

ASCOT HIGH
Episode 1: Pilot

Written by

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EXT. THE DESERT - DAY

A lone, black SUV drives along a dusty, unpaved road in that part of the USA that could be Nevada, or Arizona, or New Mexico.

INT. BLACK SUV - DAY

In the backseat a 14-year-old girl, KAIA, wears a grim, serious expression. The vast nothingness around her doesn't offer much, but she stares intently at it.

Up front two g-men types look back at her. This is one serious kid, and part of them feels a little... guilty?

AGENT 1

Ain't it crazy we have all this in our country? We got lakes the size of seas and a whole damn desert and still we make room for some of the biggest cities in the world. America is an amazing country. But you know that, since you're-

The other agent stops him from going on. Small talk isn't working on the girl.

EXT. OUTSIDE CARTER AIRBASE - DAY

The SUV pulls up to the dilapidated, old US Air Force base. Doesn't seem like there's much to guard, with it looking more like a graveyard, but an MP stands at the gate.

MP

Mornin'. Help you?

The agents show their credentials to the guard.

AGENT 1

(a secret code)

We're here for field hockey.

The MP gives a knowing look.

MP

Hangar 4.

And the gate is raised.

EXT. HANGAR 4 - CONTINUOUS

After pulling up in front of the rusted hangar one of the agents escorts Kaia from the backseat while the other grabs her suitcase from the back.

Kaia takes a moment. This is clearly strange for her, but she's got the stiffest upper lip, and she takes a deep breath as the agent hands her the suitcase.

AGENT 1

Get a good breath of fresh air.
Might not get another one for a
good long while.

The agent laughs a little, but was that also a threat?

The crew walks up to a rusty service door. One of the agents flips open a beat up panel, revealing a very state-of-the-art console. It scans the agent's thumbprint and his retina.

A heavy click signals the door is open. Behind it is another bright steel door, and it opens to reveal an elevator.

INT. HANGAR 4 - CONTINUOUS

The crew step on to the elevator. The agents resume standing sentry while Kaia holds firm. There aren't any buttons in the elevator, but it starts to move as soon as the doors close.

It's an awkward silence as they lower for what feels like forever. Kaia notices a camera in one of the corners.

Finally the elevator stops, opening up to a bare hallway with only one door at the far end.

Kaia steps off, but the agents do not.

AGENT 1

(on her confusion)

This is as far as we're permitted.
Just head through that door. And,
um, good luck.

The elevator slams shut. Kaia, alone, heads to the door, cameras tracking her movement. Her feet echo coldly.

Taking one last nervous breath, she knocks on the door. On a heavy click, the door swings open.

INT. MR. CORIANDER'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Behind the cold door is a remarkably homey office with nice carpeting and wood fixtures.

In front of some curtained windows and another door, sitting at a nice desk, is MR. CORIANDER, a guidance councilor type in a sweater vest and spectacles. As Kaia enters he looks up from his files.

CORIANDER

Oh, hello! Please, have a seat.

Kaia drops her bag and sits in a chair across the desk.

CORIANDER (CONT'D)

How was the drive? I know it's long, believe me, never gets shorter. Well, let's get to the brass tacks, shall we? I'm Mr. Coriander- well, that's not my real name, but none of the faculty go by their real names. Security purposes. I'm the integration liaison here, here to guide you through the initial phases of the program and be a sort of a welcoming committee. So, welcome, Kaia Alana.

KAIA

Thank you, sir.

CORIANDER

Already with the sirs? Guess that shouldn't be surprising.

(he leafs through a file
with her name on it)

Father a marine, mother in Doctors Without Borders. Based out of Hawaii, nice place to grow up I'm sure. Olympic level gymnast, national honors in multiple science competitions, straight As doesn't do your academic and extracurricular record justice, and... well, I could go on. But it seems that you have put a lot of time into being exceptional.

Kaia appreciates the praise, loosening up a little, but then-

CORIANDEr (CONT'D)

But here, this program, is about being more than exceptional.

He puts down the file and takes on a more serious tone. Kaia's posture improves.

CORIANDEr (CONT'D)

Behind you is the exit, the way you came in. You can head up the elevator and led out and away and you'll never remember clearly what transpired here. But if you allow that door to close, you are agreeing to go through this door behind me, which leads to a singular future. You will become more than exceptional, you will become more than what most people could ever hope to become. It will not be easy- you will be tasked with heavy burdens, difficult decisions, and you will have to rise to occasions without hesitation. If you go through your entire world will be different and grueling- mentally, physically, emotionally, even spiritually. So, what do you say?

The door begins creaking shut and Kaia sits stone still, locking eyes with Coriander. The door CLICKS, locked shut.

CORIANDEr (CONT'D)

That's great to hear. Frankly, I find that whole speech a bit dramatic, but, hey, that's high school.

He chuckles at his own joke and then gets up to the curtains, beckoning Kaia with him.

He draws the curtain and Kaia can finally see what's behind him. His office looks out to a huge atrium with floors of doors and catwalks all around. It's busy with teenage girls running, studying, and flitting about, like a college quad.

CORIANDEr (CONT'D)

Kaia Alana, welcome to the Advanced Special Capabilities and Operational Training program, affectionately called ASCOT.

SMASH TO TITLE: ASCOT HIGH

INT. LOUNGE QUAD - DAY

Tables, chairs, and couches fill this room, where girls are working through their text books and jotting down notes.

It's the sort of scene Kaia could get down with, but she notices guards milling through the facility in tinted visors.

A girl is head down in a book catching 40 winks. Another girl mischievously slinks up next to her, gradually leaning in to tickle the back of her ear with a pencil.

Once the sleeping girl gets the slightest brush from the pencil she leaps up to do a tactical take-down of the other girl, who responds with her own counter take-down, ensuring both of them end up in jiu-jitsu holds. It gets out of hand fast until guards break them up.

This is the kind of place where that happens all the time.

Coriander smiles back at Kaia to let her know so.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

Black visored guards jog as a unit down the hallway past Kaia and Coriander and duck into a room.

