

Forever, Shattered by Katie Krom

On their first Valentine's Day as a couple, Lia's boyfriend gave her his soul in a jar.

The jar was one of those jars that all the single, crafty, thirty-something year old women buy from Michael's craft store, just a few inches tall: clear glass with metal top sprayed pretend gold but really is only aluminum and an engraved logo that the weak sunlight can't reveal. Inside it was a floating pea sized lump of blue-gray *something*, like a watery gooey combination of unset Jell-O and the stuff inside those plastic toys that Lia always saw in the aquarium gift shop, those ones that you turn over and drop little balls of gel down a plastic race track and watch them fall and collect at the bottom before you turn it over again and again until you realized that you wasted ten minutes on a pointless toy. Lia had always wanted one, but every time she went her mother had steered her and her younger brother and sister out of the place without buying anything. Anyway, the stuff in the jar, Jason's *soul*, reminded her of that. She told him that and he laughed boundlessly, tenderly, pressing his forehead against her temple. They stayed there for a moment, just breathing and letting the companionable silence float in the space between them while their two hearts beat in sync.

"Yeah, I guess it does," he told her, pulling her closer, right arm around her waist, under her sweatshirt, which was really his, but she had "borrowed" it from him last week and she fell in love with it too much to give it back. Actually it wasn't so much the jacket that she fell in love with as it was the boy who once tucked it warmly around her shoulders and threaded her tangled hair from the collar and kissed her like she was made of stardust and moonbeams and-

Yeah, she was in love all right.

"Are you sure, Jase? I don't know how all this works but I know-"

“I know, Lia. I know. I know we’re moving quickly, but I also know that I love you more than I think I’ve loved anyone before. If you’re ready for this, I want you to have it.” Jason brought his free hand up to her face, cupping her warm cheek to bring his girlfriend into a kiss that still, even after all they’ve done it, still managed to bring a swarm of giddy butterflies to her chest.

“I do really want this, you know,” Lia reassured him once she had remastered her mind. “I do, I promise you. It’s just-”

“New.”

“Yeah, something like that. I mean, I’ve never done anything like this before. What if I mess things up?” Lia kept her eyes firmly on her hands, picking at the chipped pink polish on her thumbnail, trying desperately not to meet her boyfriend’s eyes, because she knew that if she looked up and saw the fond look on his face, she’d be a lost soul forever, wandering joyously through a sea of blue and promises of forever.

“Lia, my love, I don’t think you could mess up anything if you tried.”

To make sure she didn’t lose her new treasure, Lia made a tiny loop on top and threaded an old necklace chain through it, and she wore it every day along with the golden heart necklace Jason mentioned that he liked once.

The jar on the chain drew her a lot of attention, not that she tried to hide it. All her friends in her first-period class joked with her about it, teasing her like all good friends did, but she knew it was just because they were happy to see her this happy. And if it drew weird looks from strangers in the hallway, she didn’t see them. On prom night the blue of the soul inside matched

her dress beautifully, sparkling in the low evening light like fireflies. A month later, as sweet spring sunshine and the face of the boy she loved a few seats down called her mind away from eons-long graduation speeches, she cupped the little jar in her hand and swore that she would hold onto it forever.

Four years. Four years Lia and Jason spent apart. They weren't apart all the time, of course. They saw each other when Jason came back home for Christmas break, and in between, every month or so, Lia would take the train up to see him at school, and they'd spend the weekend together, a small breath of warmth that made the weeks in between a little more bearable.

She still wore the chain with the jar around her neck, the little blue soul inside still flickering on, but her new roommates didn't get it like her old friends had. "Your boyfriend gave you his soul? Why'd he do that?" they'd ask her.

"Because he's just sweet like that," she'd say back, and they'd let it drop after that once they saw the dreamy faraway look in her eyes.

"It is sweet, Lia, and we're happy for you," one of them said. Of all Lia's new college friends, she was the only one who 'got' her and Jason and didn't think they were destined to fall out of love just because they were long distance.

It was April of her senior year of college, and there were only thirty-three days until she and Jason could be together forever. It was nine twenty-four at night, and Lia was pacing the biology lab, as was her habit on Tuesday and Thursday nights, when it was her turn to monitor the experiments. Her bubblegum pink sneakers squeaked every time she turned a lap, around and around the lab tables. Once, as she passed the full-length window, she paused for a moment,

staring out into the still quiet of night. “Only one more month, Jase. Then we’re together forever,” she said aloud, even though there was no one to hear it..

She thumbed the golden heart necklace around her neck where it had gotten tangled with the soul-jar chain, which always happened when she wore the two together, but she still insisted on wearing them both anyway. And it was calming, in a way, to have something to keep her hands busy with on these long nights, especially when that something reminded her of Jason.

Just as she was about to begin her pacing again, one of the machines across the lab began to trill fiery and furiously. She tensed, still a little disoriented from her daydreaming. She couldn’t, wouldn’t, let this last experiment, the most important one of all, get messed up on her watch. “I’m coming, I’m coming,” she promised aloud to no one in particular, and rushed over to the insistent device.

In her hurry, combined with her typical graceless manner, Lia somehow managed to trip over her own shoes, which happened at least once a day despite her best efforts. She stumbled, catching her side on the black-topped lab counter, her flailing elbow narrowly missing the mess of flasks and beakers that her idiot labmate had left out, which she always told him not to do for exactly this reason. Then, as it often does under these unfortunate circumstances, gravity took over. And next thing she knew, she was throwing out her hands to break her fall, forgetting for a moment that the one still held the precious jar tightly to her chest.

The moment her hands and knees hit the ground, the chain snapped, little silver links scattering like leaves blown through the air, and the tiny jar with them, spiraling so slowly and so softly that Lia thought, for a moment, that maybe no damage would be done.

How could she have been so foolish as to hope? She was a scientist, she should have known what would happen. She should have known what would happen when a glass object

meets a hard tile floor, that hope, no matter how strong, cannot counteract nature. Because when that tiny jar hit the floor, it shattered. Like a supernova. Like a dying star, like a whole galaxy of promises unraveling in a moment.

“It’s fine, Lia.”

“Fine? No, Jase, this is the exact opposite of fine.” Lia ran her fingers through her hair, only just resisting the urge to pull on it in stress. “Your soul literally just disappeared into thin air; how on earth are you this calm right now?”

“Because what’s the alternative? Panic? That won’t do us any good. Look, I don’t know what’s going to happen, but this won’t change anything between us, I promise.”

“Promise?” She looped the pinky of her free hand through the air, and if she concentrated, she could almost feel the warmth of his tangling with hers, despite the distance between them.

“Promise. Nothing’s going to take our forever away. Not if I can help it.”

“C’mon Jase, where are you?” She tapped the screen of her phone, glancing quickly down at it before returning her gaze to the automatic doors to the building in front of her. Even though she was a bit far back in the parking lot, she still should have been able to see him by now. Last he told her, his train would be in by eleven, and currently the time was eleven-twenty on the dot. “It’s not like you to be late.”

Just when she was about to call him for herself and find out what the holdup was, her phone rang. It wasn’t Jason though. It was his mother, which was weird considering that last time she checked, she didn’t even have her number. Lia answered.

The call only lasted a few minutes. Only one word stood out:

Dead.

Jason was dead.