Summary

Picking up where The Dark Knight Rises left off, John Blake makes some choices. Then he goes hunting.

“Well, hell.”

John Blake turned another 360 degrees around the cave underneath Wayne Manor, the stately property now the huge open-air orphanage the city so desperately needed. This space underneath it was huge and damp and dark, and if the platform beneath his feet was any indication, it housed a lot of secrets he’d need to learn. Bruce’s notes had given him the basics, but surely he hadn’t been able to include everything.

Even if he had, there was a huge difference between knowing there was an immense computer network behind the stone walls and knowing how to use that network.

Carefully, oh so carefully, John activated the different cases located around the cave. The computers. The empty case that clearly had held the suit. Half-filled cases with weapons like the bat-shaped throwing stars, smoke bombs, EMP devices, and extra bits and pieces of the suit like the cowl and boots and gloves.

“This is… Huh, Bruce. What on earth did you do?” By giving John access to the cave, Bruce had forced him to make a choice. John could either turn around and swing back through the waterfall and go back home, never to step foot in this forlorn home base, or he could take the baton Bruce had offered.

“I trust you, Blake. You were smart enough to figure me out maybe even before I did. I hadn’t realized I was so transparent. Obviously if you’ve gotten this letter you know the Batman isn’t coming back. Maybe Gotham is elated by that, or devastated. I don’t have a way to know. I’m
letting you decide whether there is a Batman legacy or not. I’m letting you decide whether Gotham needs another hero or if it’s fine on its own. Either way, good luck. And thank you for being the voice I needed to hear to get me back into the world.

P.S. If you do decide to don the mantle, Lucius Fox will want to speak with you. Tell him you want to go spelunking.

John read the letter again, even though he had it memorized. Why the hell give him this? What did he do to deserve either this blessing or this hell? Blessing, sure, Bruce clearly saw something in him that he couldn’t even begin to figure out, but hell because either he’d walk away with possible regrets, or move forward with possible regrets.

Being Batman clearly hadn’t always been the best move for Bruce Wayne.

At least he hadn’t ended up scarred or disfigured after the Harvey Dent and Joker thing.

Just vaporized over the bay after Bane.

John found a dry rock to sit on to think it over. Becoming a vigilante was crazy. Suicide, even. He didn’t have the money or training that Bruce did. No doubt he’d end up splattered into the side of a building in less than a month.

But with the truth about Dent splashed all over the news by Bane, all of the criminals released from Blackgate, and the negative views of authority after everything was over—him included—Gotham was in for rough times. Citizens hated the government for abandoning them, and thought the police were useless after being tricked into the sewers then running the gauntlet to their deaths to fight Bane.

Maybe Gotham needed another symbol; maybe Gotham needed hope again. The statue to Batman was one thing, but the novelty would surely wear off and a new wave of crime would set in. Too many criminals were back on the streets, ready to rebuild their ill-gotten fortunes and dynasties. The police force suffered massive losses and would need rebuilding of more than just its leadership.

Overwhelmed by the cave and its implications, John had to leave and get some fresh air.

On the other side of the waterfall, John squinted into the sunlight.

He had a choice to make.

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John loved working at the Wayne Home. The building and grounds were beautiful, there was plenty of space to grow into, and there were enough resources to keep boys until they turned 18 and became legal adults. One of his many responsibilities was to ensure funds kept coming in; everyone was shocked he’d made enough of an impression on Bruce Wayne for him to donate his home and thus expected him to work his magic on other philanthropists.

He did his best and had already had several large donors promise regular gifts. It was kind of like what had drawn him into being a cop and what had made Gordon promote him—when you really believe in something it’s easy to work hard and then get others to believe in it too, especially if you make it seem like it was their idea. The hard work got him noticed, and faith in him got him donations.

As much as he had loved being a cop, he loved protecting the boys under his care, too. In them he saw so much of himself, and he knew what they needed. Aside from shelter and care, they needed
someone to look up to who truly did understand. He’d even gotten part of Bruce’s massive home gym that didn’t appear used converted into a karate studio so the boys could channel their anger and aggression into something healthy. A multipurpose field was painted onto part of the grounds for lacrosse, soccer, and football. Inside the home, in largish rooms that had unfathomable purposes, art and music studios had been fashioned for those boys who chose to pursue other outlets than sports.

Bruce Wayne’s death was tragic, but at least something good had come out of it.

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In the months he’d been living and working at the Wayne Home, John had become more and more familiar with the mansion’s architecture. The nooks where boys hid for hide and seek, the surprisingly narrow and steep staircase that led to what must have been servants’ cramped quarters when the Waynes had servants before Alfred, the delicate features that clearly didn’t have rambunctious boys in mind, and secret passages that led from one part of the house to another. He was grateful he’d been the one to find the entryway to the cave and not one of the boys, or even one of the other adults. It was almost a sign that he should continue the mantle. Or maybe anyone would have noticed the marks around the door and figured out that it had to move, that it wasn’t solid.

But even affording someone else those observations, he didn’t think anyone else would have guessed that the passcode to the locked door behind the moving one was his former badge number with the GCP. Obviously Bruce had been planning the hand off for quite some time.

The trick was making sure no one else noticed the door, so he worked to convince the other staff members that the room needed to be turned into a dance studio to nurture talents in the boys who wanted to learn dance instead of one of the other activities the home offered. As he’d expected, so far only a few boys had shown interest, and John had done his best to keep the action on the other side of the room by blocking off the part of the wall with the secret door with a couch.

He’d come up with something better one day.

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As much as he loved working with the kids, sometimes John needed a break from it all, and was so very grateful that the rooftop deck was off limits to anyone who wasn’t an adult. The teens grumbled, but all of the staff members agreed that the railing on the back side of the house was too low, and it was too risky for the kids to be up there.

