



# Solitaire

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Convicted of a crime she did not commit, former Hope child Jackal serves a terrible solitary imprisonment sentence and is eventually abandoned in a strange country where other people like herself help her learn the truth about her imprisonment.

## **Solitaire Details**

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Author : Kelley Eskridge

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## From Reader Review Solitaire for online ebook

### Wealhtheow says

Reads a bit like a William Gibson novel. A young member of the intellectual corporate elite is sent to prison and learns to deal with a whole new set of problems. I wish the main character had used more of her social-manipulation whiles, but the author blew her load early in regards to those and let it drop after.

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### Daniel says

This sat on my shelf for awhile, and I'm so glad I got to it. Eskridge writes about identity and place in a near-future society and ties in the movement of governments and companies on a larger stage without resorting to the usual conspiracy theories and post-Matrix references. The book has a strong sense of compassion that got under my skin and made me think about what I was reading. In fact, I've since realized that I have, once again, fallen into the rut of reading mostly male authors. Since then, I've combed my to-read shelf and picked out female authors, in hopes of changing things up.

This is highly recommended to anyone who likes an intelligent read.

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### Ozsaur says

The world building in this book is some of the best I've ever read. So many details that show what this world is about, and who the characters are. Many lovely descriptions, too.

I also love the characters. Jackal is a character worth rooting for. At twenty-two, she is still so young, and has spent most of her life studying and working harder than most people twice her age. She is a Hope, a person born at the right time to symbolize the future. Her whole life changes when she is accused of an act of terrorism.

After that, the only option Jackal has is to re-invent herself.

I'm pretty sure I'll be thinking about this book again and again. It's not a forgettable book at all. A very thought provoking read, and satisfying read.

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### Lex Kent says

I ended up liking this more than I thought I would. As a fan of futuristic/sci-fi type books, and always looking for something different to read, this book caught my attention. Also, as a big fan of Nicola Griffith, reading a book written by her wife, also appealed to me.

I would say this book really has 3 parts. Part one, is of Jackal as the "Hope" of the newer world government. A role she has been training for her whole life. Part two, is after she becomes a "murderer" and is sentenced

to a virtual reality type solitary confinement for 8 years. Part three, is after she gets out of solitary. What is it like to be out in a world where she is vilified, and dealing with the aftereffects of being alone for so many simulated years.

I do want to make clear this is not an easy book to read. In fact I found the first part, tough to get through in places. It throws a lot of information at the reader about Jackal's life. The past and present, and what her role of being a "Hope" entails. For me, once the book got to part 2, Jackal in prison, is when the book really shined for me. A really good book to me, is when you get so immersed in it, that you don't pay any attention to what is going on around you. The hours of reading fly by, without you taking a break. The book is so well described that you can picture everything clearly in your mind, even better than watching a movie. This is what this book did for me. Eskridge, shines as a story teller, especially in the last two parts of this book.

I know for a lot of people, a romance can be an important part of reading lesfic. This book is not a romance. But Jackal is in love with her girlfriend, and we see how important that love really is as the book goes on.

This is not a happy, fluffy book. It is dark and tough to read in some places, but it really is a well written book. Very different than anything I have ever read. It made me think and feel, and I always appreciate a good book for doing that. I'm glad I read it and would not hesitate to read Eskridge in the future.

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### **Karen Witzler says**

Interesting world -- but it felt like YA fiction to me. The corporate aspects felt nauseatingly real.

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### **I. says**

tbh there's a huge chunk of the story missing: what happened on the day of the accident. Also what Hopes do! I also think it doesn't delve as deep as a book on solitary confinement should. But I liked it.

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### **Melissa says**

This seems almost like a young adult novel. I wanted some more time with Jackal's solitary confinement, since it's the crux of the book, but it lasts only 30 pages. As much as I don't care for the sequel, this almost should have one, if only to explore the world Jackal is in when she's released from prison; all the other "solos" and how they've been affected by their sentences.

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### **Brendan Diamond says**

There's literally nothing about this book that I don't love. From the incredible, memorable central character of Ren "Jackal" Segura, falsely imprisoned due to an accident with her "web" (a group of affiliated coworkers/peers/friends) and some politicians, to her girlfriend and support system Snow, from the enigmatic aw-shucks charm of Sully (an ex-con who helps Jackal get back on her feet) to the alluring and

terrifying Estar -- hell, even the short-lived tragic romantic Tiger gets his moment to shine.

