



DELTA-VICTOR

SIGNAL ME #2

CAST ADRIFT, WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THEY FINALLY HIT SHORE?

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Dedication

For Rhys, Ceryn, and Jess.
My three angels.

1

The daylight grew, the warm sun illuminating the beach and their makeshift campsite. Sixteen-year-old Lou Benson woke and for the life of her, couldn't work out where she was. She was cold and stiff and her injured leg hurt. She sat up and looked around. Why would they camp on a beach with no blankets, when they had nice warm beds on board their boat, *Avon*?

Deefer, her golden and white Sheltie, rubbed his nose against her face in greeting and she petted him. "Hey, boy. Guess there's no point asking you why we're here, is there?"

He barked and shook his head.

Lou looked out across the bay. No boat. Where was it? Then she remembered. They were shipwrecked.

A wave of fear and sadness swept over her. She felt incredibly cold, almost as if the sun had been blotted out or removed from the sky altogether. This was her fault. The whole mess was her fault.

Jim Kirk rolled onto his side and opened his eyes. He smiled at her and she wished her heart would stop that double beat thing. He was a friend, nothing more, and never would be. Her

best friend she'd given up everything to help.

"So much for a rescue trip to find your parents," she said quietly.

His clear eyes clouded for a moment. "The rescuers need rescuing," he said. "If I hadn't fallen asleep at the helm..."

Lou shifted uncomfortably. "It wasn't your fault. Stuff happens."

Before he could say anything further, his younger sister, Staci, rolled over and sat. She stretched, looking confused as she brushed the sand off her arms. "Where are we?" she asked. "And don't say camping, because I can see that."

"Agrihan."

"Oh, I remember now." Staci looked at the few bags by their feet. "We didn't save much, did we? And I left the laptop behind."

Jim took hold of his sister's hand and gave it a comforting squeeze. "There wasn't time, kiddo."

Lou reached into her sewing bag and pulled out the camera. "Let's have one for the record," she said. "Our first camp-out." She took the photo and put the camera away. "At least we posted all those discs back to Mum and stuck some of the photos on the web. So we'll still have the pictures."

"Sorry I forgot the laptop," Staci said.

Jim rummaged through the food bag. "Stop apologizing for forgetting the laptop. We all got off before *Avon* sank. Nothing else matters. Are sandwiches all right for breakfast?"

"Why are you never hungry on the beach?"

Staci asked.

Jim shook his head. "Don't know."

"Because of all the sand which is there." Lou told him.

He rolled his eyes. "I see you two still haven't lost your sense of humor."

"I see you still haven't found yours," Lou retorted.

Jim scowled. "You guys just don't get it, do you? We're shipwrecked. There is no way off here."

Lou sighed. "Lighten up, Jim. We may be down, but we are not out."

"There has to be a settlement somewhere on this island right?" Staci said. "They're bound to have phones. Everyone does these days. We can get help there. Now breakfast. We'd better go easy on the food. It may take us a while to find help." She looked at Jim. "We are in this together. Strength and honor, right?"

Jim looked up. "I guess so. It's just we were meant to be searching for Mum and Dad and now we're lost, too."

"We know. But there isn't much we can do sat here," Staci said. "We need to find help. That means not sitting here feeling sorry for ourselves, but having breakfast, getting off our butts, and going to look for a village." She paused. "Wait a minute. When did I suddenly become the grown up around here?"

"When Jim decided to act like a ten-year-old," Lou replied. "He's the only grown up I can see for mi—" She winked. "Well, on this beach

actually.”

Deefer barked in agreement.

Jim nodded slowly. “You’re right. As usual.” He made breakfast and they ate quietly. Deefer finished his and wanted more.

Jim looked at him. “Sorry, mate, you can’t. We have to make it last.”

After they had all finished, Lou packed away the rubbish, while Staci put the rest of the stuff away.

Jim put sand over the extinguished fire to ensure it wouldn’t re-light.

Lou put on one of the rucksacks and Staci the other.

Jim put the holdall across his chest and shouldered Lou’s sewing bag. He clipped Deefer’s lead on and looked at the others. “Are you ready then?”