The too-low railing, no doubt intentional so it didn’t block the view, was the only thing protecting anyone from the sheer drop down into the valley. Building the mansion on a cliff was probably some hold over from when strong defenses were needed, and with the huge sprawling lawn on the front side and the cliff at the back, John definitely felt safe from attack.

And John knew that at the base of the cliff was the entrance to the secret cave. He couldn’t quite make out through the treetops the road to take him there, and if he did decide to become—not Batman, but someone—he’d have to do something about that road. If even one person knew where it led, it could lead to trouble.

He found his police-trained brain plotting alternate routes and dead ends and a spiral system for more passages and bunkers.

John shook his head to clear it before he envisioned an entire grid laid out in the woods between
the mansion and Gotham. He was not becoming a vigilante. He still believed in the system in theory, he just didn’t want to work for it.

Besides, he came up to the roof to relax, and had found himself tense as he stared out towards Gotham. Thinking shouldn’t put him on edge the same way breaking up fights and listening to screaming kids did. They were good boys, really, but the weather had turned too rainy for them to spend a lot of time outside, and the Wayne mansion didn’t have sound deadened properly so noise in one room could be heard in too many others. Maybe Bruce had been paranoid about needing to know people were nearby. John could understand that. Hadn’t the fire that burned down the original mansion been started by unwanted party guests?

The door opened behind him, and John bit back a sigh as he turned. Rob stood there, looking apologetic. “Hey, John, I know you’re just taking a breather, but we could use some help in the gym. We’re trying to organize some basketball games but there’s a couple groups that want to do something else. Anything else. You got any ideas?”

“I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Okay. The rec room next to the gym.”

John nodded, and Rob went back inside. Though grateful for the space, John wondered what the heck rich people did with all these massive rooms that didn’t seem to serve a real purpose. And what was the difference between the parlor, study, and drawing room? Alfred had gone over some of the layout with the Wayne Home’s staff before leaving the place in their hands, but it was all overwhelming.

Well, the Waynes’ need for space had finally gone to some use, so John couldn’t really complain.

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“What do you mean, missing?” John looked at Chris, who was upset and pale and didn’t seem to want to look him in the eyes. And though Chris was sixteen, it wasn’t just defiance to authority. The kid seemed ashamed.

“I mean he never came out.”

“ Came out of where?”

“The tunnel that goes to the sewer, near the intersection.”

John frowned; the boys weren’t allowed off the property without permission. They were too far from town to not know the boys had a safe ride. “Why were you there?”

“You know. Just seeing what was in there.”

“It’s the sewer. Haven’t you ever seen Dirty Jobs with Mike Rowe? Nothing in the sewer is worth looking at.” They were trying to keep the boys safe so they didn’t wind up in the sewers; why couldn’t they see that?

“Yeah, well, now I know that. And Trevor never came out.”

“Did you tell anyone else?”

“No, just you. I know you know stuff about the sewers. From when you were a cop.”

Knew stuff, right. Like where boys and Commissioners got washed through the system after they
were dumped into it. Knew stuff like being trapped in them for months can make a cop go a little crazy. Knew enough about them to know there was probably plenty he didn’t know. And didn’t want to know.

But now it looked like he had to learn.

Standing from his desk, he told Chris, “All right, you show me exactly where you came out.”

“You aren’t going to tell anyone else?”

“Do you want probation? Because if I tell anyone else you’re not going to leave the grounds for a very long time. If we find Trevor and he’s safe, you get a free pass. If we don’t, then I have to tell someone.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet.”

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What the hell was wrong with teenage boys that they wanted to explore sewers? Or, like when they aged out, wanted to work in the sewers? Everything was dark and wet and smelled, well, like a sewer could smell.

“You really needed to explore this place?”

“It seemed like the thing to do at the time.”

John bit back a few choice words at that. “When we get back, we are having a long discussion about just what is lacking on the Wayne grounds, and how you think we can fix it.” They came to another fork in the tunnel, the third so far. “Which way here?”

“Left. This was the last turn we were together.”

“You went in together and got separated?”

“I stopped to tie my shoe, and then when I tried to catch up I couldn’t find him. A little ways up the tunnel splits again, and I didn’t know which way he went. I tried all of them but if I picked the wrong one the first time by the time I picked the right one he would be too far ahead.”

“And he wouldn’t have waited for you at this new fork?”

“He was kind of mad at me.”

Temper threatening to get the best of him, John asked, “Why was he mad?”

“Because I didn’t want to go any further. But he wanted to see if we would find anything.”

“It’s—” John cut himself off right there. Repeating that it was the sewer wasn’t going to help.

“I know it’s a sewer. But you never know what might be in here. Lost treasure, mole people, you know.”

“This isn’t an adventure serial, Chris. Come on, let’s get to that fork and we’ll try a tunnel or two.”

When they got to the split, John tried to find any clue as to where Trevor went. Seeing nothing, he randomly chose the second tunnel from the left. He and Chris proceeded in silence for a few
minutes. When John glanced over at him, Chris looked scared. And when he admitted it to himself, John felt scared too. As expected, he’d yet to ever have a positive experience in the sewer. As they crept deeper into the tunnel, he couldn’t fight the way the hair on the back of his neck was standing up, or the way he could feel his heart beating faster. What was it? Something was wrong, he could feel it, the light from his flashlight not enough, and then he heard it, the sound of footsteps and panting.

Footsteps and breathing and it was only years of police training that kept John upright when a figure came charging out of a tunnel a couple meters up on their left and crashed into him. He almost wept with relief when he realized it was Trevor, filthy and with torn clothing and what looked like a pretty serious scratch along with some bruises, but still Trevor.

And then John realized that Trevor was scared out of his mind. “Run! Come on! He’ll come for me! Run, let’s go!”

Not wanting to argue, John and Chris turned and immediately fled toward the entrance to the tunnels, and John had never been more grateful for sunlight than he was when they finally reached it. Once outside they stopped to catch their breath, and John got a closer look at Trevor. Covered in sewer muck, ripped sweater and jeans, scratches on his knuckles as if he’d been fighting, and…

“Is that a bite mark?” What John had mistaken in the darkness for a scratch under the tears in Trevor’s sweater was clearly in the shape of a jaw and teeth. “What’s in there?”