This book has it all. It has a world-building opening section that outlines what happens when the corporate dystopia comes. It has a lyrical middle section that is as good as any in modern speculative fiction, describing complete isolation and what comes on the other side of the madness such isolation incurs. It shows what happens when one has to pick up the pieces, and it manages to all the while hold on to its humanity. It is, in summary, a perfect novel, one not made just for fans of science fiction but of character drama. It's part *Shawshank Redemption*, part *3001: The Final Odyssey*, and part *Continuum*, but it's all great. Every word in this book is amazing. Read it now. Read it twice. You won't regret it.

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### **eva says**

i think i made this book way more interesting for myself by skipping the synopsis on the back cover, which like most SF books totally gives the "what-if?" hook away. i had no idea what was going to happen in act II, and when it arrived i was shocked and impressed. so i guess if you haven't read the synopsis yet...don't!

i liked it for being a pretty unique coming-of-age story and character study. it was nice, in a SF book, to see a female protagonist in this role - especially one who isn't a hacker. i thought it was an astute depiction of a certain kind of geeky prodigy: gifted, unusually socially aware and apt in certain ways, but in other ways totally, eye-rollingly emotionally immature and lacking in common sense.

the secondary characters aren't much more than ciphers, which was frustrating at times - especially since there are so many of them, each one with their own little tangle that never gets entirely explained.

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### **SR says**

It's going to be really difficult to explain how much I love this and why but I do. It's incredible.

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### **Elaine Burnes says**

I like when a book leaves me altered and this one did. Wonderful. It was not without flaws. I thought the whole elevator bit was contrived, but in the end, I loved the characters so much, cared so much, worried so much for Jackel and Snow, that I forgive it any sins. I even started over again, with the intention of trying to better grasp the world, but didn't really care if all those pieces fit together neatly or not. I love stories that mess with the mind and time, and this does both very well. I wondered how she'd be able to convey eight years of solitary confinement and thought she handled that very well. I loved the third part where Jackel has to rebuild her life. That felt very real.

I also found this extremely accessible science fiction. You jump right in with no preliminary explanation of what time or place this is happening in and it worked for me. It's a near future--there are phones and bikes and cars, but also weird implants. I couldn't help but wonder if when it was written (first published in 2002) what inspired Eskridge. I assume it took a few years to write, so the fact that Ko reminded me of Halliburton and Steel Breeze (dumb name, frankly) of Al Qaeda was likely coincidental, but eerie.

And, this being the first full-length piece I've read by Eskridge, I didn't know if I could trust her to take care of the main characters (writers have been known to kill some off). Would Jackel really go mad? I worried about Snow on two levels: for her life, literally, and for her relationship with Jackel. The way things ended up was very satisfying for me.

That whole bit about how Jackel erased the things she cared about. Whew. And I LOVED Snow and her down-to-earth sensibility. Just when you think Jackel is getting a bit too precious, Snow comes in with, "Oh bullshit. I wasn't there. You didn't do anything to me." God, I love her. And thankfully Jackel is smart enough to recognize Snow's brilliance. (Oh, maybe that's where the name comes from!)

As the pages narrowed down, I didn't think she could pull off resolving everything I wanted resolved, but she did. No big action scenes, just talking, but it worked. Even minor characters were real characters. I liked Crighton immediately even though I was sure she was a scary bad guy. I loved Scully. Estar was just plain scary and I had a moment of yelling at Jackel, "Don't go there!"

Production fell apart. Some italics ended in the middle of a word and I couldn't figure out why they went on so long. Sometimes it began with a direct thought but then it didn't end. Or a foreign word and again didn't end. You wouldn't even have to be a proofreader to find those errors. Very annoying.

Edited to clarify: I read the Small Beer Press edition. Don't know why I have a review under the Eos paperback edition (I also own a first edition hardcover :)). I think I've fixed things.