As Kaia walks by she sees that there's a girl inside the room, sitting on a cot, her hair covering her face. The guards quickly shut the door on them before she can see anything else.

KAIA

Is security personnel necessary in a facility this secure?

CORIANDER

Ha, no, not security. They're just the extra help around here. Identities are secret for their and your protection. They run the gamut—maintenance, janitorial, et al. The girls tend to call them the Helmets. You'll only meet your teachers face to face. Don't worry, they're all harmless and won't intrude on your studies.

That seems unlikely, somehow.

INT. MARTIAL ARTS GYM - DAY

A classic padded gym but outfitted with rings and ropes for various martial arts. Groups are practicing and sparring.

In the center of the room is the Exhibition Ring, the main stage for fights, elevated from the rest of the rings.

Two girls stand in the center of it, one of them looking tired, the other, HELEN, 17, with a shock of red hair and smug grin, mock-stepping like Muhammad Ali. A few rows of girls sit around the ring as eager audience.

The tired girl goes in for a strike, but she's effortlessly deflected by Helen who continues to mock her by not letting any hit connect.

Helen finally strikes back, and it's an over-confident mish-mash of mixed martial arts. The other girl stands precariously at the end of ring.

It looks like Helen is about to give a strong charge and the other girl braces for impact. But nothing comes- Helen comes up close but then goes slack, loosening her fist.

The two enter a stare down until finally-

HELEN
(YELLS)
BOO!

And the girl reels back into a ring out.

HELEN (CONT'D)
Still undisputed grand champion of
the world, the undefeated, never
repeated, her reputation the most
preceded-
(wrestling intro style)
Hellllleennnn The Hellllliioooonnnn!

She makes mock crowd sound effects as she does a victory lap of the ring. Everyone thinks she's obnoxious, including her.

CORIANDER
Helen! Front center!

The crowd comes to attention, but Helen remains lax.

HELEN
Hold my throne.

She hops down and jogs up at attention to Coriander.

HELEN (CONT'D)
Yes, Mr. Coriander.

CORIANDER
Glad to see you're keeping humble.

HELEN
All things considered, this is
humble. Sir.

Coriander could punish her, but just smiles- it is pretty funny.

CORIANDER
Helen, this is a new inductee to
the program, Kaia. Kaia, this is
your new big sister, Helen. She'll
be showing you the ropes and
getting you acquainted with the
layout of the facility.
(looking more at Helen
than at Kaia)
And, ostensibly, offering some help
and guidance where necessary.

HELEN
Like Oprah would want, sir.

CORIANDER
Great. Give her the tour of the
basics, show her to her bunk, then
report for lunch.

HELEN
I gotta show this guppy around now?
But I'm seven-wins-running in Queen
of the Hill!

Coriander scans the audience around the Exhibition Ring.

CORIANDER
(shouting over)
Janine! Congrats, the queen has
abdicated, long live the new queen.

Janine hops up to the ring, elated and bubbly.

JANINE
Yessir!

Coriander leaves the gym and the room relaxes.

Helen gives Kaia a dirty look, one that Kaia impassively
deflects.

HELEN
 (flatly)
 Hi Kaia. Let's get you settled.

As Kaia and Helen head out of the gym-

JANINE
 Good day, your majesty!

Helen turns around and gives the "eyes on you" gesture.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

The hall is relatively quiet and empty besides Kaia and Helen, who is looking for something to discuss.

HELEN
 So, Kaia, yeah? They told me you were incoming. Heard you were some sort of top recruit.

KAIA
 If they said so.

HELEN
 You're kinda smaller than what I was expecting.
 (on Kaia's look)
 Was more expecting a girl version of Dwayne Johnson, y'know, with both you being Hawaiian.

KAIA
 You're confusing Hawaii with Samoa.

HELEN
 Is THAT where those cookies come from!? It must be a magical place. Is the island of Thin Mints next to it?

KAIA
 Are you asking me a serious question?

HELEN
 If there IS an island of Thin Mints in the middle of the Pacific, damn it, I'd need to know.

Kaia doesn't show any sign of appreciation.

KAIA

Is everyone here like you?

HELEN

Ha! They wish. Well, since we're already here, let's start with the physical education.

INT. GYM DISTRICT - DAY

The Gym District is the epicenter for every gym, dojo, and specialty training area. From the center of it, where notices and benches line the small waiting area, things spread in all directions. Separate rooms, giant tracks, halls down halls. Girls scale climbing walls, run obstacles, etc.

Helen and Kaia stand in the middle, both drinking it in.

HELEN

Here's the gym district, the proving grounds. Since you're an Alpha you'll probably be spending a whole lot of time here.

KAIA

Alpha?

HELEN

They not tell you? This program is split into different groups with different focus. Alphas are the field operatives- running, jumping, gunning, et cetera. It's what you've been brought in for and what I am a shining example of.

A group of less-than-fit girls takes a lap around the track being led by a drill instructor.

HELEN (CONT'D)

And then you have Betas. They're designated for home base and comms work. You'll have one assigned to be in your ear any time you're on a mission. Plus they're quick with the science and computer stuff. Handy when you don't have time to solve some security overrides while guards are shooting at you.

KAIA

Are there any other groups?

HELEN
Not technically.

Kaia registers the mystery and watches the Betas jog.

INT. SCIENCE TOWER - DAY

A towering atrium of different labs, machinery, and a whole lot of other mad science.

HELEN
This is Science Tower. You get your basics like chemistry, physics, biology. But this is also where Betas spend a lot of time whipping up some gizmos and other goodies.

They walk past a blast shield where an extendible arm lowers a mysterious smoky compound into a goopy liquid. The girl at the end of the extendible arm, in hazmat suit, is clearly nervous. At first the mixture fizzes, and then it explodes.

Kaia reels back as liquid sprays the blast shield. The girl inside is knocked back but seems to be fine. An automatic sprinkler engages to wash away the chemicals.

HELEN (CONT'D)
(knocking on shield)
Hey Lucy!

Lucy, in the hazmat suit, looks up and gives a heart sign with her thickly gloved hands.