Eyes wide and red-rimmed, Trevor gasped, “I don’t know! I lost Chris but kept on going. I wanted to see what was there, and didn’t know how late it had gotten, and I saw someone and thought it was a regular homeless person, but there was something wrong with his face, and his teeth, oh my God, and he grabbed me and wouldn’t let go, he had claws, too, and he bit me so I kicked him in the face but he grabbed me and he dragged me through more tunnels but I made sure to memorize them until I was finally able to twist out of his grip, and I was able to get away because I was faster.”

Still catching his breath, John panted out, “What?” He held up his hand when Trevor looked ready to start over. “I heard you. But you’re saying there’s a guy down there who bit you?”

“Not a regular guy. There was something wrong with him. He had, like, animal teeth. Pointy.”

Pushing aside the fragments of Trevor’s sweater, John had to admit the teeth marks appeared to be made by points rather than flat edges. “Well, hell.”

Chris finally spoke up. “What do we do?”

“First, we tell Father Reilly about your adventure. Then we take you both to the nurse to get a tetanus shot. Then you tell me everything about your encounter.”

“Then what?”

“Then I find the son of a bitch and put him behind bars.”

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“I thought alligators in the sewers were just an urban myth.”

“Well, well, no one believed me when I said a man was building an underground army in the sewers, either.”

“Yeah, about that--”
“Don’t worry about it, Morton. Sometimes there’s nothing worse than being right.”

It was times like these that John was glad he’d kept in touch with his friends on the force; it was nice to have a way to learn privileged information without having to follow the rules regarding it. He’d gone through the academy with Morton, who’d been jealous at his promotion to detective. They were still friends, though, and Morton had helped with leads on wayward boys who needed help like so many others were getting at the Wayne Home. He also tried to convince John that the GCP really needed him back on the force, but John wasn’t going to be swayed. He’d made his choice.

“So your boy got attacked by a reptile man?”

“That’s what he said. He’s been a trustworthy kid, so I’m going to take it at face value.”

“Well, I’ll ask around, check into recent reports on animal attacks. Maybe something will turn up.”

“Please let me know.”

“You got it.”

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The wound on Trevor’s side did get infected, but a course of antibiotics took care of it, and Trevor was fine. He’d developed a bit of a fear of darkness and being alone, but those things weren’t a problem at the Wayne Home. John had a feeling he’d be okay.

John was actually reading up on mole people—the boys’ comments had made him curious—when he got a call from Morton. “Blake, I got something for you. Your boy isn’t the only one being attacked by some sort of animal man in the sewer. There are two other accounts, one from about a month ago and one about three weeks ago. The first a homeless guy, died from an infection on a nasty-looking bite, and the other a sewer worker who’d gone off to take a leak and got attacked. He didn’t get bitten, but said the man who attacked him was big and deformed.”

“Where?” As John expected, the three known attacks formed a line, as if the attacker was moving counter-clockwise around the edge of the city. “Okay, thanks. Keep an eye out for me, and I’ll go check it out.”

“But you don’t have the authority—”

“One of my kids got attacked. That makes it my jurisdiction.”

“Whatever, man, just be careful. You can’t carry anymore.”

“I never liked guns, anyway. They cause more problems than they solve.”

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Using a schematic of the sewer system, John made an educated guess of where the mysterious reptile man might be found next. Knowing the force would never help him, and not wanting to endanger his friends, he decided to go in alone to see what he could see. Morton was right, he didn’t have a gun anymore, but he was well-trained in hand-to-hand. He also had police batons he’d purchased to practice training at home; he liked the finesse of hand weapons over guns.

Maybe batons wouldn’t help much against a guy who liked to chew on people, but John was willing to take the chance to learn more about what might be going on.
Wearing a headlamp, one baton in hand and another in easy reach in his belt, map clutched in the other hand, John crept into the sewer and tried not to think about how ridiculous he might look. Better than dressing like a giant bat, anyway. What the heck was Bruce even—

A rumbling started beneath his feet and he tensed for action, but an accompanying mechanical screech made him realize he was close to the subway. Sewers and subway tunnels, anyone living down here had plenty of means of access throughout the city without having to go outside.

And now he was regretting reading about the types of people that lived underneath cities. Educational, yes, but now he was imagining all kinds of—

A noise.

A footstep?

Another one.

Tensing, John crept forward, baton in ready position, hair on the back of his neck rising again. Another footstep, and a voice, and… Heat?

Turning the corner, John saw two homeless men crowding a barrel that held a small fire, the light from it not doing much to dispel the shadows. Seemingly used to being disturbed, they barely acknowledged him. They even ignored him when he called out. “You guys seen any, um… Strange men around here? Hello, sir?”

One of them turned to look at him, cloudy eyes squinting back from a wizened face. “None stranger than you.”

“I mean, um, like a man that looks a little, um…like a reptile.”

The second man turned, beard so filthy it looked like it could stand on its own. “What you lookin’ for him for? He sure ain’t lookin’ for you. You should probably keep it that way.”

“I need to find him.”

“Look north of here. That’s where there’s no more rats.”

“Ah. Thanks.”

“You won’t be sayin’ that when he finds you.”

Trying not to let the men get to him, John kept on walking. He’d memorized this section of tunnels from the map, and once he was far enough from the entrance and the men, he started marking the walls with the bat symbol they’d used during the Bane thing. Just in case he got turned around, they’d help guide him.

He hoped.

There were a lot of tunnels underneath Gotham.

Dozens of separate labyrinths connected by a tunnel here, a shaft there, ladders up and down to the streets and subway. Perfect territory for mercenaries who wanted to work in peace, or reptile men who didn’t want to be disturbed.