“Willing and able,” they chorused.

“Then let’s go.”

Jim led the way into the forest and down a path, which was really nothing more than a sandy trail with a deep groove in the center.

Lou’s crutches sank into the sand, making keeping up nigh on impossible with the fast pace Jim set. She trailed behind, barely taking her eyes off the path. Her leg hurt and she didn’t dare put any weight on it. It was one thing hobbling around a boat on crutches, doing it on unfamiliar territory was another problem altogether.

The trees towered over them, offering shade from the blazing heat of the sun. It was only ten in the morning, but already the temperature was in

the high seventies. The sandy path beneath her feet finally turned to dried mud.

Above them in the trees birds sang, parrots squawked and leaves rustled. In any other circumstances, Lou would have enjoyed the walk. She loved exploring and wanted to be an archeologist when she left school.

As it was, she could think of a dozen other things she'd much rather be doing.

Even on the dried mud path, keeping up was difficult. The ground was uneven and the path was well worn and dipped in the middle.

She kept losing her footing on the unstable ground. After an hour's walking, she could barely see the others in front of her, although she could still hear Staci chattering.

Lou stumbled, crying out as pain shot up her leg. The fragile tissue started to give. It had never really healed since the shark attack several weeks ago. She sat on the ground, cradling her leg and blinking back tears.

Jim stopped and came back to her. "Are you all right?"

"Do I look all right?" she snapped. Then she sucked in a deep breath. This wasn't Jim's fault. "Sorry. I slipped. I could do with a rest."

"OK. It looks a bit clearer just up ahead, and I can hear water. Can you go on a bit farther?"

The thought filled her with dread, but she wasn't going to say as much. They had to find civilization and get help. "So long as it isn't too far. This is farther than I've walked in weeks."

"It isn't far, I promise." Jim helped her up,

returned to the head of the line, and set off again.

Staci glanced over her shoulder. "This is like playing Brown's Cows. Remember that?"

Lou grinned. "Oh yeah, drove Mum mad with it." They'd followed her mother around the flat in a line for over an hour. Until she'd decided enough was enough and made them sit down. "Not as much fun as hanging pegs on the back on her skirt."

Staci giggled. "I'd forgotten that. She even went to church with them still attached."

Five minutes later they came into a clearing. A stream meandered to the left of it, bubbling over the rocks, and the sun blazed through the gap in the tree cover.

Lou limped over to a fallen log and gingerly sat. She put her crutches down, rubbed her leg and dropped the rucksack. "It's nice to sit," she sighed.

Staci put her rucksack on the ground and sat next to Lou. "Sure is," she agreed. "It's hard keeping up with Jim. I don't know where he gets his energy from. Nichola would insist on bottling it and making a fortune by selling it."

Jim crossed to the stream. He squatted beside it and scooped up a handful. He tasted it and turned to the girls. "Tastes fine." He pulled empty bottles from his pack and filled them with water. Next, he filled cups and carried them to the girls.

Lou fished out a bowl and gave it to Jim, who filled it for Deefer.

After they'd rested a bit, Jim stood. "I suggest we follow the stream. Most villages are built close

to water. It's our best chance of finding help."

"But the path goes that way," Staci pointed. "Lou would find it easier to follow the path."

"Maybe, but our best bet for finding help is the stream."

"Path," Staci insisted. "It's well used, and the chances are we'll meet someone on it."

Lou held up her hand. "Guys, please. There is no point in arguing. I can't go anywhere. Not for a while, anyway." She didn't need a mirror to know she looked as pale as she felt.

"Are you OK?" Jim asked, concerned. "You look dreadful."

"Good, dreadful is how I want to look." She couldn't resist trying to get one over on him. If nothing else it'd divert Staci's attention from how bad things really were. "Seriously, I've been better. I've just overdone it a bit. How about I stay here with Staci and you go exploring with Deefer. That way you won't get lost."

"OK. I'll check the stream out," Jim said. He called Deefer, and the two of them set off.

~*~

He had to admit, it was tough going. What originally had looked like a path very soon vanished. He pushed his way through waist high grass and thick undergrowth.

