartment and took over my life.

Adrian is struggling with something in the corner by the window.

TOPHER

I didn't mean to take over your life. I'm really grateful you gave me a place to stay when my apartment flooded. I lost lots of things. I don't think any of us know how much we've lost.

JAIME

You didn't have a job. Did you have any friends?

TOPHER

I was new to the city.

JAIME

So you had no one. No one except for me.

TOPHER

I had people.

JAIME

What people? I never heard about "people."

TOPHER

You never really asked.

JAIME

Oh my god.

Oh my god.

None of this was supposed to be permanent. This all just got so far out of hand. And we made these decisions—you staying over, me staying here while Arielle left, boarding the apartment up, letting these *plants* just take over the apartment—it was all just a temporary decision. No thought went into any of it—

And now...

I can't be stuck with it. This was so thoughtless. I fought for *this*?

TOPHER

It wasn't totally thoughtless, we did what we could—

ADRIAN

Hey *guys*—um—

JAIME

Not now, Adrian.

This isn't what I want.

TOPHER

Just like that?

JAIME

This isn't my forever.

TOPHER

I know it isn't ideal but can't you see? It's going to get better. I want to have good times with you. We deserve good times.

JAIME

I'm not happy, Topher.

TOPHER

None of us are happy! We've been trapped inside. We haven't had any escape.

JAIME

No, with you. We made it through, but...all of this is mine. It's mine. You can't just have what's left of my life.

TOPHER

No. I think we get to share what we built.

JAIME

And I don't want that.

ADRIAN

Hey, a little bit of help here please!

Topher and Jaime look over.

Adrian is completely entwined in a vine from Stevie Nicks.

She's wrapped herself around him somehow. Adrian is immobile and stuck to the wall. It seems to have happened gradually.

JAIME

What the fuck.

ADRIAN

I know.

Can you... grab some scissors or something, I can't—
I don't know how this happened—

JAIME

What did you do?

ADRIAN

I was just minding my own business and I was playing with a vine—

TOPHER

I'll go get the shears—

JAIME

There are too many *fucking plants* in this apartment—

Topher runs off into the bedroom.

ADRIAN

I'm kind of freaking out. Like, is this something that happens with plants?

JAIME

Are you fucking stupid? Of course this *isn't* something that happens with plants.

ADRIAN

Ok, well, that doesn't really make me feel better.

JAIME

I'm going to come over there and see what I can do—

*Jaime tries to move. But he falls.
He looks, feeling as though he tripped but—
Jaime's leg is wrapped up in a vine.*

ADRIAN

What's going on, Jaime?

JAIME

I just got caught on something, one sec—

ADRIAN

Ok but hurry, I'm kind of having a panic attack.

TOPHER.

Topher comes out of the room with very large pruning shears.

TOPHER

Coming.

*Topher goes to Adrian and starts cutting him out.
Jamie says nothing and keeps struggling on the ground.*

ADRIAN

Why are they so big? Please be careful.

TOPHER
I'm sorry, this wasn't supposed to happen.

ADRIAN
Obviously, I hope.

TOPHER
I'll be careful.

Topher quickly and skillfully cuts the vines, avoiding nicking Adrian until—

ADRIAN
Oww—

He nicks Adrian's leg on the last snip. There is blood.

TOPHER
Oh god, I'm sorry.

ADRIAN
It's... fine.

Adrian hobbles to the couch and lies down.

TOPHER
Let me get you a bandage—

ADRIAN
No, please. I'll get it in a moment. Just let me sit here.

TOPHER
(*to Jaime*)
Why are you on the ground?

JAIME
My leg is caught.

TOPHER
Oh.

JAIME
A little help?

TOPHER
Why? All of my *help* so far has been a burden to you, so...

JAIME

Oh come on, Topher. Don't be petty.

TOPHER

Is it petty?

*Topher drops the shears on the ground.
Jaime reaches for them but...
They're just out of Jaime's reach.*

JAIME

Just push them toward my hands, I'll do it myself.

Topher kicks them further away.

ADRIAN

Oh, Jesus Christ...

TOPHER

I only moved to this city a year and a half ago. And I guess I was a little old. Most people come here straight out of college but I just got sidetracked—
I always wanted to live here but I needed more in savings. And the savings never materialized. What materialized was a guy. And when he was gone, another guy. And then another guy who realized just how much of a sucker I was and kept me locked up in his apartment. Until, finally, I snapped and emptied out his wallet and took a bus to the city.
I didn't have much, just a couple thousand in cash, a duffel bag, and Stevie Nicks.
Just enough for a tiny apartment in Brooklyn. In a basement.
And one day it was raining and you know I hate the rain—
No, I don't hate it.
I fear water because I respect water because water is the most dominant force on earth.
I went out. Above ground. To get a drink.
And another guy shows up.
And I think, this one gets me. He has a magnetic smile. A real job. A sense of humor. Joy. Intellect. And the way he looks at me? It's like we're the only two people in the world.
So, I go all in. And at first it doesn't matter that he won't introduce me to his friends or his twin sister. That we only stay at my place. Especially because when I do go to his place, when I do meet his friends and his *very special* twin, they remind me why I've felt so alone.
And when I try to leave—
He holds me. Because I mean that much.
And maybe there's a chance to prove to the others that I'm not just awkward and lost and...invasive. Maybe I can belong.
And before I can second guess...
Water.
It seems like a sign, that I had to stay.
I've made it to the highest point in Manhattan. Just blocks away, there's a plaque. And I made it, just in time for the storm.