Reptile men whose territory was disturbed by mercenaries blowing up all the underground tunnels…
Well, hell. By destroying the underground infrastructure, Bane disturbed what was living there, like wildlife getting flushed out by a forest fire. Who knew who—or what—else was now roaming around down here?

Creeping himself out was definitely not helping, and he almost missed putting up another symbol to help him find his way. Forcing himself calm—mind over matter, fear was all in his head—he kept moving, learning the tunnels as best he could. Finding more dens with people in them, hollow eyes blinking in the glare of his headlamp. Finding walls of debris where there should be tunnels, and man-sized cracks where there should be solid walls.

The maps needed to be redone, all of it redesigned and fixed, where were the weak spots, roads just waiting to collapse because their support was no longer there—

A footstep.

The first in half an hour.

It was when he realized there was no sound of rats that a cold sweat broke out along John’s back and forehead.

He could sense the presence of someone…something…nearby.

But he didn’t actually think of turning around and getting the hell out of there until the stench hit him. Worse than the dens of dirty humans, this was something else.

Something more akin to rotting—

Something fell onto his head, it was then that he realized he’d made a rookie mistake, was off the force for too long, was focusing only on the floor and the walls and wasn’t looking at the ceiling and as the rat tail slipped down his cheek he looked up and into the horrible lizard face of a man holding onto the ceiling—sticking to the ceiling like a gecko—and the situation got the best of him and he screamed.

John screamed and he turned to run but the man dropped from the ceiling and pinned him to the floor. The man was only wearing filthy jeans and John could feel how hard and rough the skin of his chest and stomach was through his shirt. John scrambled, map getting slathered with muck and tearing, and he tried to regain his feet but the man was too heavy, and what was that, was he licking him? No wonder Trevor looked so beaten up, he was smaller than even John, but maybe size was an advantage here…

Twisting and jabbing as best he could with his elbows and shoulders, John finally dislodged the reptile man and got to his feet. Not in time to stay on them as the reptile man slammed into the backs of his knees and knocked him down again. The baton was slapped from his hand and he wrote it off, and maybe sliding his hand down to reach for the other one saved his life because the horrible jaws of his attacker missed his shoulder as he wriggled. The angle was to his advantage and he was able to get up again while yanking his baton out of his belt and smashing it against the reptile man’s head.

He followed with a knee to the lower jaw, which hurt John like hell and stunned the man for a second but not enough for him to not whip his head around and bite down on the baton, snapping it into three pieces. Then he reached out with a clawed hand and yanked John’s sweater, but it had been torn enough in the fight that the threads gave out as he pulled away, kicking, struggling to free himself.

At that John gave up fighting and flat out ran back through the tunnels, grateful he hadn’t been
dragged deeper into them. Even with the bobbing headlamp he was able to see his markings, able to find his way out, past the people who’d pointed him in the right direction, out into the moonlight. He only stopped when he got back to his car, and leaned against it to catch his breath.

“Well, shit.”

~*~

“Mr. Blake, how good to see you. I’ve heard great things about your work at the Wayne Home.”

“Thank you, Mr. Fox.”

“What can I do for you?” Lucius Fox leaned against his desk and gestured for John to take a seat in the chair across from it.

“I’d rather stand, if that’s okay.”

“Of course.” But the friendly smile was now a little less friendly, and with all the hell this man was put through during and after the Bane incident, John couldn’t blame him for being wary. “What’s the nature of this visit?”

“I was hoping you can help me with something. A, ah, mutual friend said you might be willing to assist me.”

“Oh? Considering I only know a few people we’d consider mutual friends, I’m quite willing to listen.”

“He said that you could help me with, ah… spelunking.”

Lucius’s eyebrows rose, and the smile disappeared. “Spelunking.”

“Like to go into caves where there might be… bats.”

“Bats.”

“Or something.”

“Or something.”

Frustrated by the repetition, John said, “Look, maybe it’s crazy, but I’ve been doing some thinking and then I did some exploring and something almost got me, and I was told you might be able to help with supplies for those times when things try to get me.”

“Exactly where are you spelunking that there are things that might get you?” The look in the man’s eyes—excitement—betrayed the skeptical tone of his voice.

“The sewers. Where there may be more things just as bad as crazy mercenaries trapping police forces.”

And, taking a huge gamble, John told Lucius Fox everything. About knowing Bruce Wayne was Batman. About the note. About the reptile man in the sewer that was huge and strong and would have gotten him if he wasn’t fast and agile. About how maybe he needed help to take him down because the police would never listen and innocent people couldn’t keep being attacked.

“So, Mr. Blake, you’re saying there’s a reptile man in the sewer, and he’s attacking people, and you need help apprehending him because your standard issue weapons aren’t strong enough.”
“Yes.”

“I might have just the thing.” Lucius nodded towards the wall, where a section slid out of the way to reveal a door. And if the smile he now wore resembled a kid on Christmas morning, well, Blake was going to take that as a good sign.

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“Holy shit.” John looked around again. “I mean, really, holy shit!” Now it was Christmas time for him as he looked around the room, fancy weapons everywhere, army vehicles, basically all kinds of crazy things to play with.

“I believe Bruce felt the same way when he saw everything for the first time. It was different stuff, of course. I’d been collecting everything and then Bane stole it all. But these are either the things he never got around to using, or stuff that’s been invented since.”

Lucius took time to point out most of the tools, those not used because they never quite worked right, or were too expensive to manufacture in large quantities. Lucius opened a nearly invisible panel on the wall and pressed his hand to the screen that was revealed. “And this was all stuff Bruce would never have wanted to use. Not flashy enough, or didn’t fit his style. Bane didn’t get his hands on it. Even with Applied Sciences off the record, there was always the chance someone would find our stash.”