INT. HUMANITIES CENTER - DAY

Helen leads Kaia into a new hallway that seems like a remarkable replica of an actual, regular high school. Classrooms line the bare hallway with windows large enough to peak through. While the classrooms are much more high tech, it's definitely a straight up class.

HELEN
Humanities Center. Where they teach you how about, y'know, humans. I guess this is like that high school thing I hear so much about. You, uh, got a favorite, um, author?

KAIA
I don't have time for fiction.

HELEN

Well, how about music? I mean, you *just* got here, you must know what's bumping in the streets.

KAIA

I'm not much for pop music.

HELEN

Okay, favorite song?

KAIA

Happy Birthday.

HELEN

Lord...

KAIA

I'm sorry, but I believed this to be a training facility. Music, fiction, and other novelties are distractions.

HELEN

Well, super soldier, then you're gonna love what's next.

INT. STUDY HALL - DAY

The next room is a low-key computer lab, magazine library, and filled with other, not-very-military bric-a-brac. Some girls are actually taking time to draw in notebooks, while others surf the internet.

Kaia, understandably, is confused.

HELEN

Welcome to Study Hall! Humanities may teach you *about* humans, but this is where have to learn how to *be* a human.

KAIA

What do you mean?

HELEN

Take a seat, kick back.

They sit in surprisingly cushy beanbag chairs.

HELEN (CONT'D)

Lemme ask you this- what did ninjas wear?

KAIA

Beg pardon?

HELEN

Ninjas. What did they wear?

KAIA

Hooded mask, gi, split toe shoes-

HELEN

(makes buzzer sound)

Wrong! They wore regular clothes. That whole masked murder pajama look is the movies. Real ninjas, real covert assassins, would wear regular street clothes so they could walk up to their target, stab them in the side, and keep on moving before anyone was the wiser.

KAIA

Thank you for the Japanese history lesson, but what's your point?

HELEN

Duder, I've been in this facility for three years now. You know what happens on the fourth year of Alpha training? You head out into the field. Now, if I had been absolutely cut off from modern civilization for that long, how long you think it'd take for Joe Schmo assassination target to realize I'm a killer robot?

KAIA

So why do you need-

HELEN

We're not supposed to have social media accounts, but some girls do. By keeping up on movies, what celebrity cheated on who, and the best memes, we can blend in with the rest of society.

(leaning in for severity)

And, super soldier, so we know about current geopolitics. It's important we know what *they* know. We're encouraged to spend at least thirty minutes but no more than an hour learning about the wide world.

Kaia looks around at the various computer screens- Justin Bieber, cat gifs, all the hallmarks of idiocy she thought she left behind.

HELEN (CONT'D)

And if you think that's bad-

INT. THE THEATER - DAY

They come into a room filled with well-dressed mannequins, cultural artifacts, and posters and diagrams of different elements of different societies. It's like a theater workshop, and it all ends in a stage with a few benches around it. Some girls are on the stage, stretching.

HELEN

Welcome to the theater. Here's where they teach you about the secret part of being a secret agent. You learn how to properly act in culturally varied formal affairs- love me a good tea ceremony- and learn the skills of coming up with covert identities on the fly and-

The girls on the stage begin to waltz with each other as an instructor claps three/four time signature.

HELEN (CONT'D)

Even how to dance.

KAIA

Dance?

HELEN

Imagine you need to target an ambassador for intel. Only place he's not surrounded by a detail is at some ridic gala. You wear a silk dress, you speak his native tongue, and you offer to dance, and suddenly, you have his trust. No sodium pentathol required.

INT. BARRACKS- DAY

They stroll down another hallway. Every door has a number on it and a scanner right next to it.

HELEN

And these are the barracks. Those scanners are for every door here, faculty and student alike. Hell, I've seen some doors that never seem to open at all. Every bunk has a thumb print scan, so only those registered can get in. Makes pranks really difficult, but we find a way.

KAIA

How do you get around facility security?

HELEN

Every rule can be bent or broken. Hell, if you ask me the administration even *likes* seeing us circumvent it. Like everything in life, just don't get caught.

Kaia looks at the intimidating thumb scanners.

KAIA

What happens if you use a scanner you're not supposed to?

HELEN

Know how many volts it takes to subdue an elephant? Double that.

INT. BUNK 19 - DAY

The door to Bunk 19 opens up. Kaia has just successfully used a thumb scanner.

HELEN

See, not so scary. Oh, this one's niiiiice.

Bunk 19 has four beds, four desks, four chairs, etc. two of which are already well moved in.

HELEN (CONT'D)

I suggest getting your stuff in order before lunch. Afternoons can be, uh, surprising.

Kaia is already putting stuff in drawers and turning down her bed, getting everything in order.

Helen mulls over all the things she could say to break the ice further, seemingly running each scenario in her head and coming up empty on each one.

HELEN (CONT'D)
So you're pretty tough, huh?

KAIA
Yes, though I'm here to learn.

HELEN
Well, you'll be challenged here.

KAIA
Good.

HELEN
But the toughest challenge to overcome isn't on the syllabus.

Kaia turns to face her, intrigued.

HELEN (CONT'D)
It's the most hardcore, unexpected thing you'll face. The most unforgiving, unyielding, unstoppable threat.

Helen pauses for effect. Kaia waits with baited breath.

HELEN (CONT'D)
It's... THE TICKLE MONSTER!

Helen tackles Kaia to her bed and starts tickling her everywhere. Despite herself Kaia giggles uncontrollably.

KAIA
(between laughs)
Stop... stop! Please-

HELEN
The tickle monster cannot be bargained with!

But Helen stops anyway, letting Kaia catch her breath.

HELEN (CONT'D)
There, now I know your face isn't made of granite. See you at lunch.

And Helen walks out, door closing behind her.

Kaia looks at the door and stews. She doesn't like being treated in such a childish way. This does not bode well for their impending relationship.

But that can wait. Kaia continues unpacking and meticulously sorting her things.