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### **Dorene says**

I guard my sleep time determinedly. I understand I need 7-8 hours each night in order to function well and maintain my health. While I always read in bed for a couple of minutes before I turn out the light, I usually have a strict time limit for doing so. With "Solitaire" I threw my personal reading rules out the window. I read at stoplights, during work breaks, at my desk during lunch and LONG past my "lights out" deadline in bed.

Ren/Jackal was innocent, convicted, sentenced (to hell I might add), served and released. But she was innocent! The rest? Error, never ever once corrected. It might have been tacitly acknowledged, but not officially. How fucking real world is that? I kept expecting some mighty conspiracy to be uncovered, Ren forgiven and a massive public apology delivered as the true criminals were brought to justice. That's how it works in books, right? But instead only one person really maintains her faith in Ren/Jackal. Sure it's one person who really matters, Snow. But Snow faces a drastically altered Ren/Jackal too. There is no guarantee at the end of a happy ending. Just of a fresh start. Again, so real world.

But the riveting horror of the book is in Ren/Jackal's sentence. VR solitary confinement. How many of us could survive being stuck alone in our heads for YEARS? No books, no TV, no internet, no other people. Just the body you're in and the brain driving it. That exploration makes "Solitaire" so riveting. And horrifying. As Ren battled her crocodile, I could only imagine my own monsters. What they would like and how well I would perform in the face of them. How many of us really even see our demons? They appear briefly on the edges of our vision. In fear we snap on some music or video, open a book or seek out conversation with a stranger, banishing those demons time and again to the fringes. They're there, herding us through our lives, but rarely vanquished or even acknowledged. Ren found herself with no other recourse

than to finally turn and face her monster. And her victory gave her peace, she found within herself the ability and comfort to be alone and silent. Her escape from the VR cell to the uninhabited VR world allowed her to roam free and explore who she was without anybody else. That's powerful...but also isolating.

Ren can now be truly alone without fear, but the others who occupied her life before have no place in it. They were a part of her monster and excised with its vanquishing. The exercise of erasing all the other people and experiences in her life allows her to move forward into the next phase. But on returning to the real world, those blank images are harder to maintain. Snow reemerges, but their relationship must be built anew with the new Ren. And glimmers of others leak through, too, in the end.

I don't feel like Ren's story is completely through. On one hand, I hope for more from her. On the other, I'm not sure how any follow up to her story could live up to the power it's beginning hold for me.

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### **Maja says**

Oh man, this is a weird book to review because I'm only about 75% sure I fully understood what was happening in only about 25% of it?? It's written in a way that alternately feels very beautiful and very dense in a future that's never quite fully explained, and so much of it feels so foreign in ways that are alternately deliberately and, I think, unintentionally alienating. It was hard to get fully into it until The Thing happened because I barely understood what was going on, and then it was hard to get fully into it because it was SO DIFFICULT to read, and then it got a little easier to get into but I still wasn't sure what was going on?? Almost certainly one of the strangest books I've ever read, but... I think I liked it?

The setting is... weird, but intriguing? The style is occasionally really engaging and occasionally alienating (what was with the italics?). Ren/Jackal was a great heroine, and I LOVED her romance with Snow; it's nice to see a very solid lesbian relationship, and how the dynamics change as Jackal's life changes. I liked the hopeful note the story ended on. As hard as reading the VC bits was, I thought they were beautifully, heartwrenchingly, agonizingly well-written, absolutely stunning and almost too painful to bear. I'm glad that Jackal changed and learned and grew, and that she learned how to let Snow in despite that.

But honestly, it was on the whole too much for me. I tend to prefer my non-real-world settings explained a little more thoroughly, which this definitely didn't do, and the denser writing style made things difficult to follow. It was hard to pin down what was happening, and even the parts I liked best were SO rough to read, I can't recommend them wholeheartedly. A lot of Jackal's training on Ko was outright boring, and the Estar parts of the story were so strange and weirdly paced (it all went down so quickly!), and even the VC parts were-- like, how DID she get to Ko? The significance of that never really got explained either, and so much of the later story hinged on that. And I'm still not sure what was up with the italics!!, which really threw me. On the whole it was just... a lot, and the parts that grabbed me never went on for too long, and I'm still not even sure what the fuck I just read. There's definitely people I would recommend this to, but I doubt I'll ever revisit it.