Deefer whined his disapproval.

Jim looked down at him. "Staci was right. Lou would never manage this. We'd better try the path." Jim struck off to his right. The trees were

less dense that way.

When he reached a path he stopped. He should have back tracked. "Question is, is it the same one?"

He turned to his left and followed the path. Deefer, tail wagging now, ran on ahead and out of sight.

"Deefer?" Jim called. "Deefer, where are you? Lou will never forgive me if something happens to you."

Deefer started barking.

"Deefer?" Jim pushed through the brush, shoved back a curtain of leaves, and stopped in amazement. "Wow! Would you look at that?"

2

Back at the stream, Staci shook Lou awake.

Lou looked at her sleepily. "What's up? Is Jim back?"

"No. He's been gone almost four hours. I'm worried."

"He's got Deefer with him. He'll be fine. Tell you what, if you do something to eat, he's bound to come back."

"OK. It'll have to be sandwiches as I can't light a fire."

"Jim's better at that sort of thing," Lou said, settling back to watch Staci get more water from the stream to dilute the juice. Lou yawned and rubbed her leg. She and Staci had barely taken their first bites when Jim and Deefer came into the clearing.

"Told you," Lou grinned.

Jim flopped down beside them. "Lunch," he said. "I'm starving. You should see what we found."

"Is that the royal we?" Lou asked. "Or is it just delusions of grandeur on your part?"

"Me and Deefer."

"Deefer and I," she corrected.

"Oh, pssht." Not even her teasing could

diminish his enthusiasm or the grin on his face. Whatever he'd found had to be pretty spectacular. "It's amazing."

"Did you find civilization?" Staci asked.

"Not exactly, but signs thereof. It's a temple. Albeit a slightly dilapidated one, but it means there are people here somewhere."

"How far?"

"About forty minutes down the path." Jim paused. "Well, probably more like an hour and a half at Lou's speed. There's water so we need only take enough for the journey. We could stay there tonight."

After they finished lunch, Staci rinsed the cups and knife in the stream and, once again, topped up the water bottles.

Then they set off up the path in search of Jim's temple. It took them just over the hour and a half that Jim had estimated.

Lou limped as slowly as she could. She was in a great deal of pain from her shark-damaged leg, more so than usual, but was trying not to let it show. "Where's this temple then?" she asked as they entered the clearing.

"Here," Jim answered pulling aside the leafy curtain covering the offshoot of the path.

Staci and Lou went through and stopped in wonder.

Before them rose the remains of an ornate building. Huge pillars supported the roof. Creepers entwined themselves around the pillars adding to the ethereal charm. Stone steps rose from the ground up to the entrance. Flowers and

leaves were carved around the tops of the pillars while some kind of bird was carved into the base.

"There's more inside," Jim told them. "The windows give enough light for us to see. The roof has gone in a couple of places, but there's plenty of shelter."

Lou struggled over to the steps and sank down wearily. "You two explore. I'll catch up in a bit. Take the camera and get some photos."

As the others disappeared inside, she rubbed her leg and grimaced as the pain increased.

Deefer sat down next to her and whined.

She patted the top of his head. "Just wish I had the energy to go look for myself. It's an archeologist's dream."

~*~

Inside the temple, Staci looked around, fascinated. "It's nothing like any ruins I've ever seen. There's no dust or debris. It looks well cared for despite the holes in the roof and walls."

"Look at this," Jim said. He pointed to one of the walls. It was divided into panels. Tiny pictures and some kind of writing covered each panel.

Staci ran her fingers over them. "Are they hiro, hero...oh, those glyph things?"

"Hieroglyphics? Yes, I think so. They obviously tell some kind of story, but I don't know what."

Staci said, "Are we staying here tonight?"

"Yes. We might need to help Lou up the

steps. Is she OK? She's very quiet."

"She's walked farther today than she has for weeks."

Jim shrugged. "Yeah, but we all have."

"Yes, but not on crutches. She's also in a lot more pain than she's letting on. We'll have to take things a lot easier tomorrow. Maybe just move on every other day."

Jim went back to the temple entrance. He went down the steps.