Another room was revealed, walls filled with drawers. Lucius walked over to one and pulled it out. He reached in and picked out a small shaft then flicked his wrist, causing the entire baton to expand. “Collapsible, so it can fit almost anywhere. But made out of a tungsten alloy, so while not as light as a titanium baton, it’s much stronger. Your reptile man shouldn’t be able to bite through it.” Lucius pulled out a few more types of batons, ones with Taser capabilities, ones with holsters to fit around John’s thighs, ones with points to be used like a fencing foil.

“What was the purpose of all of these?”

“Not everyone wants to shoot people, and weapons are needed in close hand-to-hand fights. The problem is not enough people believed in the ‘non-lethal force’ concept of battle, so there weren’t any buyers.”

“I’m not a fan of guns.”

Smiling again, Lucius said, “No wonder Bruce liked you.” Handing him the tungsten baton, he said, “How does this feel?”

“Heavier than I’m used to, but I’ll get used to it.”

“Now, what about your outfit?”

“My what?”

“Well, you can’t just keep wearing regular shirts. You’ll end every night looking like the Incredible Hulk after he changes back to Bruce Banner.”

_Every night?_ Just how often did Lucius think he was going out there? “I don’t think I can wear that heavy suit Bruce did.”

“Yes, he was larger than you are and was lucky the prototypes were in his size. But if you envision yourself doing more spelunking than base jumping, you’re going to want more maneuverability. His size was a factor in his success because the suit added to his bulk. We can
make it one for you, too, if we focus on keeping you lithe.”

“I’d like to stay away from actual combat as much as possible. Obviously Bruce had some scary-serious training and I don’t know how to get that. All I have is my cop training.”

“That’s obviously not all you’ve got going for you if Bruce trusted you with all of this. But I wouldn’t engage in full on combat without more tools, and especially learning more information. Come on, I’ll show you a few more things.”

Back in the main room they looked at boots that had more compartments than a backpack did. “I have a feeling you’ll want to minimize ways people can grab at you. So no belt, and no cape.”

“Yeah, dragging a cape through the sewers doesn’t sound like a good idea anyway.”

“No reason for it, either. So multipurpose boots, and maybe multipurpose gauntlets…” Lucius rummaged around through more bins and drawers, pulling out things he deemed John might find useful in ways the military didn’t. “A lot of this stuff wasn’t considered practical for soldiers. But gauntlets that have sheathes for more batons and tools? I’d say that’s right up your alley. Same with the boots. And for the costume…”

Lucius pulled out giant spools of material. “Kevlar webbing. Not easy enough to manufacture and shape for big scale use, but for just you, I think we can find a tailor willing to work it out.”

“Tailor? I don’t really have the money to--”

“Any project of Bruce’s can be absorbed by my department, now that the fingerprint fraud was brought to light. We have money to play with again. So we can get you a custom costume with this stuff. Resistant to anything that might be coming at you, including bullets, claws, and teeth. Just get me your measurements, and I’ll have it done.”

“Measurements?”

“Inseam, waist, shoulders. And tight. We don’t want to give him anything to grab on to.”

Overwhelmed, John couldn’t help but think, What have I gotten myself into?

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The next night, after the boys at the mansion were asleep or pretending to be, John headed back to the sewers. He didn’t want anyone to know where he was going; too many questions to dodge. He also didn’t want to waste time waiting for his new costume that Lucius was having made by a trusted tailor. A long sleeve black undershirt and some black jeans would have to do.

He did have Lucius’s batons. Four collapsibles in his pockets, two strapped to his thighs in holsters, and one he was keeping in his hand just in case. With his headlamp firmly in place once again, he entered the sewers once more.

The fact that he was becoming almost comfortable down there didn’t sit quite well.

That his goal was to become even more comfortable...well. He was confused and conflicted.

But he had to catch the reptile man so he’d stop attacking people, and in order to catch him John needed to know where he was at all times, and what he was dealing with. So he’d brought tunnel schematics to mark up and update so he had a better chance of tracking the reptile man. The weapons were for in case he actually met up with him.
He set off on the same route he took last time, his markings still visible. He carefully traced his route on the schematic, indicating on it in a thick permanent marker all the changes he’d noticed last time. And basically, he just looked. Looked for clues, looked for new routes, looked for people to talk to. There weren’t as many as last time; maybe the different time of day was the cause, or maybe they’d suspected he’d return, or maybe they were avoiding the reptile man.

Deeper into the tunnels he went, trying to veer slightly in the counter clockwise direction he’d suspected the reptile man to be heading. He also tried to head away from the rats.

He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed when he reached his turnaround time and hadn’t yet encountered anything or anyone other than what one might expect to find in the tunnels.

It took four nights of exploration for him to finally get frustrated.

Should he go back around where he’d already explored? Was he somehow wasting time? Should he assume the reptile man was much further along because he knew he was being hunted?

He got his answer with a call from Morton the next day. “Got another one for you. Sewer worker drilling through some rubble thought he’d do a little exploring. Met the nasty side of this guy’s teeth. Got away by smashing him in the face with his hard hat.”

“Where?”

“Near the 33rd Street/Lex Ave entrance.”

“Excellent, thank you. I know you’re busy.”

“The city is a mess and we’re understaffed. You’re lucky I’m not asking you to come in and give us a hand. …You aren’t doing anything stupid, Blake, right?”

“Nope.”

“You be careful.”

“I will.”

~*~

Because he was actually in the city this time, not entering from somewhere along the edge, John wore a long coat over his costume, such as it was. It wouldn’t be advantageous to be seen walking in all black with weapons and a map of the sewer and subway. Of course he ditched the coat soon after entering the manhole, and appreciated not having the extra bulk.

He was still wary of the spandexy thing Lucius was putting together for him.

The trek started like the others, note taking, marking his route, keeping his eyes peeled for clues. Close to the subway, occasionally the ground rumbled but John did his best to ignore it. Following what seemed to be a logical path from the construction area, John’s persistence was finally rewarded with the discovery of blood.

