

KINGDOM
KEEPERS III
DISNEY IN SHADOW

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FINN WHITMAN RAN HARD, then all the harder still, Donnie Maybeck by his side and keeping up. By day, Tom Sawyer Island in the Magic Kingdom was an intriguing tangle of trees and bushes interrupted by meandering pathways. By night, it was something altogether different.

Especially with four insanely angry, sword-carrying pirates bearing down on you, followed closely by an alien with a genetic malfunction that posed like Elvis Presley and looked slightly like a cross between a koala bear and a cuddly dog.

The guys in the torn T-shirts and calf-length pants had leaped from the shadows surrounding Pirates of the Caribbean—the park having been closed for nearly three hours—immediately in pursuit. Stitch, on the other hand, had appeared out of nowhere.

Finn made the mistake of glancing back at them.

“Don’t look back!” Maybeck called out sharply. “Your face, your skin is like a flashlight. You’ll give us away! Believe me, Whitman, this is when it pays to be yours truly.”

Maybeck thought of himself as God's answer to everything, and wasn't afraid to share that opinion. If given half a chance, he would make the point that his great-grandparents had been slaves, and his grandparents sharecroppers on Florida sugarcane plantations; he was fiercely proud of his African American heritage and of the fact that his family were some of the original Floridians, instead of being descendants of snowbird retirees, like Finn and so many of his friends—and their fellow DHIs.

DHI stood for Disney Host Interactive, or Daylight Holographic Image, depending on who you asked. There were five DHIs, including Finn and Maybeck—holographs of teenage hosts that, by day, acted as guides to guests at the Magic Kingdom. (The other three, Philby, Willa, and Charlene, were by now supposed to be awaiting the two boys in the Indian Village across the water from Tom Sawyer Island.)

There was a glitch in the software that projected the holographs in the park: when any of the five teens who'd originally modeled for the DHIs went to sleep at night, they would wake up, not as themselves, but as their holographs, *inside* the Magic Kingdom. As it turned out this was no glitch—an old guy, a Disney Imagineer named Wayne, had intentionally made this “crossover” possible by rewriting the projection computer code.

He'd done this because he'd needed the help of the DHIs to solve a riddle left behind by Walt Disney years before.

But tonight was different: the kids had gone to sleep; they'd crossed over, becoming their DHIs inside the Magic Kingdom at night—something they were used to by now. They had left a special fob with a button, like a garage door opener, inside a teepee, to ensure that they could all simultaneously cross back over, retreating into their sleeping bodies in their homes. That was all pretty much the same as usual; what made it different was why they were here in the first place.

Wayne was missing.

He'd been missing for nearly three weeks, ever since one very long day inside Disney's Animal Kingdom where the teens had battled the wicked fairy Maleficent and the gargoyle beast Chernabog.

It was unacceptable to leave Wayne missing. He was the last Imagineer alive who'd known Walt Disney personally, who'd known Walt's plans and intentions for the parks and characters. Wayne had created their ability to cross over. He was their mentor and their leader in trying to fight Maleficent and her ambitious plans.

Wayne had explained it all to Finn, what seemed like a long time ago now.

“You know the movie *Toy Story*?” Wayne had asked.

“Of course.”

“Andy’s toys come alive when he leaves the room.”

“I know,” Finn had said.

“Well, that wasn’t exactly a new idea around here. Walt designed it so that when the last of the humans—the guests, the cast members, the cleaners, maintenance personnel, even the security guys—leave the Magic Kingdom, the characters get to have it all to themselves.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious,” Wayne had said. “We began to suspect this as odd things started happening, like finding equipment moved or an Audio-Animatronics in a different position than it had been left in the night before. Strange, unexplainable events. But Walt had wanted it this way, and we left it alone. That is . . . until the trouble began. Even now, security rarely patrols the parks at night, and when they do, the good characters are left alone to enjoy their freedom as Walt wanted.”

The good characters, Finn thought.

He would later discover that Wayne was telling the truth, but when he’d first heard the story, he’d thought the guy was nuts. He hadn’t believed a word. Having been raised to be polite, he kept quiet and didn’t challenge the old man.

“I had a pet monkey when I was a child,” Wayne said. “My mother gave it to me for my thirteenth birthday.”

“Fascinating.”

“A terrific pet, a monkey. A real friend. Except the more freedom I gave him, the more freedom he wanted. The more freedom he *took*. I eventually had to give him back to the store that had sold him to us because he would no longer get back into his cage at night. He couldn’t give up his newly found freedom.

