

SOLITAIRE

Kelley Eskridge

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SO HERE SHE WAS, framed in the open double doors like a photograph: Jackal Segura on the worst day of her life, preparing to join the party. The room splayed wide before her, swollen with voices, music, human heat, and she thought perhaps this was a bad idea after all. But she was conscious of the picture she made, backlit in gold by the autumn afternoon sun, standing square, taking up space. A good entrance, casually dramatic. People were already noticing, smiling; *there's our Jackal being herself. There's our Hope*. It shamed her, now that she knew it was a lie.

She took a breath and stepped into the chaos of color and noise, conscious of her bare face. Most people had made some effort at a Halloween costume, even if only a few finger smears of paint along cheekbone or forehead. Enough to make them unrecognizable, alien. She had a vision of Ko Island full of monsters lurching to the beat that boomed like a kodo drum, so loud that she imagined the huge western windows bulging under the pressure, only a moment from jagged eruption. It could happen. There was always a breaking point.

But she should not be thinking about things breaking, about her life splintered like a bone that could never be set straight. She should wipe from her mind her mother's voice, thin and sharp, *They give you everything and you don't deserve it, you're no more*

a Hope than I am! She should stop wanting to split Donatella's head open for saying it. And she should not yearn to lay herself in her mother's lap and beg her *take it back, Mama, make it better* while Donatella stroked her hair. What good would it do? Her mother would only find a way to break her all over again.

Enough. She shook her head and braced herself against the jostle of bodies. Fuck Donatella. Jackal would cope. She would find a way to work it out. She was here, that was the first step: and somewhere in this confusion were the people she needed—her web mates, her peers among the second generation of Ko Corporation citizen-employees. Her web was the world. Her web was safety. She only had to brave the crowd long enough to find them.

She guessed they would stake out their usual space by the windows that faced the cliffs and the sea beyond. They would be drinking and laughing, expansive, expecting only what everyone expected: that the world turned, that business was good, that the company prospered and its people prospered with it, flowers in the sun of Ko. With Jackal as the tallest sunflower in the bunch. It was a ludicrous image, with her olive skin and dark eyes, but it was true. She was the one they looked to, the budding Hope of Ko. Every person of the company—the three hundred in the room, the four hundred thousand on the island, the two million around the world—watched their Hope with a mix of awe and possession, as if she were a marvelous new grain in the research garden, or the current stock valuation. They knew her latest aptitude scores and her taste for mango sorbet. They had opinions about her. They parsed her future at their dinner tables. Is she ready? Will she be a good Hope? Compelling questions for the past twenty-two years, gathering urgency now as Jackal approached her investiture. In just two months she would go to Al Iskandariyah, where the heart of the world government pumped, to stand with the other Hopes in the first breath of the new year, the shared second of their birth. At twenty-three, they would be of age in any society, legally entitled to take up their

symbolic place in the global administration. But what was the task? *You are the world builders*, the official letter from Earth Congress read. Jackal knew it by heart; she bet all the Hopes did, the thousands scattered around the planet who had been born in the first second of the first attempt to unify the world. *We honor you as the first citizens born into the new age of world coalition. You are the face of unity: the living symbol of our hope to be a global community with shared dreams and common goals.* That was who she was: the Hope of Ko. The Hope of the only commercial entity on the planet with its own home territory and almost-realized independence from its host nation, only a few negotiations away from becoming the first corporate-state in the new world order; the only commercial concern powerful enough to leverage its impact on world economy into inclusion in the Hope program that had, over the years, become an increasingly meaningful symbol of influence and power in the emerging Earth Congress and Earth Court.

“Coming through!” a man called as he bumped past her and splattered beer on her shirt. She bit down on the impulse to say something nasty; instead, she ducked her head and stepped back. The Hope must be always gracious. The Hope must show the best face of Ko.

She had been aware for most of her twenty-two years that she carried the future of the company in some way that was undefined, emblematic. She had tried to visualize it. She could see herself in Al Iskandariyah, living in a functionary’s apartment near the marketplace with its smells of boiled wool and incense and calamari fried in glass-green olive oil. She could imagine the cool hallways of the Green and Blue Houses of government. But she never pictured herself doing anything. What exactly was a Hope supposed to do? All she was being taught was what any manager at Ko might learn, albeit more quickly and with more personal attention from her trainers; there had to be more to being a Hope than that. She squeezed her eyes shut against the

frenzied loop playing in her brain: *no more a Hope no hope no hope—*

Breathe, she told herself. The music seemed louder, the air thicker with sweat and the smell of beer. A new track was playing, that song about fame, and she felt her lips pull back from her teeth. Easy; people were watching. She pulled her jacket tighter around her chest and managed a general nod to as many of them as she could. She had to find the web. Especially Snow. All she wanted right now was someone to be safe with. But maybe she would never be safe again, never safe, never—

“Jackal!” A hand on her arm. “Great, you’re here. Hey, they’re playing your song.” Tiger laughed at his own joke, and she made herself smile even though it was hard.

“Hey, Tiger.”

“Where’ve you been? Everybody’s asking for you. Come on, we’re over here. I’ll get you a drink.” Drawing her into the music and the laughter, his body warm from dancing, just a little too close. Another thing to deal with. Later, she thought. First a drink and some space to wind down. And Snow. I’ll deal with the rest of it later.

He led her to the back of the room, opening a path with a touch on one person’s shoulder, a gentle nudge of his hip to an enthusiastic dancer, a grin and a clever word for all of them as he cleared them from his way. The music battered at her; her heart took up the beat.

And there was the web, some dancing in the glow of the sea-refracted sun, some stuffed two to a chair, loud and laughing; a few at a corner table with a pitcher of beer, muttering over a project timeline. Business and life moving belly-to-belly. Ko might be structured along traditional lines of management, but it was sustained by the webs that cut across hierarchies and divisions, people focused on the company but loyal to one another. As familiar as family. Web mates liked or loved or despised each other, but regardless they made each other successful, and Ko thrived.

“Jackal!”

“Hey, Jackal.”

“Hey.” She was especially glad to see Bear and Turtle, both good friends, both solid and safe. She smiled, settling into a chair next to them. Bear blinked at her from behind his feathered half-mask, turquoise and scarlet, dramatic against his mahogany skin. “Where’s your costume? We should send you back home and make you change.”

“She came as an ordinary person,” Turtle said, leaning over to hug her. From someone else it might have been a nasty remark. Today, it hurt precisely because it was so earnest, so obviously well-meant. “*Feliz Vispera de Todos Los Santos*,” he said with a smile.

“She always looks like that,” Mist said. That wasn’t exactly nasty, just disapproving.

Tiger had come up beside her with a tall glass of something orange and cold. “Oh, lay off,” he said. Then, to Jackal, “Here, try this.”

“What is it?”

He gave her a look. “Try it. If you don’t like it, I’ll get you something else.”

She took a sip: lovely, cool orange juice with something warm and rich behind it. “Mmm,” she said, nodding. “Good.” She took another, larger swallow. “What is it?”

“Brandy and orange juice. My new favorite drink.”

“It’s revolting,” Mist said. Tiger rolled his eyes at Jackal. She raised her glass to him and drank down the rest in one breath, then wiped her arm across her mouth. Turtle chuckled.

“Well,” Tiger said. “You’d better have this one too.” He handed her his glass.

“Thanks.” Another deep swallow, until her stomach felt hard and full, and waves of heat started up her spine. The party rolled around her, music and laughter, people in motion. She wanted Snow. The others were talking over her; as far as she could tell,