He folded his map and put it away, not wanting to have his hands full this close to the place of attack. Instead he pulled out one of his new batons and extended it. The ground rumbled, and John moved forward.

A few turns later, John stepped in something extremely unpleasant. He’d had his eyes on the ceiling and thus missed the half eaten rat left on the floor. The creature’s top half was simply not
there, its entrails leaking out of the bottom half. Kneeling down, John put his hand close enough to
determine that the mess was still warm.

Assuming the reptile man left his snack, it meant he was close.

The tunnel let out into a junction area with three other tunnels leading away from it. In one corner
was a pile of bones. More rat bones, by the looks of it. But looking more closely he could see
beyond those also bigger, human sized bones… John tried not to gag. The filthy remains of a
blanket were in another corner. So here was definite evidence of some sort of nest. Excited, John
knelt down, took out his map and marked the nest. Just in case.

He was so excited he barely noticed the rumble due to the nearby train.

And that, of course, was when large hands grabbed his shoulders, claws digging into them
through his shirt as if he wasn’t wearing it. He jerked in the grip, trying to shake the hands loose
as that horrible tongue flicked against his neck again, but all that earned him was a chuckle. "You
again." The voice was deep and rough and thick with venomous saliva.

“You can speak?” Well, that changed things.

“Not to you.” The claws dug in deeper and John fumbled for the baton strapped to his thigh, but
the angle was wrong to take it out of the holster. He’d have to break the man’s hold and stand up
—or lay out—straight.

Taking advantage of facing the wall—back to the room, stupid of him—John slipped down
enough to push backwards off the wall, which took the reptile man by surprise. It wasn’t much,
but it was enough for John to wrench himself away from the claws, the pain deep but nothing he
could focus on now. Instead he reached down and pulled out the right baton, twisting as he did to
jab the point into the reptile man’s arm.

Howling with rage, foul breath making John gag, the reptile man swiped at him again and
knocked the pointed baton away. John spun and somehow got to his feet, gaining his balance in
time to send a boot smashing into his attacker's face. Apparently that just angered him more, and
he roared as he stood to his full height.

John didn’t like the direction the fight was taking.

He tried a few different attacks, the tungsten batons not breaking as the reptile man stood there and
laughed at him. “You think your puny tools can take me?”

“Ah, apparently not.” It still shocked the hell out of John that the reptile man could speak.

Stalking towards him, trying to trap John in the corner again, the reptile man continued, “You think
you can come into my territory and take me down with sticks? Your useless weapons are the
reason that I exist!”

Wanting to know what the hell that meant, John tried to inch to the walls with tunnels so he had a
chance of escaping, but also tried to keep his opponent talking. If he was talking, he wasn’t
attacking. “What do you mean? I don’t know you.”

“Your type. All the same. Always wanting more. First you came to me with nothing. Then sticks.
What’s next, a rocket launcher? But humans are always the same. Not much to improve on.
Unless you take the blueprint and modify it! What’s the difference when the subject already has
scales? It doesn’t take much to change his DNA and make him a real monster!”

The reptile man lunged, but John was able to duck and bring his knee up into his stomach.
Thankfully it knocked the wind out of reptile man, which gave John more time to try more attacks. It took three blows to the reptile man’s head for him to remember the Taser baton strapped to his other thigh. Just as he was about to electrocute the reptile man, the strong neck and head whipped around, jaws snapping down on John’s hand. The pain was excruciating and he dropped the weapon as he was knocked down.

At this point, John conceded defeat. There was no way he was getting out of this fight alive unless he gave up right the hell now and got away. But in order to give up he had to keep fighting... He reached out, flailing for the pointed baton along the ground, and tried not to shout in triumph when his fingers curled around it.

Clearly not too intelligent, the reptile man grabbed John’s shirt to pull him closer, and it was enough time for him to rock up and use his weight to jam the point of the baton into the reptile man’s face, two inches below the eye. Like on the man’s forearm, the scales weren’t thick enough to stop the point from penetrating, and the man howled in pain and let John go.

He didn’t wait for a second chance.

John scrambled to his feet and did another round house kick to the reptile man’s face, knocking him to the ground again. It was enough time for John to dart into the correct tunnel and run all the way back to the manhole he’d used to get into the sewer. He knew speed was on his side; the reptile man didn’t seem to be too fast on his feet, using his bulk to knock people around before biting them.

Grateful for the long coat he’d worn down, he put it back on to cover up the tattered remains of his clothing. His weapons were also half gone.

But he now had vital information: the reptile man could speak, and because of that was able to give him clues.

After a tetanus shot and some antibiotics, John was going to do some research.

~*~

“Hmm.” Hand bandaged—he’d told people at the Wayne Home he’d cut himself in the kitchen, and his shoulders were hidden by his shirt—John used the mouse on Bruce’s ridiculous computer setup to scroll through the database. He was a little surprised it was a basically normal mouse, not bat-shaped at all. The computer setup was ridiculous because it took John all of about six seconds to figure out the computer had access to more than the Internet.

Like police and government databases that should have been extremely off limits.

Bruce was either insanely smart, which John had assumed, or had slept with or bought all the right people to get in their back pockets, which was also possible.

But right now John was grateful Bruce had his means and methods, because he was pretty sure he had his man.

Well, part man, part reptile.

Apparently Waylon Jones had been born with atavism, or reptilian features, but that didn’t stop him from joining the military as soon as he was able to run away from his abusive home life. His appearance—reptilian scales and teeth—had given his commanding officers an idea. A horrible idea Jones agreed to because of a lie. He’d been told they were trying to cure his condition, but they were really trying to exploit it and go the other way. Make the reptilian features more pronounced to turn him into a real threat, a humanoid super soldier.
Jones didn’t take to that very well and killed everyone he ran into on his escape from the compound.

Which happened to be near Gotham.

Being a crossroads city really didn’t help Gotham sometimes.

