

crisrina jurado marcos

ENGLISH

del naranja al azul

Chapter I

(The encounter)

“You don’t mean anything at all to me”
Nelly Furtado *Say it right*, 2006

“I don’t work with guys like this”, Maya said looking nervously down. Hugo watched her attentively. In the meantime, Captain Gross folded the maps and the remaining documents scattered over the untidy table.

Gross shoved the papers aside and screamed at her.

“This is not a suggestion; it’s an order, Lieutenant! Hugo is probably the best tracker in all of Sector 8. He has valuable contacts among the Bionauts. We cannot afford to waste this opportunity to infiltrate their lines and dismantle their supply network.”

While talking, the Captain gave her an apprehensive look. Once a man of an athletic build, he tried hard to hide his large, fifty something belly behind sweat pants and a shirt. With a shaved head to conceal his baldness and weather-beaten skin, the result of hours playing golf in the sun, he looked like an old sea dog. Gross narrowed his eyes impatiently, as if he always had something better to do than listen, which made pretty much everybody uncomfortable talking to him.

Although she could still feel Hugo's intense eyes, Maya finally looked up. He was the one the Captain called 'the tracker', and the third person in that meeting. She began to fear that her blushing cheeks would betray her. She could not but hate that feeling, especially as she refused to admit that Hugo's presence disturbed her.

It must have been years since she last heard of him, and ages since she'd seen him for the last time. Although she received daily reports on all the

active trackers in Sector 8, it never occurred to her to associate his name with that of her ex-boyfriend. She was shocked to see him at the meeting. He was still tall, slim and pale, and his hair still shone the same pitch-black obsidian color that she remembered so well. Impeccably dressed in dark pants and a dim grey shirt, he resembled a character out of a black and white movie. His blue eyes were the only hint of color in the ensemble.

It did not seem strange to her that he had become a successful tracker. The report in her hands confirmed that, like the rest of them, Hugo provided raw material shipments and earthling resources to the Bionauts in exchange for lucrative commissions.

Could anybody expect anything different from such a despicable being? And now, she was being forced to work with him. It was one of those ironies of fate, or more like a dirty trick. After all the time she had needed to forget him, he, out of all possible trackers, was the one crossing paths with

her. Maya could sense how much he enjoyed their encounter. Without a doubt, he had anticipated the scene after discovering that she was the Communications Specialist at the Resistance Movement.

He can definitely feel how nervous I am, she thought while listening to the Captain.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed Hugo's intense gaze, which served only to further intimidate her.

I still hope he doesn't realize how I feel, she said to herself. *Indifference! That's it, Maya! Show only coldness, so he can't detect how much he disturbs you.*

She could not think clearly, but knew she had to say something to get out of that uncomfortable situation. The only thing she was sure of was that she did not want to work with Hugo, or really, that she could not.

“Sorry Captain, but I can’t work with this... tracker. He is not trustworthy”, Maya assured. Hearing her own words, she almost surprised herself. For a split second, it felt as if another person had spoken them.

Captain Gross did not welcome the comment. Tired of having to be politically correct, he liked to give only the necessary explanations, without worrying about the feelings of the officers under his command. What was all that about? What happened to good old military discipline? Before, there was no place for feelings in the troops. Orders were given and followed. But all that had changed, and every single little decision had to be endlessly justified. New circumstances arose, and only added complications to all operations. It was now virtually impossible to perform productively. It was getting late and, if he did not hurry, there would not be enough light to practice his swing before dinner. Golf was the only thing he was unwilling to give up, not

even for his leadership position in the Resistance Movement.

Gross reluctantly raised his eyebrows. “And... may I ask what is the source of your suspicions, Lieutenant?”

Staring at them, he could immediately sense the tension. “Wait a minute!”, he exclaimed, while gathering more papers. “You already knew each other, didn’t you?”

“Listen to me! I don’t care if you are distant cousins, if he owes you money, or if he left you at the altar on your wedding day.” Whilst introducing the sheets of paper into his faded black briefcase, Gross continued, in an infuriated tone. “We don’t have the luxury of choosing with whom we work. Fortunately enough, there is a tracker willing to help us, and it’s a damn well-connected one.”

The Captain held out a bulky red folder at her and made his way to the door.