From the deep of her rucksack she pulls out a small leather wallet. Inside are three photos of unfamiliar people. Kaia takes some time to look at them and her face softens.

Then she hears the sound of crying. Puzzled, she tries to find the source, and realizes it's behind a door, marked WC. She creeps quietly to the door and puts her ear up to it.

The door slides open. Kaia jumps back defensively, but lowers her guard when she sees the pretty pathetic sight before her.

Standing in the doorway of the bathroom is CHLOE, small and frail, her face red from trying to suck up tears.

The two stand in deadlock for a beat, waiting to see who makes the first move.

CHLOE

Sorry. I thought, I thought you had left, too.

She pushes past Kaia to get to her bed, embarrassed.

KAIA

Hi. I'm... I'm Kaia.

Kaia extends her hand in a very formal, business-like manner. Chloe looks to it hesitantly, then gives a weak handshake.

CHLOE

Hi. I'm Chloe.
(beat)
Guess we're bunk mates.

KAIA

Looks so.

Well, that's about as good as it'll get. Kaia goes back to unpacking, back turned to Chloe.

CHLOE

I... I wasn't crying.

KAIA

(not turning around)
Okay.

CHLOE

It's... being underground, it's affecting my allergies. Maybe there are cats down here.

KAIA

I don't think there are cats.

That's a fair point after a weak lie.

KAIA (CONT'D)

I'm guessing you're a Beta?

CHLOE

What?

KAIA

If you have allergies you would be ruled out of field work.

CHLOE

Yeah. Yeah, I'm a Beta. Are you?

KAIA

Alpha.

CHLOE

I didn't know they roomed us together.

KAIA

Looks so.

Chloe picks up the one personal item she has- a toy puzzle she habitually solves and unsolves.

CHLOE

Were you... laughing before?

KAIA

Under duress. My "big sister" is not what I hoped for from this program.

CHLOE

Oh. I didn't get a big sister.

KAIA

Guess Betas don't get them.

CHLOE

Yeah.

(beat)

Are you excited? For the program?

KAIA

Not excited, exactly. I'm more just ready for it to begin. It's been a long time coming for me.

CHLOE

Oh. You, you knew about this place before?

KAIA

Parents are military. This was always the plan.

CHLOE

Oh. I was, I guess, drafted?

KAIA

That's impressive. Means that you were excelling enough to get noticed by ASCOT. Considering the low standards most people are held to, that's impressive.

CHLOE

(processing the compliment)

Yeah. I guess that is, um, impressive. I'm impressive. Huh.

Kaia finishes up putting her things away and sits on her bed, testing its springiness. Once it settles, she looks at Chloe head on. Her face is still red from crying.

From inside her cubby Kaia pulls out a package of face wipes and hands it to Chloe.

KAIA

We have to go to lunch.

It helps remove the dried tears, and Chloe is grateful.

This is the beginning of a... friendship?

INT. MESS HALL QUAD - DAY

Kaia and Chloe wait in the shuffling line with trays in hand. The food isn't prison issue, but it's still amorphously unappetizing. Nutritional, no doubt, but not pretty.

Chloe approaches it more gingerly than Kaia, but both sort their foods very meticulously.

But the bigger issue is where to sit. Everyone is grouped together, some groups larger than others, but cafeteria politics abound.

Then they notice a table with two girls and one of them is waving a sign that says "19". So they head there.

Seated at the table are two strange-looking girls a year older than Chloe and Kaia. One, ALYCIA, has her hair in a lot of messy braids and knots, while the other, TRIN, is as close to goth as you can get in a government program.

ALYCIA

You two the guppies in bunk 19?

KAIA

Yes. Who are you?

ALYCIA

Your roomies! Take a seat.

Kaia and Chloe cautiously sit.

KAIA

You're older than us.

ALYCIA

You must be in Alpha training with those eagle eyes. Yes, they room us randomly in age. Or, well, they want you to think it's random. This whole place, man, it's full of *systems*. And those systems? Part of systems you wouldn't even believe.

TRIN

Names before conspiracies, please.

ALYCIA

Ha. Le duh. I'm Alycia, and this ball of sunshine is Trin.

TRIN

Hi.

KAIA

Kaia.

CHLOE

Chloe.

ALYCIA

Fun! "Ka" sounds!

Chloe can't stop looking at Trin's goth chic.

TRIN
Yes, Chloe?

CHLOE
Oh, I'm sorry. It's just, how do you have makeup here? I thought that was contraband.

Trin and Alycia share a knowing smirk.

TRIN
There are a lot of things we're not supposed to do.

ALYCIA
But that doesn't stop anyone here from doing it.

Kaia already doesn't like this.

TRIN
The spice rack picks their battles. Makeup isn't exactly worth their disciplinary effort.

ALYCIA
And even though there are systems guarding systems in this place, there are holes everywhere, if you know where to look.

She leans in to the table, scanning for anyone watching. From her bag she pulls out two bite-sized Snickers and hands one to Kaia and Chloe.

Chloe is about to unwrap it until Alycia smacks her hand.

ALYCIA (CONT'D)
You will find in this place that chocolate is worth more than gold. Hold on to that for a rainy day.

KAIA
This is a reportable offense.

ALYCIA
Oh c'mon, you just got here, you're gonna turn narc straight away?

KAIA
I believe in the rules.

Trin slams down her fist, demanding attention. A cafeteria knife sticks up from her hand.

TRIN

Guppy, you have a lot to learn. Alycia is in Beta training, but I'm Alpha, with quite a few achievements. Especially in surgical incapacitation. I ask you, do you want to live with someone who only sees you as a bunch of vulnerable arteries?

This can't be happening. Can it? Kaia isn't sure.

ALYCIA

Trin, ease up.

TRIN

People disappear from this facility all the time. No one knows where they go. No one would bat an eye if you didn't come for breakfast.

Kaia is tensing up, ready for a fight. Trin keeps eyes forward. It's a showdown, ready to explode.

HELEN (O.C.)

Super soldier! Glad you found your way to the mess. You pass your first test.

The two turn to see Helen standing over them.