Lou was hunched over at the bottom of them.

"Lou?"

She looked up, rubbing her eyes with her sleeve. "I'm here."

Jim pushed aside a touch of embarrassment at having caught her off guard and sat next to her, concern flooding him. "Are you all right?" he asked gently.

She nodded. "I'm fine."

"Liar. You're not fine at all, because normally you'd be jumping through hoops to explore this place. Is the pain really bad?"

"I've just over done it," Lou gasped, her face creasing as a fresh wave of pain swept over her. "I'll be OK." She looked at him. "Honestly, Jim, I'm just tired."

"We'll stay here tomorrow to give you a rest. Let's get you inside. There's something I want you to see. It might take your mind off how tired you feel for a few minutes."

"Can't see that happening, but OK. I'll come." Lou struggled to her feet and with Jim's help made it to the top of the steps. She gripped

her crutches and limped inside the temple after him.

Staci had found some cloth in a box. "It's weird," she said, showing them. "This looks almost new. So does the box."

Lou studied the symbols on the wall. "These pictographs are amazing. They tell the story of the building of the temple and what happened to the people who built it."

"You can read them?" Jim asked in astonishment.

Lou smiled. "Misspent youth," she replied.

Jim laughed. "I'm sorry? I thought you were only sixteen. I forgot for a minute you turned fifty a couple of months ago."

Lou poked her tongue at him. "Ha, ha. Very funny. You know I find the whole archaeology thing fascinating. I've spent hours studying Egyptian and Mayan hieroglyphics and pictographs. Apparently some kind of disaster struck the people shortly before the temple was begun. As a result the temple took a many years to complete."

"What happened?"

"I'll need a lot longer to study them if you want the whole story." She crossed over to one of the statues. "This guy looks familiar."

"It's Jim." Staci said.

Lou laughed. "It does look like him, doesn't it? No seriously. I know this guy, but I can't, for the life of me, remember his name."

"So until you remember, we'll just call him Jim." Staci laughed.

Jim rolled his eyes. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Lou turned and her leg gave out. She dropped the crutches and toppled to the floor, crying out as she fell.

Jim dashed across to her. "You OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just this stupid leg. Help me up, please."

Jim pulled her upright.

Staci passed her the crutches.

Lou looked at them. "Honestly, I'm fine. Just tired."

"I found some cushions as well," Staci said. "You can rest properly tonight. I'll show you."

"It's half five," Jim said. "I'll get a fire going outside for tea, shall I?"

"Please. I'll get Lou settled, and I'll be there."

Lou sank onto the cushions and closed her eyes. She could control the pain better like this. A thud on her chest and a heavy sigh told her Deeper was using her as a pillow again. She took a couple of deep breaths as she stroked his ears. "Maybe I'll remember where I've seen the statue before, when I'm not so tired," she told him.

Deeper licked her hand.

Staci giggled. "I think that was him agreeing with you. I'm going to see what Jim's doing."

Lou waved a hand. "Sure, Deeper and I will lie here and think about statues."

~*~

Jim came to tell Lou tea was ready, and

found her asleep. He returned out to Staci. "She's asleep. I won't wake her."

"What about tea?"

"We'll have to eat it. We can't keep it warm, can we?"

"True."

Jim divided Lou's between them.

Deefer ate his and disappeared back inside to Lou.

Staci looked at Jim. "Is there any way we can have a fire inside?"

"Not really. I thought I might light one of those torches later when it gets dark."

They lapsed into silence and finished tea.

Staci rinsed the dishes in the stream. Then she and Jim sat by the fire and watched the stars come out as darkness fell. Before the fire died completely, Jim carried a piece of blazing wood inside and lit two of the torches in the room where Lou was sleeping.

Jim rejoined Staci on the steps of the temple. He pointed out the constellations to her. There were many they didn't usually see in England, but most of them were the same, just in different places in the night sky.

Staci yawned. "I'm tired." She looked around. "Where's Deefer?"

"With Lou."

"I should've known," Staci laughed. "I'm going to bed. You coming?"

"In a bit."

Staci rose. "Night."

Jim watched her go. He'd explore tomorrow