“Here you have all the details concerning, our so-called agreement with Hugo. I suggest that you start preparing the infiltration strategy so we can finalize the operation with the heads of the Intelligence and Command Units.”

Gross choose to give them an ultimatum. “Lieutenant, I expect you to make an honest effort to leave your prejudices aside, because both of you are going to be in each other’s company for quite some time. And don’t give me that look. These are hard times for everybody, and it’s our duty to put our personal issues behind those of our work.”

He left the door half open and Maya half shocked by his words. Walking hastily away, the Captain dropped a small golf ball, which rolled towards the wall producing a hollow sound.

Without looking at Hugo, Maya turned back and started to talk to him.

“I’m dying to know what you have done to make the Captain trust you. Let me tell you that I

don't, for one second, buy the story that you want to help us", she said while reading a report from the red folder.

He laughed triumphantly and, just then, she heard his voice for the first time in years.

"I cannot believe you are not happy to see me. I thought I would never set eyes on you again."

She remembered his voice as deep and restless, not as soft and calm as it sounded now. Still staring at her, Hugo came slowly closer. She could feel his breath brushing her face. As she looked up at him, he met her gaze.

"You are out of your mind if you think we are going to work together. My guess is that you are up to something and, when I find out what it is, I will expose you before the Captain. You can't lie to me", she said in her most aggressive manner.

Considering Hugo was just a few inches from her, Maya was confident that her totally artificial composure was convincing enough. She

could almost feel the warmth of his body. Both defiant and pleased, the iron blue of his eyes was fixed on her own.

Hugo's smile widened and his gaze turned colder and deeper. "I already did it once, why could I not do it again?", he replied softly.

Maya almost forgot to breathe. She felt the blood rushing to her head and the rage within her growing with every heartbeat. She could not allow him to drive her crazy. Since their last encounter, Hugo knew very well how to tackle her.

He waited for her to slap him, even to scream at him in reproach to his behavior. His words expected, almost asked for, a violent reaction. What an entirely foreign feeling! He had to admit that tormenting her was entertaining. On the other hand, he hardly could take his eyes off her.

Without blinking, Maya continued to stare him. A combination of painful memories and old feelings rushed to her mind, confirming that she had

not really forgotten him. When she could breathe normally again, she took some time to answer him.

“I’m not the same person, and it’s not going to be that easy for you to deceive me now. And let me point out that I need you to keep your distance. I’m a Lieutenant of the Resistance Movement. You must show some respect to my post. These are not the dumps you are used to hanging around in.”

She tried very hard to sound indifferent. Beads of cold sweat started rolling down her spine, and she began to feel electric sparks traveling between them.

Hugo stepped back. Still smiling, he held his hands behind his back. He was vaguely disappointed at her apparent control. He remembered a totally different girl that would have fiercely attacked him. Instead, she just looked at him with an annoyed expression.

“Sorry, Lieutenant.” He gave her a martial salute. “This is Hugo, tracker of Sector 8. I have

made an agreement with Captain Gross and I'm here to assist you in the field. I'm familiar with every hole in the Sector and conduct business with most of the existing trackers."

Once the distance between them grew wider, Maya felt more comfortable. It seemed that air was passing more easily through her lungs and, to her relief. She noticed that she had stopped sweating. She looked back at the yellowish recycled paper bearing the report of the Resistance Movement. The data on Hugo did not follow any particular order. It was obvious that nobody has taken the time to organize it.

I bet that everything Hugo told them hasn't even been verified, she thought. She knew that her task would be to review all that information with him in order to prepare for the next day's meeting. Sure of his lies, she prayed for a bit of luck in finding enough evidence to expose him. Even though spending time together did not sound so appealing, it was her only chance to be rid of him.

I can do this! By tomorrow all this could be just a bad dream, she said to herself pretending to read the report. She already knew most of the information in it, but had to admit that Hugo's latest adventures were always interesting. The very thought of taking an interest in him troubled her deeply. Maya shook her head as if to drive away those ideas.

“May I have a seat, Lieutenant?”, Hugo asked mockingly. Without waiting for an answer, and still staring at her, he sat in the closest chair. The situation amused him. But even if he enjoyed having her so physically close, he also could sense the huge rift that had opened between them. He knew how uncomfortable she was feeling, and that made it all even more enjoyable.