“So, Jones… What happened to you was an accident. But attacking people who stumble across you, killing some of them, that’s not an accident. Maybe it’s not entirely your fault, maybe your brain chemistry got scrambled too, but it’s still not an accident.”

John continued reading, but now that he really knew what he was facing, he was already forming a real plan.

He just needed to see Lucius again.

~*~

“Mr. Blake, so good to see you again.”

“Hi, Mr. Fox. I was hoping you might be able to, well, assist me some more.”

“I’ll certainly do what I can. Mi applied sciences, es su applied sciences.”

“Glad to hear it. I have an idea and I really need your help to make it happen.”

“You learned more about your reptile man?”

John told Lucius everything he learned, and an idea he had to bring him down. “The design is just going to be a little clunky.”

“Clunky is better than completely unfeasible. Let’s go to the shop and we can look around. I also have a prototype costume for you, keep him from grabbing onto you.”

“I’m running out of dark clothing. But I guess if I’m wearing a lamp and the opponent knows I’m there anyway, it doesn’t really matter.”

“No, no, black is good. I’m sure you’ll want to be out of the sewers and onto the rooftops soon enough anyway.”

John didn’t say anything to that, just followed Lucius down to the storehouse.

All of this was crazy.

But so was the existence of half man-half reptile creatures in the sewer.

~*~

“You look good.”

"I feel weird."

"I'm sure Bruce did, too."

"Bruce had a cape." John twisted around, making his muscles flex under the Kevlar webbing material that now clung to his body like a leotard. There’d been hazing to join the GCP, but he
hadn’t felt anywhere near as exposed then.

"Bruce’s enemies have never tried to grab him and drag him into the sewers using their claws."

"Lucky him." Scarecrow, Falcone, Joker, Dent, Bane... All human. All crazy and/or violent, but still human. “You sure about the mask?”

“You can’t go down there wearing a headlamp all the time. The mask has regular and night vision lenses so you can see in the dark without casting light yourself. Maybe sneak up on him for a change. Besides...Bruce thought the mask was important.”

John nodded. “To protect the people he cared about.”

“Exactly. Everyone you know will become a target. It’s part of the risk associated with being a hero.”

“And outfitting one.”

Lucius nodded. "You ready?"

John took a deep breath to give himself time to think through every facet of his plan. "I think so."

"Know so. This isn't a regular spelunking trip. You go down there, and you might not come out."

"I will."

"Then go get 'im."

~*~

Once again John waited for a tip from Morton, sure Jones had moved on from his latest nest. Currently John was enjoying another quiet moment on the rooftop deck, watching the stars blink into sight as the sky grew darker. The thought that his friends on the force were pulling multiple double shifts a week was never far from his mind. He just wanted to prove to himself that he could be successful against the reptile man before broadcasting to the city that there was another masked man helping the police.

The call from Morton came two nights later, informing him of an attack above the surface, which meant Jones was getting braver or stupid, John wasn’t sure which. Or maybe his other surface victims just hadn’t been discovered yet. There were plenty of places to hide a body in Gotham. John knew a lot of them.

John told some other staff members at the Wayne Home he was going out for a while, and if some of them looked suspicious, well, he’d probably think someone else seemingly sneaking off in the dead of night was cause for concern too.

Back into the sewers for what had better be the last time—maybe he should add a cowl to his costume too to keep his hair cleaner—John stripped out of his overcoat and collected his things together. Weapons all in the right places, gauntlets bulky but functional, bootlaces tied, mask secured with spirit gum, and John was ready to go.

He found that having his head free helped with his balance, and his vision was much better through the lenses than it had been with the headlamp creating shadows. He still clutched his batons in his hands, ready to use them at the first hint of danger. He would not let Jones get the drop on him again.
But even if he did, he was ready. He and Lucius had worked out a solid plan.

He wasn’t expecting to get too far into the tunnels before he came upon Jones, and he wasn’t disappointed. The deep voice echoed out of a small side tunnel as John crept past and he turned sharply. Jones squatted there, hands braced against the sides of the tunnel, teeth bared in a horrible grin. “You again. I’m beginning to think you like me. I’m not a fan of the black outfits, though. You need color.”

“Jones. I don’t want to fight you.”

“Then get out of my home.”

“I can get you help, you don’t have to live in the sewers like an animal.”

“I am an animal. Your government made me this way. All I need is more time to gather more information, and I’ll be able to get what I need.”

“Information? What do you want?” Conversation or not, John didn’t relax his defensive stance.

“To be fixed. But first I need to learn my way around Gotham. The tunnels are mine, and the streets will be soon. Everyone will see me and have nowhere to run. Bane was only the beginning for this town.”

Delusions of grandeur? Maybe Jones really wasn’t that bright, biting off much more than he could chew, so to speak. “I can get you help.” From where, John had no idea, but surely Lucius would help him find someone.

“I don’t need your help. I just need you to leave me alone!”

With that, Jones lunged at him, launching himself out of the tunnel at John. Ready for the assault, John shifted to the side and stuck out his foot, tripping Jones. He crashed into the floor and scrambled back to his feet. Roaring, he attacked again, and John tried out a kick combination he’d been practicing while waiting for more information from Morton about animal attacks.

He would have to learn a heck of a lot more moves if he was going to fight people like this.

The last kick to the scaly stomach was followed by a backhand into the face with the tungsten baton, then a knee up into the hard jaw. As much as the skintight costume made him self-conscious, John was glad for the kneepad armor built into it.

Of course, when the target was solid bone in an angry reptile man, even armored knees didn’t do much. Jones even laughed at him, an awful raspy chuffing sound. “Why do you think you can take me?”

“I know I can’t.” Right now he was buying time, seeing if he could weaken Jones at all before using the new weapon Lucius gave him, catch him off guard. He also needed to catch him in a certain position.

Roaring, Jones attacked him again, faster than John would have thought possible. Jones swiped at him with the claws, and John could feel them rake down his chest, but the Kevlar held. At least something was working right, other than the night vision.

