

**Author's Note:** *This chapter (5) is the same as that which was taken down a week ago. A few minor changes, one scene in particular, have been made to correct some errors that would have affected future chapters.*

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***The Present***

***Monday, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016***

***Highroyds, Safehouse H***

Everything was really crappy.

I was cold and miserable. Two days cooped up underground had pretty much fucked up my morale. I had no idea what to do. I was an eight-year-old boy with many skills but I could not readily integrate into the adult world. I needed somewhere better to stay but who would rent a room to a little kid? I needed a change of scene, and soon, before I fell apart from a mental point of view.

I dug out my tablet and headed upstairs to get some 4G reception.

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***November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013***

***An unknown location in the USA***

The training was hard, but in general, Rachel was kind.

She said it was due to the way that the other boys treated me. The Phase 1 girls varied from thinking I was cute to just plain ignoring me. I still had to put up with a certain black-haired boy who saw me as his own personal punchbag – his name was Damien Whyte. Yes, his name was spelled with a ‘y’ which just told me that he was a doofus. I put up with my twice daily beatings – there wasn’t a whole lot that I could do about it. I was biding my time until I *could* do something about it.

Damien wasn’t the only source of bruises on my body. The instructors seemed to take perverse enjoyment in treating me harshly. Rachel said it was a kind of initiation to see if I could really hack it as a *Predator*. One thing Rachel *had* been able to confirm for me was that if I proved unsuitable as a *Predator*, then I would die. It was that simple.

My first real experience of it was that afternoon. I was late getting to my next class and I had stopped to tie my trainer.

“What are you doing here?”

“Tying my shoelace, sir.”

The baton came out of nowhere and struck my left thigh. I fell backward and took my head off the wall.

“Get up, worthless fuck!”

I struggled to my feet but I was struck again, on the same already aching thigh. I screamed out in pain.

“Too slow!”

Despite my obvious distress, I was then dragged down the corridor and literally thrown into my classroom. I quickly got to my feet and I stumbled to a free desk. I received several smirks from the other kids present – Damien was almost laughing. I struggled through that lesson and resolved to avoid getting into trouble again.

Despite my resolve, me and the baton would become quite close.

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### ***The Present***

***Monday, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016***

***Whitby, United Kingdom***

Two days I had been evading them.

It had taken every skill that I had and the constant concentration was taking its toll. I had not slept more than a few hours since I had discovered my tail. So far, they had not found out where I was sleeping – but that could not last for ever. I made my first mistake as I was dodging two individuals that I had marked as dangerous. I made a left instead of a right and walked straight into the woman that I was supposed to be avoiding at all cost.

“Well, well, well,” the woman drawled. “I thought you were better than this, Stormtide.”

“I am,” I replied casually as I gauged my opponent.

She was a little taller and she had an athletic build. She was also an adult and probably better trained... But I had something to fight for – my life – that gave me an edge. I pulled out a pair of ASP extendable batons and flicked them open. The woman smirked as I prepared myself for action. I was going to win – there was no other option.

I launched myself at the woman.

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***November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013***

***An unknown location in the USA***

Two months I had been in captivity.

It had been six weeks since Stephanie had vanished. Strangely, I was beginning to forget things. Not the present, just the past. I was struggling to remember what my sister looked like. What her voice sounded like. How could that happen? I had asked Rachel about it but she was not much help although she did admit that she could remember very little about her life before she became a Predator. It would be months before I matched up the memory loss to the pills we were given each morning at breakfast; ‘vitamins’, they were vitamins – at least that was what we were told.

My relationship with the batons became more common as the days wore on. I also began to retaliate against Damien Whyte. I was not entirely sure whether that had been a good idea or not. It seemed that he did not take kindly to my shoving the top of my head into his chin. How did I know that? The ferocity of his counterattack told me. So, another night was spent crying myself to sleep.

I felt very low.

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## ***The Present***

***Monday, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016***

***Whitby, United Kingdom***

I used the wall of a building to jump up and I swiped the ASP in my left hand towards her head.

As expected, she dodged. In return she punched out in my direction catching me on my left calf. That put me off kilter and I rolled to the ground but I caught myself and I sprang back to my feet. I had to keep on top of the fight; I had no choice, else I would die. I also had to end the fight fast before her pals turned up. So many negative things could get a girl down!

“Come get me, you fucking hormonal cow!” I growled and I saw the bitch’s lip curl.

I was very good when it came to ambidextrous activities. It was something which had moved me to the top of my class at the academy. She produced her own ASP and we fought. I caught her on her right thigh and drew blood.

“Those jeans were new!” she growled.