So, you are not all that indifferent. If you are uncomfortable, it is because you still have feelings for me... this is going to be really interesting! He had to think hard to remember something that had amused him like that. Suddenly, emotions poured in

and he had to look down at his keys. He stopped smiling and tried to focus on reading the faded brand on the key chain to give him some time.

Once he overcame his emotions, he looked up at her again, searching to meet her gaze.

Maya had let her hair grow, and it came down her back in a tousled fall. As she was of medium height, her mane contributed to make her look even smaller. Her brown eyes seemed darker, but he thought that it was the effect of the hard stares she insisted on. Because she appeared slimmer, her features showed sharper angles. He remembered her as being lively, although her face now projected the same melancholy shared by all the survivors. Only her charisma seemed unchanged, and he found the same old difficulty dealing with it.

“Where do we start?”, he inquired.

She sat in doubt for few seconds while she put her ideas in order. For the time being, she decided to focus on her task. As soon as she could

catch Hugo making a mistake, she would quickly inform the Captain.

That seemed like a good plan. Finally, she took a seat in the second existing chair, directly in front of him. Only the table separated them and she placed the report on top of it.

“So, you are a tracker... what else could we expect from you!”, she exclaimed like she was talking to herself.

Hugo stayed unperturbed. “I’d rather adapt than die, Lieutenant. The Diseases did not kill me, so I thought the best thing to do was try to cash in.”

For an instant, Maya had forgotten all about the Bionauts. After the turmoil of emotions that she had gone through since Captain Gross had summoned her earlier that day, facing Hugo had made her stop thinking about what had happened.

‘Bionauts’ was the name adopted by the beings that had arrived on Earth two years ago. They had brought with them new illnesses, against which

Earthlings had no defense. In the span of a few months, almost the entire population of the planet had died. Lacking a proper name for those strange illnesses, survivors referred them as ‘The Diseases’.

Nobody knew exactly how many existed, why they affected most people and spared so few, or even if there were new ones that had not manifested themselves yet. There were no official figures about the number of actual survivors. In Sector 8 alone, they were around a few thousand, but there were strong indications that some nomadic groups had formed in the North. Not counting the wanderers, the rudimentary censuses conducted in the Sectors that had made contact provided a number of roughly half a million people on the whole planet.

What was clear is that the Bios, the name everybody used to refer to them, had never shown any animosity against the earthlings. They also had not shared their advanced technical knowledge, not

even to provide vaccines or treatment that could have saved billions of lives.

Maya frowned, thinking about the many dead bodies she had seen as the world population was practically extinguished. She bitterly resented the Bios for doing nothing to prevent it.

Hugo thought her gesture was directed at him. Without a doubt, Maya disapproved of his business pursuits, but her scorn was to be expected. He enjoyed making her nervous and feeling how his words slowly drove her to burst out in anger.

That's right. Embrace your rage! he thought as he played with his keys.

With a sigh, Maya looked up and drove her eyes straight into his. *I can't believe he is not feeling even a bit uncomfortable. What was I thinking!* He was always a cold-blooded jerk.

“We already know each other; so don't try to provoke me. I'm not interested in the least in learning why are you working for our enemies. Even

though I still don't buy the idea that you want to help us, I'm not going to waste the opportunity to obtain valuable information about the Bios' supply system", Maya said with conviction.

He continued smiling and merely answered. "Whatever you say, Lieutenant. I'm all yours, literally!"

Maya was about to lose her temper. She took a pen from the side pocket of her faded blazer and started to scribble in the margins of the sheets. "How long have you worked for them?", she asked flatly.

"Ever since they arrived, a couple of years ago. I know how to take my share of the pie when the occasion is suitable, Lieutenant", he replied. "Judging by your clothes, you've done far from well yourself."

Maya jumped off her chair. "We are not here to discuss my personal situation. And you, of all people, should be the last one to take such liberties.

I'm aware that the only thing that matters to you is to save your own skin. Only you could think of profiting from the dramatic situation in which we find ourselves.”

As soon as she stopped talking, she understood his twisted game, his plan to infuriate her. She tightened her fists and stared at him, steeling her nerves. She noticed, for the first time, his brand new clothes, so different from her own.

Hugo did not attempt to move. “If you are going to address me in such a familiar way, it is only fair that I drop your title, don't you think?”

