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AT FIRST, FINN ASSUMED THE alligator was a Disney prop. But then a flicker of doubt crossed his mind: Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn were Mark Twain Mississippi River characters. Alligators and the Mississippi River didn't fit.

Swiss Family Robinson, maybe. Or the Jungle Cruise. The doubt—the fear—made him less DHI and more human, less pure light and more flesh and blood. Swimming underwater, glowing slightly, his eyes wide open, with Maybeck swimming to his left, Finn came to a major realization: the alligator was for real. It was swimming right at them, its mouth wide open.

He didn't know much about alligators, but this one looked hungry. And big.

Finn reached over, grabbed Maybeck by the hand, and pulled him lower. The alligator misjudged and swam above them. It turned with a flick of its massive tail and came at them again.

At that same instant, the pirates or Stitch must have stepped into the river water that surrounded Tom Sawyer Island. A splashing sound was familiar to any

alligator—it often signaled an animal’s arrival at the water’s edge for a drink. To an alligator that sound meant a chance at a meal, and for this particular alligator the instinct proved too strong to resist. Only a foot or two from being able to bite off Maybeck’s feet, the beast reversed course with another fierce lash of its tail and headed for shore.

As Finn and Maybeck scrambled up the muddy bank on the far side, winded and spitting out river water, there came a cry of terror from across the way: one of the pirates had nearly lost his leg to the alligator. He and the others and Stitch were in full retreat, running as fast as they could in the opposite direction.

“You’re late,” Philby said. Philby was maybe the biggest techno-geek Finn had ever met, but he looked more like a soccer player than a nerd. Finn supposed that all the DHI models had been chosen for their “average” looks, their “all-American” qualities; all but Charlene, who was anything but average. She stood just behind Philby in front of one of the teepees, and looked more like a teenage movie star. She had blond hair and a cheerleader’s body, but she didn’t fit the stereotype of what all that implied. She was smart and athletic, cautious and curious.

“We were worried about you,” she said. She pointed across the river. “Looks like for good reason.”

“Yeah,” Finn said, “you might say we were delayed.”

“You might say the pirates were *waiting* for us,” Maybeck said. “Waiting to grab us. To trap us in the Syndrome. They chased us onto the island and Whitman figured a way off, but it was close.”

“Waiting,” Philby said, “as if they knew you were coming?”

“That’s the way I read it,” Finn admitted. “Someone had spotted us in the park and alerted the pirates. Maybeck’s right: it was a close call.”

“Come on!” Charlene said. “Before they come back.”

The way the DHIs crossed over into the park was to go to sleep in their beds at home. Once asleep, they “woke up” inside the Magic Kingdom; but that meant that whatever they wore to sleep was what they were wearing when they appeared as DHIs in the park. Knowing this, Finn always dressed in normal clothes before going to bed. He pulled the covers up so his mother didn’t see what he was wearing as she said good-night. Charlene, on the other hand, had a mother who insisted on rubbing her back and talking to her each night before bed, so Charlene always arrived in the park wearing a nightgown, as she wore tonight. The boys had a hard time keeping their eyes off her.

Willa, on the other hand, who looked Native American or Asian with her hooded, inquisitive eyes

and dark braided hair, wore cargo pants and a T-shirt that read: BITE ME. On the back it had the picture of a shark—some kind of promotion for a seafood restaurant.

Once inside the nearest of the six teepees, the Kingdom Keepers were in an electronic shadow, an area where the DHI projection system could not reach. They became invisible once they moved a few feet from the teepee's door. Only impressions in the sand showed where any of them were sitting. Though their DHI projections sometimes did not project in certain locations, they remained in the park, just as when light is showered onto a shadow, the shadow disappears but the object that was casting the shadow remains. In projection shadow the DHIs could still touch, feel, talk, smell, and hear; they left footprints. Invisible to the eye, they were not beyond detection, and therefore had to be careful. Now inside the teepee, their four voices rang out from the darkness. To anyone looking inside, it would have appeared that no one was there. The only thing that seemed out of place was a small black plastic fob that looked like a garage door opener, hanging from a nail in a pole by the teepee's open door.