HELEN (CONT'D)

And you found your roomies!
(noticing the tension)
Oh my god. Trin. Are you doing the artery thing again? Stand down.

Trin obliges, but slowly, making sure Kaia knows she's getting off easy.

HELEN (CONT'D)

(to Kaia)

Don't worry, Trin is a great Alpha, she'll teach you a lot, and underneath the black paint and knives is the heart of a puppy. Isn't that right, cutie pie?

She squeezes Trin's cheek like a grandma, which is embarrassing, but then it starts to hurt.

HELEN (CONT'D)
Don't make me rip this cheek off.

Helen lets go and Trin rubs her face.

HELEN (CONT'D)
Okay! This was fun. Later, little sister!

And Helen almost skips off.

TRIN
That is your big sister?

ALYCIA
Ain't you lucky!

TRIN
The Hellion is one of the most obnoxious people in this program.

KAIA
Believe me, I know. She *tickled me*.

TRIN
But she is one of the best, which is really all that matters.
(beat)
Sorry about the knife.

Kaia nods and focuses on her food.

ALYCIA
Bunk 19! One big happy family!

Mr. Coriander is walking between tables, greeting people, and comes up to the bunk 19 table.

CORIANDER
Hello, students. Kaia, Chloe, how's first day so far?

KAIA
Fine, sir, thank you, sir.

CHLOE
It's okay. Um, sir. I get lost a little...

CORIANDER
(hand on her shoulder)
Don't worry, it gets easier, and I'm here to guide you.

(MORE)

CORIANDER (CONT'D)

Chloe, there are a few things I need to go over with you. Clerical details. Report to my office after lunch.

CHLOE

Okay, sir.

Welcome to the border of comfortable and creepy.

CORIANDER

Trin, Alycia. I hope you're being nice to your new bunk mates. How are you today?

TRIN

Fine, sir, thank you, sir.

ALYCIA

A double plus, Mr. Coriander, sir!

CORIANDER

Great. At ease.

And Coriander goes to the next table.

TRIN

What a tool.

CHLOE

He seems nice.

TRIN

Don't let that sweater vest fool you.

ALYCIA

Coriander is a part of *system* none of us know.

Chloe and Kaia don't know what that means.

ALYCIA (CONT'D)

The spice rack. They answer to unknown powers.

TRIN

You know how I said people disappear? Coriander tends to be standing near the vanishing spot.

CHLOE

Well maybe it's just people who left the program?

Alycia and Trin look at each other and laugh.

TRIN

No one *leaves* the program.

ALYCIA

You train, you pass, you become the agent they want you to be. You slack off, you fail, well...

Chloe sweats and looks to Kaia, who is unfazed.

KAIA

I don't plan on failing.

TRIN

Oh, quite the little badass you think you are, huh? Sometimes it takes more than that. You'll learn. Keep your eyes open.

Alycia opens her eyes wide with her fingers. Chloe, considering her meeting with Coriander, sweats more.

The PA crackles to life over the mess.

PA

Welcome all new recruits. All Alpha recruits are due to report to the Mountainside obstacle course in 30 minutes. Repeat. All new Alpha recruits to Mountainside in 30 minutes.

TRIN

Oh you're in for a treat.

KAIA

What's going on?

Trin just smiles smugly and munches on her food.

INT. MOUNTAINSIDE OBSTACLE COURSE - DAY

The squad of new Alphas march into a specialty room in the Gym District. It's huge and ominous.

On one side of the room is a full obstacle course noticeably filled with thorny plants. On the other side is a large, craggy scaffold structure.

Bleachers nearby are filled with older students who shut up and smile when they see the guppies walk in.

Out of nowhere a burly, thick necked man, MR. BAY LEAF, steps forward, decked out with whistle, clipboard, and grimace. He's a militarized gym teacher.

At the sound of his whistle the guppies stand at attention.

BAY LEAF

Fallllllll in! Guppies, welcome to ASCOT. You are here to be the best of the best. It's time you learn that won't be easy.

He starts pacing in front of them.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

I am Mr. Bay Leaf. The gym district is MY district. Alpha training will require heavy physical discipline, and I will make sure you live up to my standards.

Finally, something Kaia feels comfortable with. She almost let's out a smile.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

There is a myth that lions throw their young off of a cliff to see if they are strong enough to climb back out. Lions don't do that, as it would kill their cubs. However, at ASCOT, we- I- hold higher standards than lions.

He gestures out on to the obstacle course.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

This is Mountainside. This is where you will prove to me you didn't come to this program as useless wastes of space.

As he explains Mountainside the guppies look at each element.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

You will begin the course with the first half, the Brambles. Standard and above standard obstacles stand in your way. If you fall, misstep, or otherwise screw up, you will be greeted by a thicket of thorns.

The obstacle course is filled with grip challenges, leaping challenges, and some wild stuff. And the thorns look sharp.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

Once- if- you pass the Brambles, the back half is Mountainside itself, where you will scale the structure before you. It is rickety, foot and hand holds are not guaranteed, and there are other hazards you'll get to find out for yourself.

The Mountainside scaffold is rusty and sharp with odd wood platforms and abutments.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

Grab the flag at the top of the mountain within 8 minutes, and you win. Simple.

(singling out a girl)

Now, guppy, what do you see that is the hardest obstacle?

The girl has flop sweat already, but stammers out-

GIRL 1

Um, the unstable overhang-

BAY LEAF

INCORRECT. Look to your left.

The guppies all look toward where the older students are sitting.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

No matter what environmental hazard you come across, the most dangerous obstacle is always- *always*- other people.

Kaia finally notices Helen in the crowd.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

These are all your big sisters. They have one job while you run the course: stop you.

The guppies sweat harder.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

Once you pass the Brambles your big sister will be waiting for you. You will have to scale Mountainside with them doing everything in their power to make sure you don't reach that flag.

(MORE)

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

Hit the brambles- you fail. Run out of time- you fail. Incapacitation- you fail.