Angrier, Jones lunged again, seemingly giving up on any sense of finesse and just using his brute strength and size to try to knock down John. Knowing he could use his secret weapon at any time, John did his best to simply hold his own, until Jones swept his feet out and got too close to his neck with those teeth.
“One more warning, Jones. I can take you to the surface and we can get you help.”

“Or what?”

“Or we’ll see how much easier it’ll be to take you to the surface in pieces.” The confused look in the reptilian eyes almost made John feel bad, but then he thought of the people killed by this monster, and about Trevor being taken.

“They’ll never find your pieces.” Jones reared up to slash at him with the claws again, giving John the space he needed to maneuver.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Wriggling backwards by kicking with his feet, John bent his wrists and pressed his middle and ring fingers on both hands into the lever in his gauntlets at the base of his palm. Liquid nitrogen sprayed out of the canisters concealed in the gauntlets and onto Jones’ arms, coating them rapidly. Jones howled as the freezing liquid burned his arms. He tried to shake it off, but that only resulted in cracks radiating from his elbows.

John wasn’t sure if he was glad the limbs didn’t shatter like they would in a movie or not; either way it was pretty disgusting. As Jones was distracted by pain, John took out of his thigh holster the hypodermic needle of sedative that Lucius had given him. Not wanting to simply freeze Jones to death, wanting to bring him to justice, John needed a way to get him unconscious, but couldn’t trust a needle penetrating Jones’ tough skin after being shot out of a gun. The muzzle flash would blind him in the night vision anyway. The thick needle went in with John’s strength, and the horse sedative rendered Jones unconscious soon after.

Now all he needed to do was get Jones to the surface. Somehow. He was still damn heavy.

~*~

John flashed the headline of the *Gotham Gazette* to Lucius.

**Armless Killer Crocodile Man Found In Sewer System! New Growth Reveals Amazing Regenerative Properties!**

“I distinctly remember you asking for a harness and rope so you could lift Jones out of the sewer rather than leave him there.”

“Well. I didn’t really want to walk into the police station with this giant in a fireman’s carry, so I called Morton and had him ‘discover’ Jones. That way I can keep my name out of it.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow. “And just what is your name?”

“I haven’t thought about it yet. At least, not much. Not Batman, that’s for sure, I never liked that anyway. Who calls themselves that? I want something more fun, something catchier.”

“You’ll need a symbol, too. Symbols are more powerful than names.”

“That I’ve been thinking about—I have something in mind.” John sketched the bat symbol they’d used to mark the Bane bomb truck routes. “Maybe stylized a little, make it less like the bat.”

“More like a bird?”

“Sure. Birds can be scary, like ravens and crows. There’s meaning there.”
“You want to be Crowman? The Crow? Little ominous, don’t you think?”

“I didn’t mean it that literally. I’ll have to think about it some more.” John chuckled self-deprecatingly. “Something more reflective of the nights I’ll succeed with only a wing and a prayer.”

“You’ll get better. Bruce had a rocky experience at first too, or he wouldn’t have kept coming back for more equipment. How’d everything else work?”

“The mask is great. I could see perfectly. The batons either need work or I need to learn to use them more effectively. The gauntlets and boots are great. The costume, though… Jones was right. It needs some color.”

“You’re taking fashion advice from a man who runs around the sewer in dirty jeans?”

“No. But solid black is visible in the darkness. Camouflage 101. It needs something to break up the outline.”

“I think we can invest in a more mottled look. Let’s work on your symbol more so we can incorporate it, and we’ll pick a color that’ll look good with black. Black is classic, after all.”

John smiled, and he and Lucius got to work designing the finer details of the costume. They elongated the bat symbol so it became a bird of prey, and chose a blue that would stand out yet be less visible in the dark and help disrupt his outline. They worked on more weapons, and John considered how much he needed to learn before being as dominant as Batman.

For right now, though, for rounding up common criminals and helping the police with a difficult outlier, he thought he’d be able to get along just fine.

~*~

Six months later, after John and Lucius nailed down a design and more tools, and John learned more about the cave, how to build, repair, and use those tools, and some crash courses in custom martial arts while on leave from the Wayne Home, Nightwing made his official debut in Gotham City. He’d been out before without the full costume and gear, but now he truly felt ready.

Standing on a rooftop overlooking the boardwalk along the bay, John caught sight of a mugging a few blocks away. John backed away from the edge to get a running start, and as he raced toward the edge of the roof he removed from his back and unfurled the collapsible hang glider fashioned with titanium rods and Lucius’s memory cloth. He leapt out over the street and fell a foot or two until the cloth caught the air current and he was able to glide down to the mugger.

Feet out in front, he crashed into him, knocking him to the ground. After collapsing the glider while stumbling to his feet, John pressed his knee into the mugger’s back. Modifying his voice so it was a bit deeper and hopefully unrecognizable, John said, “You shouldn’t take what isn’t yours.”

John picked up the purse from where it had clattered to the pavement and held it up so its owner could see it. “I believe this belongs to you.”

The woman gingerly took it from him. “Thank you, Mister…”

“Nightwing.”

“Are you related to the Batman? He saved our city.”
“I’ll admit he was a friend. And the city now has me.”

After the victim quickly tiptoed away, no doubt wary of what else might surprise her on her walk, John used the ties Lucius gave him to bind the mugger’s wrists. Wishing there were still Tumblers in production, John strapped him to the back of his motorcycle to bring him to the closest police precinct.

He left him outside, knowing someone would come in or out any moment, but not before pinning a sheet of paper with his symbol to the mugger’s shirt. He didn’t want to be seen directly by the cops just yet, not sure what the reception would be. Would a new masked hero helping clean up the streets dirtied by Bane be welcome? Or would he be considered a hack after the reverence given to Batman?

He knew the only way to earn a good reputation was to go out and earn it right.

The streets of Gotham wouldn’t know what hit them.

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