Philby remained as a lookout somewhere outside the teepee. This, because they'd had unwanted visitors before.

“So? What now?” Willa asked. “I mean we’ve looked for Wayne everywhere and I just don’t think he’s here in MK.”

“If he is here,” Charlene said, “we’re not going to find him. I agree with Willa.”

“We can’t give up,” Finn said.

“That was a trap tonight, Whitman,” Maybeck said. “You and I . . . we walked into it. We can’t be hanging around MK anymore. They’re onto us.”

“I’d like to disagree with you,” Finn said, “but I can’t. I say we move on to the Animal Kingdom.”

“But our DHIs aren’t set up there, right?” Charlene said. There had been a time when Charlene had understood little of the technology that allowed them to cross over and become DHIs by night inside the park. But now she spoke as the expert they all had become.

“Correct,” Finn said. “If we look for him inside AK, then it has to be during the day, and we have to go as ourselves.”

“We’d be mobbed,” Maybeck said. He made a valid point, Finn thought. The DHIs had become so popular that even at the mall and at movie theaters the five kids were approached and often overwhelmed by fans. Inside one of the parks it would be insane. There were also contractual rules limiting their visits to the Disney parks in order to protect the “brand” of the Disney Hosts. The

kids often ignored these rules, going in disguise, but. . . .

“My parents would kill me if I got caught,” Willa said. “Now that they’ve added us into Epcot and the Hollywood Studios, the cruise line and the ice show, my parents are freaking. It’s apparently a lot of money Disney is paying into the college account. I blow that and I’m dead.”

“Yeah, same here,” Maybeck said. “My aunt has lectured me about a million times on not messing with that college fund.”

“So we don’t look for Wayne?” Finn said. “That’s not happening.”

“If it means we have to go into AK, Epcot, or the Studios as ourselves, I’m out,” Charlene said. “Or, if we go in, we’ve got to tell the company, and everything the contract says to do. I’m in the same situation as Maybeck and Willa. My parents are counting on this college money.”

“I can’t believe you guys would bail on Wayne,” Finn said. He found it a little strange to be talking to a dark, empty teepee, but it wasn’t the first time.

“*Psst!*” It was Philby just outside the door of the teepee. His DHI glowed in the darkness. “We’ve got company.” He stepped inside and, as he crossed into the projection shadow, a black line sliced through his image and slowly ate him. His DHI disappeared.

“Ouch!”

Philby had sat down on Finn’s crossed legs. Finn moved over, and Philby’s butt made an impression in the sand beside him. “Not a peep,” he whispered. “It’s all of them!”

A moment later, the crunch of dry palm fronds and jungle leaves could be heard as the pirates entered the Indian Village.

“They probably skedaddled,” said a man in a low and ominous voice. It sounded as if he had gravel in his throat.

“Footprints!” called another man’s voice.

A shudder passed through each of the Kingdom Keepers. They had gotten careless. A year earlier they would have taken the extra precaution of dragging a branch behind them and erase their footprints. When Finn was pure light, a true DHI, he didn’t leave any footprints, but that wasn’t often and it wasn’t for long. The other DHIs were always part human, and therefore left tracks. Finn and the others understood perfectly well where those footprints led: directly to the teepee they now occupied. They’d trapped themselves. Their only defense was their invisibility, and their invisibility lasted only as long as they were deep within the teepee and in the projection shadow.

The voices drew closer—the pirates were following the footprints closer and closer.

“It’s here,” a low voice growled, immediately outside the teepee.

A face appeared, partly in silhouette, with a scraggly beard, dark brown moles like warts, and winding scars. The man stepped inside.

Finn spotted the black plastic fob hanging from the pole by the door of the teepee. The remote control device could send them all back to the safety of their beds. Their homes. But it was out of reach now. The pirate blocked the way.