Maybe this guy is the one.

JAIME

Please just cut me out of here. We can keep talking.

TOPHER

No. You get to be trapped for a bit longer.

I found Stevie Nicks outside a bar right after I had to drop out of college the second time. I was drunk and alone and she looked sad and alone. I've had her ever since and ever since then, she's been sad and miserable. Until now. It's not a mistake that she grew here.

This might have been the hardest year of your life but I hope I brought you some joy. I think, in some ways, this is the happiest I've ever been.

ADRIAN

Oh, wow, that's depressing.

Topher grabs at the wound on Adrian's leg and Adrian yelps.

TOPHER

I survived. I was useful. I was loved. I was dry.
Surviving matters.

JAIME

I need someone who wants more.

TOPHER

I'm still figuring that out. I want to figure that out together. I want you there. Because you saved me. What if I'd been on a train home when the subways flooded? What if I had made it back to my apartment?

What more is there to want right now but *this*?

Being alive matters and surviving with someone matters.

ADRIAN

Again, I am also here, too.

JAIME

You deserve someone who knows you and loves you and Topher, I can't be those things. Now please, cut me out of here.

TOPHER

You won't try.

JAIME

No. I want my life back.

TOPHER

Fine. Then it's yours.

Topher goes to the bedroom.

JAIME

Where is he going? I need him to get me out of here.

ADRIAN

Maybe not the best time to break up then, Jay.

JAIME

Then can you do something?

ADRIAN

In a minute.

Topher comes back with a packed bag.

JAIME

A little help?

ADRIAN

Why does everyone in this house have bags already packed?

TOPHER

Breadcrumbs.

*Topher grabs the crowbar and heads toward the door but—
The door bursts open.
The boards are nothing to Kirsten and a battering ram.*

*Kirsten looks like a fierce warrior, fresh out of Mad Max (the Charlize Theron version).
Maybe she's surrounded by mist.
She strides in and surveys the scene.*

KIRSTEN

What's up, bitches?

ADRIAN

WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?

KIRSTEN

Oh my God. Wow. All three of you. I can't believe this. You survived? My babies. (*She kisses Jaime first, then Topher, then Adrian.*) You survived. How?

TOPHER
(*near speechless*)

Somehow.

KIRSTEN
(*to Adrian*)

What happened, sweetie?

ADRIAN

Stevie Nicks.

KIRSTEN

I better clean that up for you.

*Kirsten whips out a med kit from what is probably a military-grade backpack.
Everyone is silent.
She pulls out scissors and starts cutting off Adrian's pants—*

ADRIAN

Hey! My pants.

KIRSTEN

Quiet pussy baby. I'm gonna fix you up.

JAIME

Kirsten, what the fuck?

KIRSTEN

Yeah, what the fuck. What the fuck to you, too. I am the fuckin' boss, that's what the fuck. Hold still, Aidsy.

ADRIAN

What are you doing here? Where have you been? Ow, careful.

KIRSTEN

All set. (*She stands up*) I came back for supplies. Batteries. Maybe some water bottles. Stuff like that. Didn't expect to see you all. But this is, uh, good. Guess Tophie made it happen.

JAIME

We made it through. Sorry to disappoint. And it wasn't all Topher.

KIRSTEN

Yeah, ok, whatever makes you feel good.

I worked my way upstate.

Made it to the Adirondacks before the worst of it. Camped out in some million-dollar homes, raided perishables and water.

Made some sick armor when the bombs started falling.

TOPHER

Bombs?

KIRSTEN

Yeah, bombs. And then hail. Then bombs. Then fire from the sky.
Where have *you* been?
Guess it helped to have your windows boarded up.

ADRIAN

I *told* you the world ended.

KIRSTEN

If the world ended, what are you doing here?
What am I doing here?
I mean, sure, girl, the world ended a long time ago.
I mean, not totally.
Just in the way that books do...
That chapter of life that we knew? It has ended, yes.
But it does that.
The world doesn't stop ending.
And we can be angry *if* we're lucky enough to be alive.
I'm still angry. At all of you. (*to Topher*) Except you.
How can we escape it?
God.
We're hurt. I'm hurt.
Have you heard from Arielle?

JAIME

No.

KIRSTEN

Well, plenty of people are still alive. And, fuck, I do hope she's one of them.
Now I'm going to steal some stuff from you. Because it was mine. And you're going to let me.

TOPHER

What's left is still in your old room.

KIRSTEN

Thanks, baby.

*Kirsten goes into her old room.
A moment.*