

Project Xerxes

Synopsis

EMRA is a Space Force Executive Officer on the colony world of Galileo whose life goal is to earn the command of her own cruiser, where she can fold across the stars in search of other human colonies who fled Earth from the Uu'nok 10,000 years ago during the Exodus.

That dream shatters when NIZ, a Master Sergeant in the Marines, body flips someone onto her tea and punches her Commanding Officer, sparking a reckless, pride-driven chase across the city that ultimately lands them both in jail. Niz's CO convinces the military police to release him, but Emra's stodgy CO folds out of the solar system without her, leaving her to rot in prison with no clue where her treasured career stands.

Finding herself without an assignment for the first time ever, Emra resets by engaging in her favorite climbing activity, only to be stalked up the remote mountain by the last person she wants to see. Niz explains that Galileo may have discovered a colony on planet Enigma. The Top-Secret project is codenamed Xerxes. He desperately wants to be the first person to greet a new colony. His rank was too high to qualify. He only assaulted her CO to obtain a demotion, and he now wants her help to ensure he's chosen. Before she can tell him how crazy he is, Niz suffers a grand mal seizure as a side effect of removing his body-function-regulating WetWare in preparation for the mission and is emergency airlifted to a hospital, but not before he invites Emra on a date.

Post-recovery, Emra attends the dinner date only to discover their wonderful hosts from a different colony world are Niz's surrogate family. She goes home in a huff, only to find Niz waiting for her the next morning, who says his seizure disqualified him from the project's candidate list. He apologizes for upsetting her by offering to help Emra recover her career instead of pursuing his own selfish goals. Touched, Emra defers her career, so they instead track down one of the three people who have the authority to put Niz back on the list, a dean at a university.

Even after hearing Niz's plea, the dean refuses, so Emra takes him to see her Admiral father in hopes that he can introduce Niz to the second Project Xerxes authority. After a difficult conversation, her father agrees to arrange the nigh-

impossible meeting, but it is unfortunately scheduled too far in the future to help Niz.

Their affection for each other blossoms into romance while they plot a way to speak to the third and final Project Xerxes authority, BRITTA, whose high social standing makes approaching her difficult. Emra scores an audience by volunteering to speak alongside her at a public event. Britta turns out to be more approachable than they'd feared. She identifies with Niz's single-minded determination and surprises them by catapulting him to the top of the candidate list.

Emra and Niz celebrate with a dinner between their two families. Their planned night of passion is interrupted by a message from Space Fleet requesting Emra's presence. When Erma wakes, Niz is gone with no explanation, which tears her apart. However, she is soon delighted to learn that she has been awarded command of a brand-new space cruiser, which is part of the reason her CO left her behind.

Emra later receives Britta and Niz on her own ship to transport them to Enigma. Niz apologizes for leaving her. After making him squirm, Emra forgives him, and they pick up where they left off, even knowing that his dangerous mission means it may be the last time she ever sees him.