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### **David - proud Gleeman in Branwen's adventuring party says**

*At times, Solitaire is a fascinating read! Sadly, at other times, reading this book is about as exciting as...well...playing a game of solitaire!*

In the not-too-distant future, world peace has finally been achieved. As a symbol of this new era, all children born on the first second of the first attempt to unify the world have been designated "Hopes". Now the Hopes are entering adulthood, ready to take their place as figureheads for the global administration. The Hope of the world's only recognized corporate-state is Ren "Jackal" Segura. However, when Ren is blamed for a terrible tragedy, the Ko Corporation, her very homeland, severs all ties with her. Taken away from her lover, her family, and all her friends, Ren participates in an experimental virtual reality form of solitary confinement, where she will be made to spend eight years trapped in her own mind, with no contact at all from the outside world.

***When we are left all alone, is that when we find out who we truly are?***

*Solitaire* is one of those most heartbreakingly beautiful novels, one that could have been so much better than it ultimately was. This was Kelley Eskridge's first novel, and the first half of the book was very promising. In it, we are introduced to Ren, her eclectic group of friends (whom she refers to as her "webmates"), her dysfunctional family, and her charismatic lover known as Snow. I found many of the characters to be engaging and wanted to keep reading more about them (even if the immensely likeable Snow did have a tendency to overshadow the grumpier Ren). Eskridge's greatest feat while writing this book was the beautiful romance she developed between Ren and her girlfriend Snow. Whereas other writers often fall into pitfalls involving "insta-love" and the so overused "love-triangles", Eskridge avoids all this by having Ren & Snow already be a couple at the beginning of the book, so we get to experience their strong emotional bond from the start. It's no accident that most of the book's most powerful and beautiful moments involve Ren and Snow.

While Eskridge does a marvelous job crafting her characters at the beginning, her inexperience as a writer does show at times. For one thing, Ren's webmates are always referred to by their code names, and since Eskridge almost never bothers to describe the secondary characters, not even by gender, it's difficult to draft a mental picture of them. Later, when Eskridge starts referring to them by gender pronouns rather than names, it can get confusing knowing who she's even referring to. Adding to the confusion factor is that Eskridge sometimes jumps back and forth between flashback sequences and present-time without any real transitioning. Also, several scenes in early chapters take place in boardroom type settings, and they're about as thrilling as real-life board meetings...

*I almost referred to this as a "bored room meeting", just to see if I could actually hear some of you groaning overseas!*

After a couple big plot twists, Ren finds herself in solitary confinement, and while I was afraid things might get dull here, it was this part of the book where Eskridge proved just how talented she truly is! The solitary confinement section gives us brilliant psychological insight into Ren. Ren's internal struggle to preserve her sanity is both heartbreakingly beautiful and mesmerizing, and it is here that we get a clear picture as to how brilliant and capable Ren really is. Indeed, by the time I got to the book's halfway point, I was convinced I wouldn't be giving it any less than 4 stars...

...and then there's the second half... \*SIGH\*

The second half of the book concerns Ren trying to rebuild her life after her solitary confinement period. No longer welcome by the Ko Corporation, Ren is exiled to North America (now known as the Nations of North America, or the NNA). Unfortunately, Ren's experiences in the NNA are not nearly as interesting as everything that transpired previously. Ren soon stumbles upon a bar named "Solitaire" which attracts former prisoners of the same solitary confinement experiment that Ren participated in. The ex-cons are referred to by the locals as "solos", and they are idolized by fans who call themselves "watchers". You would think a

setting like Solitaire would have the potential for many exciting events, but unfortunately most of the characters introduced here are simply dull. The watchers are defined almost entirely by their codependency on the solos, which leaves them with very little personality or spark of their own. The solos aren't much better...bartender Scully possesses very little charisma and may as well have just been named "MacGuffin", while the psychotic Lady Butcher constantly alludes to her supposedly-impressive body count, yet usually only manages to kill my interest in the story...