That last one gets an evil grin from the big girls.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

And don't think they'll be going easy on you. To better motivate this lot, your big sisters will receive a Ritter Sport chocolate bar if they stop you. If you have not had a Ritter Sport, I assure you, they are *delicious*. You get the flag, the chocolate is yours.

He holds up the candy and the big sisters salivate for it.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

It is up to you if you fail and join the rank and file, or become one of the few guppies in this entire program's history to win. Now! Let's begin. First up, Patricia, big sister, Tyra!

MONTAGE

The Brambles pose a serious enough threat on their own, as girl after girl drops from a rope swing or a balance beam or a list of other hazards, ending up with thorns in their sides.

But a few manage to get past the obstacle course. The first one who does breathes a sigh of relief before getting suplexed by her big sister, immediately disqualifying her.

Some girls make it to the actual scaffolding, only to have a piece of it break off or for them to lose their footing.

As girls try to scale Mountainside we see that the older students aren't messing around. Well, actually, they are, because this is fun for them. But they are real threats.

The guppies are getting more and more dispirited (and bruised) as each challenger fails.

Chocolate bar after chocolate bar is tossed to the big sisters.

END MONTAGE

INT. MOUNTAINSIDE OBSTACLE COURSE - DAY

Finally, it is Kaia's turn.

At Bay Leaf's whistle she starts hustling through the Brambles. She's a deft gymnast, kicking over obstacles and seemingly starting the next one before she even finished the one prior.

Helen stands at the ready on Mountainside, impressed.

Even Bay Leaf, normally inscrutable, is impressed with how quickly the girl is moving through everything.

The guppies should be taking notes. Some are.

Finally, Kaia crosses the threshold to Mountainside proper via rope swing. As soon as she touches down a BUZZER goes off, signaling Helen is now allowed to attack.

Kaia stares down her competition. She knows Helen isn't a joke after seeing her fight earlier.

Helen, for her part, puts her fingers to her forehead to mime a bull getting ready to charge.

As Helen makes a break for Kaia, Kaia swoops and jukes out of the way.

But Helen is quick to adapt and kicks back, running after her again. Just as it looks like it'll be a head on collision, Kaia jumps up and hoists herself onto the scaffolding, causing Helen to charge right into it.

Bay Leaf wasn't lying- Mountainside is wobbly. With Helen crashing into it Kaia fumbles with her center of balance.

A crash like that isn't enough to slow Helen down by much.

Kaia starts making her way, scaling the side of it and running along the loose planks. Helen keeps her pace on the level beneath her.

It turns out Helen can leap like an animal. She jumps up and grabs Kaia by the ankle, pulling her down and off the ledge to fall to the ground below.

Helen miscalculates Kaia's spider moves, because mid fall Kaia catches herself and swings her way up to a lower level.

So now Kaia tries scaling Mountainside on its further end, away from Helen. She's making good time, too, so Helen starts attacking Mountainside itself.

Striking the joints, jostling the boards, yanking on ropes.

This insanity startles Kaia, but not for long- she keeps moving.

Bay Leaf smacks his head in turn.

BAY LEAF
God damn Hellion.

The guppies (and some of the big sisters) are waking up to the spectacle before them.

Kaia reaches closer and closer, the top flag is within her reach with Helen still two levels down.

But Helen plays the nuclear option. At a pillar right under Kaia she kicks out the support beam.

Just as Kaia is about to grab the flag her footing falls from under her. Then, she starts falling. Then, the entire Mountainside starts falling.

The whole scaffold crumbles under the destruction of the support beam. Everyone looks on with awe.

After a beat, Kaia emerges from the rubble with a bruised head.

Helen kicks off a girder herself and looks up. The flag is still hanging there. So, of course, she does a victory dance.

HELEN
(singing)
All right, oh yeah, got the
chocolate, won the day, oontz-oontz-
oontz.

It's all Kaia can stand. She rushes Helen. For the first time, she's on the attack.

The class looks to Bay Leaf, but he's going to let this ride.

While she gets off a quick hit relying on surprise, Helen outclasses Kaia in every way. The fight lasts only as long as Helen lets it.

HELEN (CONT'D)
Guppy- Kaia- you got spunk, but you
got to learn the pecking order.

Beaten, woozy, and exhausted, Kaia finally goes down with one last hit from Helen.

Bay Leaf comes to assess the damage to Kaia. She'll live.

BAY LEAF

Helen! What in hell's name were you thinking, wrecking my course?

HELEN

Operational tactics, mostly, sir, as you've instructed. Exploit environmental advantages.

BAY LEAF

(sighing)

Right. How very *protocol* of you.

(uses his walkie)

Bay Leaf. I need a maintenance team to Mountainside. A big one.

(to the students)

Due to some unforeseen circumstances, those who didn't do Mountainside today will be having a special session at 0500 tomorrow.

Everybody groans.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

You can all line up to thank the Hellion here for your early report time. Meanwhile- DISMISSED.

The class shuffles out, bumping shoulders with Helen and being generally pissed at her. It doesn't faze her too much.

Helen goes over to Kaia, catching her breath.

HELEN

Good show, little sis.

She extends her hand to help her up, but Kaia swats it away.

KAIA

Are you INSANE?

HELEN

Only in the membrane.

KAIA

Shut up SHUT UP! Stop joking around! You could've gotten us both killed!

HELEN

Please, a super soldier like you?

KAIA

Don't act like we're friends! I don't know you! I don't LIKE you! You're a crazy weirdo and I hate being assigned to you! I'm getting you OUT OF MY LIFE!

Yelling exacerbated Kaia's head injury, making her flinch.

BAY LEAF

Guppy, head to medical, get that checked out. Dismissed.

Kaia clutches her head and walks off. Helen tries to shrug it off.

But as Helen is about to go-

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

Not so fast, Hellion. I say dismissed to you? You just got a work assignment. Maintenance.

HELEN

But I'll miss dinner! They got Boston Cream Pie tonight!

BAY LEAF

BCP is for obedient soldiers, cadet. If you can't fix what you break, then you better not go around breaking it.

He nods up toward Kaia as she leaves the gym. Helen reluctantly gets it.

