

## *The deep blue*

They had come to Korfos for a long weekend. Alex, Voula, Katerina and the kids had arrived late in the evening. Katerina had stayed back to tend to the kids while Alex and Voula walked to Enplo Bar to meet the others for coffee. It was unusually quiet at the bar, which was great for the group, apart from the mosquitoes which were lethal at that time of the night. Andreas had been talking to them about fear and holding back. He was looking at Despina as he spoke, but they knew he was talking to everyone.

“Good evening,” the owner, Nikos, greeted them. “What would you like to drink?”

“An espresso for me,” Voula replied.

“Hot chocolate for me, please,” Alex said.

“Nikos, what is the fishing situation?” Andreas asked.

“Not encouraging, very little about. The guys saw some dolphins the other day. Must have scared the fish away.”

“Oh, we were thinking of going fishing tomorrow. Maybe we’ll fish for squid or octopus instead.”

“Yes, why not,” replied Nikos, before crossing the street to get the drinks.

“Like I was saying... Fear is what keeps people from living and experiencing life. We build barriers to protect, but this protection also confines us. You cannot do both. You cannot live in a cage. To live life is to love life and everything it presents.”

“Are you saying we shouldn’t be afraid?” asked Alex.

“No, it is okay to be afraid. Like the waves of the sea, it too is a current. It comes and goes. The point is not to let the fear overwhelm you, to keep you from living. To be alive is to take part in life. We prefer to stand at the edge and watch because it means we don’t have to do anything. But this is not a healthy position towards life.” And so they carried on talking late into the night.

The bay of Korfos was at its best, quiet and serene. The sun had been up for about an hour or two, which made its rays still gentle on the skin. Alex was in his swimming trunks, standing on the deck of Café Pilos,

staring at the sea. Voula was seated on a chair putting on her blue snorkel fins. The beach was quiet at this time of the morning, dotted with only a handful of grey-haired men and women who found an early morning swim pleasant.

Voula walked to the edge of the shore, holding her mask, and stood with her back to the sea.

“Come in!” she called out.

“In a minute,” Alex replied, but kept looking over the sea. Alex had always loved water and the ocean, even though he wasn’t that great a swimmer. There was something about the sound of the waves crashing on the shore and the expansive nature of the sea that filled Alex with peace.

Few minutes later and Alex was knee-deep in water, ready to surrender to the calling of the sea and of course Voula. He dunked himself into the waves, as one would dip a biscuit into a glass of milk. His head reappeared, then went under again, a little longer this time, before popping up next to Voula. Until today, Alex had only swam on the surface apart from the odd dive here and there. He was too afraid to dive deep down to the seabed. But Voula was going to help him with this, and that was why they were there: for Alex’s sake.

Voula had first walked through the doors of the Center thirty years ago. “I was afraid to live at the time,” she told Alex. “I thought life was miserable, full of chaos. It was

difficult at the beginning, accepting what I was taught at the Center.

“It was not until the teachings settled within me and I started to apply them in my life that everything around me changed and my life became a joy. If you embrace the teaching and put it into practice, you will see it’s effect over time,” she told Alex. “You will find life meaningful again. My life became a joy just by virtue of my exposure to these teachings.”

Voula juggled family life with a high-level financial career. However, her life revolved around the Center. She was one of its oldest members. Listening to the fascinating stories of the older members gave Alex hope and strength. Knowing that someone else had walked in his shoes and come out on the other side singing and dancing was encouraging. They were an example of what was possible.

Alex had never experienced anything like it. The different sizes of fish, from tiny and almost invisible to dinner-size. Then there were the colours, some so beautifully co-ordinated you could not but be amazed. The urchins lodged between rocks and the plants that had made the seabed home. Life in the deep blue was something else. They had been diving for an hour, coming up every so often to catch their breath, Voula always nearby, showing Alex a few tricks underwater.

He could have carried on but was tired, partly due to his fitness level but more to his overdose of excitement. Alex felt alive, different and changed by the experience. A big smile drawn on his face, he walked towards Voula, giving her a long loving hug. Voula was in many ways everything to Alex, and her partner Andreas too. He could not express how much they meant to him.

They both sat on the white plastic deck chairs, sipping on freshly squeezed orange juice and drying out in the sun. The beach was now busy with people, young and old. The sun was also in full swing, blaring down on the row of sun-seeking bodies that had spread out along the shore-line. As Alex sipped on his remaining drink, he woke up to what he had heard the night before and what had happened earlier in the day. He had learnt to dive to the bottom of the sea.

By taking a plunge, he experienced more of the sea than he could ever have imagined. You never see anything at the surface, just like you don't experience life sitting on the fence, he said to himself.

"Voula," he said, turning his face to her as he spoke. "I'm ready to take part in life, ready to experience its richness."

"Bravo Alex!" she replied with a smile.