In the past, Wayne had typically kept the fob himself. But without Wayne around, they had to hide the fob safely in the park so they could use it to leave. They’d been using the teepee as a hiding place, but now that would have to change.

Finn’s hand nervously clutched into a fist. In doing so, he gripped a handful of sand. He reached out, his hand searching, and he bumped into Charlene’s arm. He let some of the sand cascade onto her skin, hoping she would get the message.

Over the next few seconds he heard the soft trickle of sand spilling. She had understood! The sound moved from DHI to DHI in a semicircle inside the teepee.

The pirate heard it too, but couldn’t figure it out.

Finn scooped up two big fistfuls of sand. His heart pounded in his chest.

The pirate looked searchingly into the teepee.

"Ain't no one here," he said.

"But them tracks go in and don't come back out," said the man with the gravel voice. "Don't make no sense."

"Them kids is cagey," offered a third voice. "Wouldn't trust them with my teeth."

"You ain't got no teeth," said the man in the doorway. "Come take a look yourself."

A second face appeared in the doorway. This man had long, greasy hair, a gold hoop earring in his right ear, and a left eyelid partly sewn shut. He smelled like bacon fat and fish guts.

He also stepped inside. "Them tracks don't make no sense." He looked up into the peak of the teepee, searching for the kids. "And them tracks don't lie. They're here somewhere."

He looked *right at Finn*.

"Maybe they done dug themselves down into the sand like a flounder."

"You mean a stone crab," said the first man.

"I mean a flounder, you landlubber. Or a ray. What's it matter what kind of fish, you ninny? Point is, they could be hiding 'neath the sand and we wouldn't know it, now would we?"

The two were standing inside the teepee now, one

so close to where Philby had sat down that he had to be just about touching his DHI. The pirates used their feet to disturb the sand, digging down.

“How would they be breathing?” the gravel-voiced pirate asked.

“How should I know?” answered the one-eyed stink bomb.

“*Now!*” Finn shouted. He stood and threw both handfuls of sand directly into the faces of the two pirates.

The men screamed. Covering his face, clawing at his eyes, one fell to his knees as Philby tripped him.

Finn snagged the remote control fob on the way out the door as the other Kingdom Keepers charged for the doorway. Two more pirates appeared.

Startled by the kids appearing out of thin air, the two men went wide-eyed with surprise. Willa and Charlene filled those eyes with flying sand. The two pirates hollered and staggered back.

The Kingdom Keepers rushed out of the teepee as a group. Finn, the fob in hand, ran smack into what felt like a giant sponge, bounced back, and fell to the sand.

Stitch stood over him.

“You don’t belong here,” Stitch said. He showed his teeth. It looked as if he could bite Finn’s head off—and maybe had that in mind.

Maybeck, who had run past Stitch, now daringly crept up behind the blue alien and knelt down on all fours.

Finn got up.

“Neither do you,” Finn said. “Shouldn’t you be back in space? And you want to know something? I *liked* you until just now. My sister thinks you’re cute.”

This caused Stitch a moment of thought.

Finn took the opportunity to step forward and shove the creature over Maybeck’s back. Stitch went down hard.

Maybeck jumped up. He and Finn took off, turning left down an access trail, back toward the park.

The pirates were up now, angry as hornets, and running hard to catch them.

“*Ready?*” Finn called out. “Keep close together. Everyone hold hands.”

No one argued. They closed ranks and all held hands.

Finn had never tried to use the remote control device on the run before. They’d always been standing together as a group. He had no idea if it would work. He hoped that by holding hands. . . .

“One . . .” he counted.

The pirates were only a few feet behind them. He heard the ring of steel as swords were drawn.

“Two . . .”

Whoosh! A sword blade passed frighteningly close to his head.

“Three!”

He pushed the button. All the holograms disappeared at once. The black fob fell into the bushes at the base of a palm tree—a location Finn would etch vividly in his memory.