INT. MR. CORIANDER'S OFFICE - LATER

Kaia has a bandage on her head and little patience on her face as she sits across from Coriander.

CORIANDER

Gauze on your first day?

KAIA

I want to be reassigned to a different big sister, sir.

CORIANDER

Oh? What brought this on?

Kaia points to the bruise on her head.

CORIANDER (CONT'D)

Don't tell me you have hard feelings over a Mountainside loss.

KAIA

She DESTROYED Mountainside. She's a lunatic and, frankly, sir, if I may speak freely, has no place in an elite program such as this.

Coriander leans back in his chair, giving her the once over.

CORIANDER

Then who does?

KAIA

Beg pardon?

CORIANDER

Who does belong here? Everywhere you go in life the strangest, strongest enemies and allies will always be people in all their wild unpredictability. It is up to the individual's abilities to make those allies, or enemies, in each their own way. Not everyone is elite, as you say, in the same way. But this institute will not cater to petulance, Kaia Alanna. You have been dealt this hand. How you play it is up to you.

Kaia is humbled- she wasn't expecting to be shot down.

CORIANDER (CONT'D)

Try hitting the gym if you need to let off steam.

INT. FIGHTING GYM - DAY

Kaia takes Coriander's advice. With a bo staff in her hand she wails on a practice dummy with notable THUDs.

We hear some thoughts from Kaia's head, cheers and jeers and words of encouragement, but mostly shouts of "AGAIN" from an unknown instructor.

The thoughts get louder and louder and the hits harder.

INT. GYM QUAD - DAY

As Kaia towels off she is about to return the bo staff when she notices some huffing and puffing from the track.

On the track Chloe is running- better word, flailing- along. Some much faster girls are running in a group. One of them turns around to do fast back pedals and collides with Chloe. They both go down hard.

The rest of her girl crew stop and Chloe and her get up achingly.

BULLY GIRL

What the hell, guppy!? Watch where you're going!

CHLOE

I'm sorry, but you were behind me, so I couldn't see you.

BULLY GIRL

You getting smart with me?

CHLOE

No, no I was just pointing out-

BULLY GIRL

You're some guppy Beta, ain't you? I'm a second year Alpha, y'know. All us are. You know what that means?

CHLOE

Um, no?

BULLY GIRL

Means this.

The bully shoves Chloe on to her butt. Every time Chloe tries to get up she's shoved down again.

Kaia squeezes her grip on the staff.

KAIA

(to bully crew)

HEY!

They stop shoving Chloe to see Kaia, punching her fists together.

BULLY GIRL

Another guppy? What, you want to learn something, too?

Kaia's response is to walk over, maintaining eye contact with the bully. The distance keeps shrinking, the bully standing her ground. When Kaia gets within 10 feet of her-

BULLY GIRL (CONT'D)

I don't know what you think you're gonna do with that but-

And Kaia makes the first strike.

The other girls come to back her up and now Kaia shows off some rather sophisticated fighting ability and lays some serious hurt into these older girls.

But it's still four against one. For as good as her fighting is, Kaia eventually gets disarmed, pummeled, and beaten.

The girls are about to start kicking her while she's down but then a huge whistle blow interrupts them- Bay Leaf.

BAY LEAF

FALL IN!

All the girls, including Kaia and Chloe, stand at attention in a row.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

You wanna fight? Do it in the dojos. The track is for running. So, you four- show me wind-sprints. Until I say stop.

With a collective groan the four bullies run off.

Bay Leaf inspects Kaia's face for bruises.

BAY LEAF (CONT'D)

(to Chloe)

You hurt?

CHLOE

Uh, no sir.

BAY LEAF

Maybe have Kaia here teach you a couple things for next time. Now hit the showers. Dismissed.

CHLOE

(toward Kaia)

Yes sir, thank you.

She runs off. Bay Leaf returns focus to Kaia. He gives her a strong once-over.

BAY LEAF

You wanna pick fights you better start winning them. If you've got this much energy go run the Brambles again.

(grabbing the bo staff)

Unarmed.

INT. MOUNTAINSIDE OBSTACLE COURSE - NIGHT

A rinky-dink little speaker plays some tinny music that reverberates loudly in the giant room of Mountainside. Debris is littered everywhere.

Kaia enters to the scene. It's a lot calmer than it was before and there feels like there's more air in the room.

At the end of the room Helen has set up the speaker and is dancing as she uses a push broom, occasionally singing into the handle as if it were a mic stand. And she's terrible at all of it.

But considering Kaia came up quietly Helen continues to dance as if no one's watching, and Kaia takes it in, bemused.

On a particular dramatic dance move/solo, Helen looks up to see Kaia standing by.

The moment hangs as the song plays on.

KAIA

You're an awful singer.

And Helen bursts out laughing.

HELEN

And she's funny! In a mean, cutting sort of way. Come to see me slave away?

KAIA

Doesn't look like you're having that bad of a time.

HELEN

If you think I *want* to be here, I mean, c'mon. But I have to be here, so I'm making the most of it. No reason you can't make something more bearable.

KAIA

Looks like a lot of reconstruction.

HELEN

Yeah, the maintenance Helmets that were supposed to help clocked out for the night. Just me until morning. Bay Leaf would serve my ass on a platter if I so much as leave the room. So what are you doing here? Gloating?

KAIA

No.

Instead of asking to elaborate Helen just keeps working.

KAIA (CONT'D)

You're- you're my superior. And clearly superior to me. I should respect that.

HELEN

And?

KAIA

And respect you.

HELEN

And?

KAIA

Um, I don't know what else.

HELEN

Ha, just wanted to see if you'd say anything. I'm sorry, too.

She drops the broom.

HELEN (CONT'D)

Look, I know I'm a lot. Believe me- my folks put me through just about every disciplinary program there was. But here, y'know, ASCOT is all about learning to be a kind of soldier, sure, but it's also about being exceptional in whatever way you are. Honestly, it's the best thing to ever happen to me. Could be for you, too.

(beat)

Y'know, this whole exercise isn't really about some feats of strength, it's designed as a get-to-know-you exercise.