“Do whatever you like, but cut the comments about my wardrobe. We are not here to waste time. This is serious, at least to me.” Maya could not believe she was actually using the typical propaganda from the Resistance Movement.

She took a deep breath and continued to question him. “Where exactly do you conduct your... business transactions?” While speaking, she did not

stop taking notes. She had to show to herself her total dedication to preparing the next day's meeting.

“I really believe today is your lucky day! In fact, I operate in the whole of Sector 8. Do you want me to write you a list of all the dealers that I work with?” The irony of the answer served to attract her gaze to his.

“Really, why do you want to help us?” she asked directly.

Instead of answering her, he spent some time thinking. Still smiling, he focused his infinite blue stare into her eyes.

“What do you think?” As he spoke, he brought his hands closer to hers on top of the table.

Hugo cherished the sweet taste of the situation. He knew that any physical contact between them would drive her crazy.

Maya felt paralyzed. She had not anticipated the gesture. Almost like a robot, she let her hands fall

into her lap before Hugo could touch her. Now, her eyes showed a mix of disbelief, anger and contempt.

To play with other people's feelings was one of his typical traits. She could still not believe his coldness, as if the global disaster that had taken place had not affected him. It seemed as if he cared nothing about the situation of their planet. Maya was sure Hugo must have lost his family and friends, just like she and the rest of the survivors had. It was a miracle that both of them were alive, but he still showed no scruples and continued to be as selfish as ever.

After her abrupt movement, Hugo smile grew bigger.

"I really don't have a clue. With you, anything is possible," she answered without diverting her stare.

To control the conversation, Hugo understood that he had to drag it out as long as possible. It was the best way to get on her nerves.

“Come on! Don’t disappoint me! I’m sure you must entertain some theories.”

She did not doubt that. “I don’t believe that you just woke up this morning and realized that our cause is fair. You are here because you closed a deal with Gross. It must be a really good one because, otherwise, you would not have bothered. We both know you don’t care about anybody except yourself. You could go as far as to be a double agent. I believe that you might be passing information from the Resistance Movement to the Bios. That’s more like you.”

Hugo’s hands were still toying with his keys. “Hasn’t anybody ever told you that you have a vivid imagination? You must get really bored in this hole”, Hugo remarked.

At that very moment, somebody knocked faintly on the door. A head full of untidy short ringlets appeared at the threshold. “Hi Maya! Can I

talk to you for a second? Oh, hello Hugo!” Alex cried out.

The tracker reluctantly returned his greeting. “What’s up?”

Maya could not believe her eyes. “You know him?” She asked quietly after getting up and closer to Alex.

The face of her comrade was showing an expression both surprised and paternalistic. “But... who doesn’t know him? No merchandise moves in the sector without his getting a commission from it. I already told you thousands of times that you need to read the small print in the reports. That is where you can find the juiciest information. I cannot understand how you have not seen him. This guy is really popular.”

As always, Alex was informed about everything that happened in the center of sector 8. Maya had never met anybody as gossipy and devoted to the Resistance Movement. Her guess was that that

was the reason he was in charge of the Intelligence Department.

“I need to know what he has disclosed to you. I’m on the trail of a grain shipment that we should have captured few days ago, but it looks like it has disappeared into thin air”, he warned as he pushed her out of the room.

Feeling Maya’s gaze, he concluded. “So, he has not yet said a word! Well, then you have to get your act together and put the pressure on him. The Board is very impatient. They want to see results soon, you know, something colorful. I’ll see you later. Good luck!”

Surprisingly, when Maya entered the room again, she caught Hugo smoking. ‘I did not know that there were still cigarettes. It has been months since I’ve seen anybody smoking. How did you get them?’ she stated as she took her seat.

‘You can find anything if you know where to look’, Hugo answered, who could not resist the temptation to blow the smoke directly into her eyes.

Maya did not flinch. She concluded that the meeting was useless, as there was no chance of his telling her anything remotely interesting. To add to her worries, the meeting had seemed to go on forever. “Smoking is forbidden here”, she hastily claimed.

Hugo continued smoking. After a long pull, Maya saw him shake his head. “That’s impossible”, he replied, exhaling the smoke violently. “You just said that nobody smokes nowadays... how am I supposed to believe you can forbid something that nobody has done for so long? I will be happy to obey if you show me the rules.”