Lady Butcher presents another big problem in the second half...it makes us wonder what happened to the brilliant girl from the first half of the book! Despite the fact that Lady Butcher is a known murderer (*and doesn't seem at all sorry about it*), Ren still maintains a friendship with her! Even Scully warns Ren to stay away from Butcher, but Ren insists on placing herself in potential danger from the unrepentant Lady Butcher, to the point that it almost becomes a parody! Remember those camp councilors from the Friday the 13th movies who would stop to smoke pot and have sex while an ax murderer was chasing them?!? Even they display better decision-making skills than Ren does in the second half of the book!

*The person filming Jason while being killed by him still has better survival instincts than Ren Segura!*

The book continues to limp towards the not-so-grand finale at a plodding pace. I kept waiting for some big reveal or startling twist, but the book meanders into a disappointing anti-climax instead. Even the ending felt completely unsatisfying, with me simply muttering, *"That's it?!?"* And, finally, one of the biggest problems I had with the book was its flawed premise. I can't get too specific without revealing major spoilers, suffice to say that there is no real compelling reason given for Ren's willingness to accept complete blame for the tragedy that leads to her arrest. Yes, an explanation is given as to Ren's cooperation, but it is so flimsy, it's hard to suspend disbelief enough to accept that Ren would go along with all this. I refer to this kind of situation as "**The Dollhouse Fallacy**", referring to Joss Whedon's short-lived "Dollhouse" series, which involved operatives of a secret organization having their memories constantly altered to meet the needs of their clients. While it was an intriguing concept, the biggest problem with the show (and with "Solitaire") is that the premise just didn't make a whole lot of sense under scrutiny. When a man's daughter was kidnapped in the pilot episode, why did he hire the Dollhouse to download the memories of a kidnapping expert into the mind of their operative Echo, instead of going to, gee, I don't know, the freakin' police or even the FBI?!?

*Tonight's episode of Dollhouse - Echo downloads the brain activity of the network executive who cancelled Firefly...only to learn that his mind was completely blank (which surprises no one)!*

So, ultimately, I'm giving this book three stars, which is really four stars for the thrilling first half and two stars for the disappointing second half. I still encourage science fiction fans to check this one out, as the solitary confinement chapters alone make this book worth reading, and romance lovers will find a lot of enjoyment from the sweet Ren/Snow relationship. Even if it stumbled towards the finish line, I'm still glad I read *"Solitaire"*.

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### **Angie says**

Ren "Jackal" Segura is the Hope of Ko, and honestly I'm still not sure what that exactly means, but what I gathered is that Jackal has been set apart from birth and has been provided a sort of celebrity status, special training, and special treatment. Expectations are grand and it's stressful for her, but she's up for the challenge. She wants to do well--for her and for Ko. And then everything goes to hell.. She's convicted of a crime she didn't commit, and in her conviction, she's stripped of her Hope status, expelled from Ko, and sent to prison,

where she undergoes a virtual reality solitary confinement for what feels like 6 years.

Basically, this book is everything I try to avoid, but I read it (for reasons) and I liked it way more than I expected I would.

The story is broken into three parts:

1. Jackal's life in Ko and training to be the Hope
2. Jackal's sentence
3. Jackal's life after her solitary confinement

I had a really hard time getting into this book and trying to figure out the world building that was happening and, I mean, I still don't quite understand what it means to be a Hope. It was a chore to read and I forced my way to get through, and I'm glad I did. Jackal is likable; her girlfriend, Snow, even more so, but everything else was hard to figure out: the relationship to her webmates, her relationship with her parents, how Ko operated.

Everything picks up after the crime. Jackal's solitary confinement is fascinating, and thankfully didn't drag on. And then she's completed her sentence, and she tries to figure out what happened to her, how not to become a guinea pig in some government science experiment, and how to go on living her life now that everything is gone.

The ending was mostly satisfying, but I was left with questions unanswered, but it was Jackal I was most interested in, along with Snow and their relationship, and she seemed to get an ending that was good for her.

**A note for those interested in the f-f aspect of this book:** This isn't a romance, per se. The story doesn't revolve around Jackal's relationship with Snow, but it does play a big part. And I love a cute romance more than anyone, but it was quite refreshing to have a queer heroine whose relationship was completely normalized and not the story's central focus.