KAIA

That... seems unlikely.

HELEN

It's for us big sisters to get to know our little sister's strengths and weaknesses. You can't make the Brambles, we know to do routine training. You make it past means you got something and we see it firsthand. So I know you a lot better already.

KAIA

I'm not that easy.

(beat)

What did you figure out?

HELEN

You're a tough piece of work, for one. But mostly that you're not very clever.

KAIA

Hey!

HELEN

You like protocol. That can be exploited.

KAIA

That's not true.

Helen whips out the chocolate bar.

HELEN

This says otherwise.

KAIA

You weren't supposed to wreck the whole course.

HELEN

No one is *supposed* to do anything. Do you think this is all in a vacuum? We'll eventually be dealing with dangerous people who won't give a damn about rules.

This does shut Kaia up. But Helen waving around the chocolate bar gives her an idea.

KAIA

Okay, rematch.

HELEN

Rematch?

KAIA

Let's do a ring out, like you were earlier. I get you out, I get the chocolate. You get me, I help you fix this thing.

Does it surprise anyone that Helen likes a good gamble?

HELEN

You're on.

MONTAGE

They sweep out a clearing in the debris to act as their ring.

Helen grabs some duct tape and lays out the perimeter.

Kaia eyeballs it to make sure everything looks squared up and ready.

END MONTAGE

INT. MOUNTAINSIDE OBSTACLE COURSE - CONTINUOUS

Now that they have a ring, the girls start stretching it out. There is pride on the line for both parties, which is clear every time their eyes lock.

HELEN

At the sound of the bell.

(beat)

DING!

Helen comes barreling at Kaia but Kaia quickly dodge-rolls out of the way, keeping low in her stance.

HELEN (CONT'D)

(reading her)

Keeping low for balance.

Kaia comes at her with a leg sweep but Helen jumps over it and leverages it into a pin on Kaia.

HELEN (CONT'D)

Which means low moves, attacking my balance. Predictable.

Kaia breaks the pin and enters a taller fighting stance. It doesn't faze Helen much. But then Kaia comes at her with a swift set of kicks and punches.

Outside of the confines of running the obstacle course- and without it falling on her- Kaia is quite the fighter. This is a fast way to Helen's heart.

HELEN (CONT'D)
You learned Muay Thai, huh?

Helen's stance changes and comes barreling back at Kaia, pushing her closer to the ring's edge. At the last second before the duct tape line Kaia weaves out and puts some distance between them.

HELEN (CONT'D)
So did I.

It looks like Kaia might erupt with frustration but then, suddenly, loosens up a bit, and enters into a bob and weave style of fighting.

Helen isn't sure how to read this one. A new style? Not much time to think, though, as Kaia comes fighting at her.

Instead of joking Helen focuses on the fight. In a super soldier sort of way this is how you learn about someone. This might just be bonding.

But Helen ends it when she wants to. Kaia goes down on her butt with a big thud as Helen looms over her.

HELEN (CONT'D)
You're good, super soldier. But I'm better. Truce?

Helen puts out her hand to help her up. Kaia is sweaty and panting and lets the look of defeat roll over her face.

As soon as their hands meet, though, Kaia rolls back lifting Helen up with her feet. Of all things, Helen didn't see this one coming, and she is launched in Kaia's throw.

And she lands on the other side of the ring.

Stunned for a second, Helen then bursts out laughing. Kaia got her and got her good.

HELEN (CONT'D)
That was a dirty move.
(beat)
I'm so proud of you!

Helen gets up and brushes herself off then throws the chocolate bar to Kaia with a wink.

Back to the task at hand. Helen starts ripping up the duct tape from the ground when, entering frame, half of a chocolate bar taps her on the shoulder.

Turning her head there's Kaia, sharing the spoils.

Helen understands the gesture and takes the chocolate. After taking a bite together, Kaia goes to grab a broom and starts sweeping up the place.

And fixing it together is better than fixing it alone.

KAIA

This doesn't mean we're friends.

HELEN

I know, but we're sisters.

INT. MR. CORIANDER'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Coriander is filling out some paperwork when an exotic phone tone goes off. It's not the regular desk phone, but rather coming from one of his drawers. Putting his thumb on a pad the drawer pops open, revealing a secret line.

CORIANDER

(on answering)

Headmaster Salt?

Coriander's composure is a little rattled. Salt isn't someone you address lightly.

CORIANDER (CONT'D)

Yes, the new recruits are in... All arrangements are in order... Status?

He consults a file on his computer that we don't get to see.

CORIANDER (CONT'D)

A bit of *difficulty* adjusting to the program. But I'm sure that will pass. First day jitters and all-yes, of course, I understand the severity of the situation. I will keep close supervision... Yes... Understood.

And the phone clicks off. Coriander exhales loudly.

INT. BUNK 19 - NIGHT

The door of the bunk slides open to show Kaia is covered with dust, picking out splinters from her hair, and in desperate need of a few dozen naps.

She tries to tip toe to not disturb everyone else and then flops down, hard, on her bed.

CHLOE
(stage whisper)
Kaia?

KAIA
Mmhmm.

CHLOE
Where've you been?

KAIA
Bonding.

Kaia turns over.

CHLOE
Are you scared?

KAIA
About what?

CHLOE
I dunno. Everything?

Kaia flips back over to her.

KAIA
Everything? No. Some things, yeah.

CHLOE
Like what?

KAIA
Like that I won't be ready.

CHLOE
For what?

KAIA
For whatever comes next.

Chloe takes a moment.

CHLOE
Me too.

KAIA

I know.

CHLOE

Well we can be scared together.

Chloe chuckles. Kaia actually, sincerely, laughs, too.

An alarm blares, the lights switch on- morning already.

Alycia jumps up, a bucket of energy already, and dives onto Chloes's bed and then Kaia's.

ALYCIA

Wake up, guppies! You little ladies
got a whole lotta ASCOT ahead of
you. Let's have some fun.

Kaia grumbles as she slowly sits up, takes a breath, and-

CUT TO BLACK