Maya felt trapped between the smoke and the crushing logic of the argument. She really needed to get out of there and get him out of her sight. “Look... you are here to give us information, so I

will appreciate if you don't waste my time. What can you tell me about the last grain order of the Bionauts? ", she asked impatiently.

He put out the cigarette and threw it on the floor. "All I can say is that the Bios are going to stuff themselves with bread and buns". He stood up without dropping his gaze. "I'm sorry, but that shipment has already been sent. I'm afraid there is nothing you can do to capture it."

Maya also stood up and closed the folder. "Is it possible that we are talking about one of your deals and you don't want to talk in order to protect your commission? According to our sources, the shipment has not been processed yet."

Hugo went to the only window in the room. As he thought, he looked through the crosspieces and saw dozens of bicycles parked in the back alley. "You are all wrong. The wheat was processed in sector 2 and the barley in sector 3. That was a couple of days ago. Products have been already been loaded

onto one of their shuttles. There is nothing that you can do about this one.”

When he turned, her head was slightly inclined to the right and her eyes seemed lost. Hugo could not help but laugh silently. He recognized the familiar expression she displayed when she concentrated on something.

“But the Bios always process their goods in the same sector in which they collect them”, he heard her saying. She was now biting the end of her pen whilst turning her eyes back at him. Maya had to admit that the conversation was turning out to be more interesting than she had anticipated.

Hugo leaned back on the window frame. Against the light, she noticed his tall and slender silhouette and was forced to move sideways to be able to look at him without half closing her eyes.

She did not have to wait long for his answer. “The Bios are starting to get tired of your constant sabotages, so they’ve decided to transport food

products to other sectors in order to process them. They intend to prevent losses that way. They are planning to do the same with the rest of their supplies.”

“How do you plan on infiltrating us into your organization?”, she asked. The light that came through the small window started to fade. The only bulb was automatically switched on. They both looked at the artificial light, orangish and irregular.

“If I am not mistaken, languages are your specialty”. Now Hugo spoke softly, almost whispering. “There are a lot of people pouring in from every corner of the continent, and it would be great if I could hire you as my interpreter. You know... to ensure the transparency of negotiations. Most of the dealers are impossible to understand, and it sometimes takes too long to close a deal. Nobody will suspect anything if you translate for me.”

Maya had to bow to his arguments, which sounded almost too convincing. She did not know

what kind of crooks Hugo hung around with, but she guessed they were probably dealers from the North and the East. Having spent years traveling in those regions, she was quite familiar with their languages and was sure she could manage the task. *Ironically, I left when we broke up. Thanks to him I traveled everywhere to meet other cultures and learn their ways. And that is precisely what has brought us to work together,* she thought.

Maya reluctantly brushed aside a stray lock of hair. Their eyes met again. “You haven’t told me what you get from helping us.”

He was still leaning against the window. Darkness engulfed the alley and faded into his shirt, jeans and black hair. His figure appeared to lose its contours. His only distinctive features were his pale face and the absolute coldness of his blue eyes.

Hugo muttered. “I’m helping you because I want the Resistance Movement to spare some of my

own shipments from sabotage. Why else would I do it?”

Silence arrived in the room. For a strange reason she felt relieved to realize that Hugo was still a crook. Some things never changed, even after all the misfortunes the planet has suffered. That absurd reasoning gave her back her self-confidence and, for a second, she stopped feeling intimidated by Hugo.

“Well... I think that that will be all. We will see you first thing tomorrow to work on the final details of the operation”. Maya walked to the door and showed him out.

Hugo came closer, with his hands in his pockets. At the door, he halted and looked at her for few seconds, as if waiting for something.

Facing her silence, he could not control himself and laughed subtly. “I just wanted to tell you that the role of offended ex-girlfriend suits you quite well. See you tomorrow!”

Angry and annoyed, she saw a presumptuous expression on his face just before he turned and walked away down the hall. Maya felt a sharp pain in the center of her chest and a knot in her stomach. At that very moment, she realized that her life had taken an unforeseen turn. She could only hold a sigh half way.

Will Hugo and Maya be able to work together?

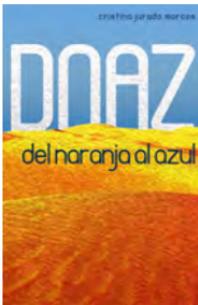
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