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### Sana says

Solitaire by Kelly Eskridge was, in my opinion and okay novel with a great concept. The concept was really interesting, really very interesting. I don't know how this happened with a book set in the future, in a new world order, regarding virtual confinement, but it was boring. I don't know how you make mass manslaughter boring, but, it was. The first part of the book is basically about this new world order, and the main character, Jackal's role in it. She is a main political player by birthright in this new world, specializing in project managing. I found this part of the book to be interesting, but really confusing. If you are going to the trouble of creating a new world order, go into detail. I am still confused about what a web is. I just didn't get it.

The next part is when Jackal finds out she never really had the birthright, freaks out, accidentally kills four hundred people, and is accused of working with a terrorist group. This part had too much emotional fluff for my taste.

The next part was Jackal's trial, and her choice to go to virtual confinement (VC). I really disliked the portion of the book devoted to Jackal's confinement. It was emotional and boring, and all around weird. I think that is because my image of virtual confinement is quite a bit different. Also, I would have been a lot more interested in the science of all of this. At least some peak into the kind of technology that would be used. I thought that the book was really vague in that sense, and I disliked that.

The next part was about Jackal coming out of VC, and assimilating into this sub-culture of exotic 'solos' I thought it was really cool at first. How Jackal gets back out there, tries to find a job. I also thought the way the sub-culture worked was very original, and interesting to think about. But after a while the hipster, exotic convict, sub-culture got old. Also, some of the events did not really make sense to me personally.

Then, when Snow (Jackal's girlfriend from before VC) comes back it got to sappy. It stopped being logical. I feel that for something set in the future, emotions played to large of a role. I really wanted technology, culture, politics, and history to be explained. Instead we just focused on the ups and downs of one ex-Hope. One strange thing I just happened to notice was that emotions and gestures were exaggerated. Any movement a character made seemed to be specifically outlined. This might be because Jackal was noticing all of this because of being in solitary confinement for so long. This novel is becoming a movie. I think that would be the best course of action for this. I think that would speed up the pace, as well as make the climactic parts of the book more dramatic.

I didn't particularly enjoy this book, and would not recommend it. At the same time I really liked the concept, and know that I would enjoy seeing a movie based on this concept.

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### **Kevin Smythe says**

Amazing story of self-discovery. Light, near-future, believable sci-fi. Meaningful, important issues addressed without being heavy-handed. Definitely a page-turner - I gave up some sleep to keep going in this one.

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### **Catherine says**

A beautifully written book whose characters never really came to life for me. I found it an interesting read, but not a compelling one. I suspect that it makes a better film because the actors would fill in the emotions that I'm not really getting from the text. I look forward to seeing "Other Life" and comparing it. That said, if you're looking for more cyberpunk with queer female protagonists, this is one you should probably add to your list.

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### **Althea Ann says**

I picked up this book in a bargain bin because it looked interesting. Beginning to read it, I thought, "wow, stylistically, this book reminds me A LOT of Nicola Griffith" (an author I particularly like). Next time I picked it up, I noticed the dedication: "to Nicola, my sunshine." I looked it up and yep, Kelley Eskridge is Nicola Griffith's partner; they met at a Clarion workshop. Whether or not proximity has influence on style, this is an amazing book.

Ren Segura, a young woman who calls herself Jackal, has had a privileged life. Born at just the right second, in one of the world's largest corporations, she has been designated a 'Hope' - a celebrity, and an example of what is to be a brilliant new era for the world. It's a good life - but a lot to live up to - especially when her jealous mother reveals that her claim to fame is a sham - she wasn't really born at exactly that time. Under a lot of emotional stress, Jackal is then, unluckily, involved in a horrible accident, and comes under media suspicion of actually being a violent terrorist. Convinced by her corporation to plead guilty, her fall is complete - and she is pressured to sign up for a new sort of criminal punishment. Rather than spending 40 years in jail, she will serve out her sentence in an electronically induced state which makes her feel like she

is spending time in solitary confinement - allowing her to go free only a short time later - but with unknown psychological consequences.

Great characters, interesting situations and a satisfying conclusion... I'm putting this down as one of the best of this year.

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### **Jamie says**

sci-fi. i read this sometime last summer and it took me this long to recall title/author. dark-ish but i really am curious about her further adventures. i'm a sucker for the look and feel of future civilizations.

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