“If I must, I’ll take you one fucking piece at a time.”

The ASPs moved through the air fast and it was all I could do to keep track of the tips of my own plus the tip of hers. More than once she came very close to catching me but I was faster and much nimbler than she was – she had quite a few years on me and a lot of extra weight too. I got my break just as I was tiring; the tip of the ASP in my left hand collided with her throat. She went down hard, a hand to where I had struck her.

The hand came away with blood on it. I never gave her a chance to regain her feet as I took the other ASP across her face; she screamed at the pain of the injury. Then I went to work on her abdomen. She forced herself back to her feet but I was in control of the fight and I was finally able to finish it off with a knee to her smug face.

She was out cold. I could hear voices approaching so I vanished down another alleyway and quietly slipped back to my room.

“Shit!” I growled as I noticed the blood on my trousers. “That’ll be a bitch to get out!”

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***December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013***

***An unknown location in the USA***

It was the first Christmas that I had ever spent alone.

We all got time off for the season and generally we were all treated better. Even Damien left me alone which was a blessing. My training with Rachel had continued and she had coached me through everything from year 2 maths and English to earning the yellow tab on my belt in Taekwondo. I could shoot too – pretty much.

“Well, at least it means we can reuse your targets!” Rachel had commented dryly at the accuracy of my marksmanship.

Rachel had also introduced me to knives – the lady in the hospital wing kept me well supplied with plasters and she even gave me my own box! While we sparred together, we generally did not go out of our way to hit each other. That all changed on Boxing Day.

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That morning, I missed a movement during our sparring session and Rachel slapped me hard. I was stunned. She had been nothing but kind to me ever since we had met. Her expression was neutral and I saw nothing friendly about her demeanour.

“Playtime’s over, kid. I was nice to *you*, ‘cause you were nice to *me* when I really needed it. You didn’t laugh when I had my own excrement dumped over my head...”

She went to slap me again, but I blocked her hand. She made to slap me with her other hand . . . again, I blocked it. Rachel smiled.

“You’re a damn quick learner, kid, I like that.”

I caught onto what she was doing; she was toughening me up now I had some skills under my belt. I reached up to her chest and grabbed hold of her t-shirt. I looked directly into her eyes without fear.

“You slap me again and I’ll slap you back, only twice as fucking hard!”

Rachel laughed out loud.

“You’re a survivor, kid. You can do this. From now on, we are no longer friends – at least not openly. This place is the worst possible place to be alone, but the only way to get anywhere is to make sure that you’re the top dog. You’re the youngest here, by a long way. You’re gonna have to punch way above your weight to survive. I will help you as much as I can, but it will be a long and dangerous road for us both.”

“Thank you, Ascot!”

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### ***The Present***

***Wednesday, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016***

### ***Highroyds, Safehouse H***

I needed to get away, get some sun, and see if I could figure out my life.

There was a place that we used to go for holidays as a family, before that fateful final holiday to the USA. Initially, I had struggled to remember the name of the place, but after a little help from Google, I found it. A small town on the east coast. Tomorrow morning, I would find a train and head to the coast.

Tomorrow, I would be in Whitby.

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***December 31st, 2013***

### ***An unknown location in the USA***

While me and the baton were well acquainted with each other, I was introduced to the next level of punishment . . . the strap. I had witnessed several boys and one girl being strapped. It had frightened

the life out of me each time that I'd seen it being used. The screaming from the child being strapped was unearthly, especially when the punishment called for more than about five strikes. In almost all cases it was publicly administered on bare skin which just added to the humiliation of the punishment.

So, how did I get into that predicament?

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The New Year was approaching when Alexander came to ask me if I wanted to join in with a little fun the following morning with the other Phase 1 *Predators*.

Fun!

*Predators* did *not* have fun – at least I had never seen any. Or if they did have fun, it probably involved some creative ways to kill each other! Typically, I was remarkably close to the truth, not that I would know that until the early hours of the following morning when it was too late to do much about it. As I understood it at that point, nobody slept on New Year's Eve and as was tradition, the instructors would leave us kids alone.

Cool!

At least that was what I thought.

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### ***The Present***

***Thursday, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016***

#### ***Whitby***

Almost three fucking hours on public transport.

I had had to change at Scarborough to get on a bus after a 75-minute train ride. I hated buses! So, after another hour on a bus with zero fucking suspension, I was very tired and very grumpy when I finally spied the sea and I was able to leave the rickety contraption that passed as high-quality public transport. I seriously hoped for a few days of sun, sand, and tranquillity.

I soon found a seedy B&B that was more interested in cash than an eight-year-old checking in on his own.