“Well, the same thing has happened to the characters,” he continued. “Turns out some of them like having the park all to themselves. Mostly the villains, as it so happens. They enjoy bossing around the likeable characters, sabotaging the more popular rides, and generally making trouble. We think a group of them—we’re not exactly sure who all of them are—have decided to drive the good characters out, to take over the park and make it a dark, evil place. The plan seems to be a simple one—if they can scare away the good guys, only the villains will be left. Eventually only people attracted by evil will come. That’s why we call them the Overtakers. Their mission is to change the park forever.”

Wayne had studied Finn’s face to see how much, if any of this, Finn believed. He couldn’t read him.

“We had it wrong for the longest time,” Wayne

said. “We thought it was about them turning it into a ‘dark park’—a place where, instead of being magical and happy, it would be villainous and dark. We’re no longer certain that’s the case. We now think instead they want the parks—maybe all the Disney properties—for themselves. The more playgrounds, the better.”

Finn remembered the day clearly, remembered how he’d felt about the idea of losing Disney World, Animal Kingdom, Epcot, Hollywood Studios. As DHIs—nonhuman holograms—he and the four others could infiltrate the park at night, making efforts to spy on and bring down the Overtakers. This had been Wayne’s grand scheme, his big plan in making the kids DHIs in the first place. Their most recent effort had been in the Animal Kingdom. They’d managed to save a friend from the Overtakers. But only Wayne saw the bigger picture. Only Wayne fully understood any of it.

They had to find him.

This was their fifth night searching the Magic Kingdom; their last now that they’d been spotted by the pirates and Stitch, now that all the Overtakers under Maleficent would be looking to . . . eliminate them. Or at least to trap their DHIs, a situation that left their sleeping bodies back in their parents’ homes unable to wake up. They called the condition the Syndrome—short for Sleeping Beauty Syndrome. Maybeck had

experienced it once. So had Willa and Philby, briefly, in the Animal Kingdom. The Syndrome was nothing to mess with.

“Note to self,” Finn said, intending it for Maybeck, “we are glowing bodies of light running through the dark jungle. You really think *my face* is going to give us away?”

Of the five DHIs, Finn had the most control over his crossed-over state as a hologram. The four others existed in a kind of suspended state when crossed over: half DHI, half human kid, susceptible to getting hurt by accident or at the hands of others.

Finn had learned with Wayne’s guidance to separate himself from fear, from all sensation—touch, sound, taste, smell, sight—and in doing so to make himself pure light, a stream of energy, a holograph just like his DHI that Disney used as the park guide. He couldn’t maintain this pure state for long—a minute or two at most. But he liked to rub his skill in Maybeck’s face.

Finn ran right *through* three palm trees, not bothering to get out of their way. Maybeck weaved and bobbed, avoiding collision.

“Show-off!” Maybeck said.

“Elitist!” Finn fired back. His body passed transparently through a huge rock that Maybeck had to scramble over.

“Know-it-all!” Maybeck said.

“Eye candy!” Finn said. Maybeck was popular with the girls at school.

They both heard the footfalls at once: the pirates had closed the distance and were only a matter of yards behind them now.

“We should continue this later,” Maybeck said.

“Agreed.”

“Right now we need something resembling a plan.”

“I have one,” Finn said. “Do you?”

They continued running, Finn out of breath, Maybeck not winded at all.

“That would be *no*,” Maybeck said.

“All right then.”

“All right then, *what?*”

“We’ll go with my plan,” Finn said proudly.

“Only if you have a plan in the next five seconds,” Maybeck countered.

At that instant, Finn felt a burning sensation on his arm. He didn’t really have much of a plan, and Maybeck’s reliance on him had taken him out of his pure holographic state. He wasn’t glowing as brightly. He was part human again.

He kept running.

“Dude,” Maybeck said. “Your arm is like, gushing blood.”

Finn looked down. He'd been caught by the tip of a pirate's sword. It was a nasty cut, but he wouldn't have called it "gushing."

Whoosh! Whoosh! Finn heard the sword slicing the air just behind him.

"Slowpoke!" Maybeck chided. Maybeck ducked to his right and went down onto his hands and knees, tumbling over. He tripped up three of the pirates, sending them flying. He jumped to his feet and caught back up to Finn.

"You do make yourself handy," Finn said.

"What are friends for?" Maybeck asked.

"Here's the plan. . . ." Finn said at last. "How are you at swimming underwater?"