



radioactive

A SHORT STORY BY
Kay-L Moody

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Tavia left the confines of her closet-like bunkroom to enter the hallway of the electricity plant where she worked. Most people loved the idea of sleeping in the same place they worked, but to her, it felt like a prison. Iron Plant Electric, IPE for short, wasn't ideal, but it did have its bright spots.

She glanced down the narrow hallway and right on cue, Elson came into view. His broad shoulders bounced at the sight of her. A smile beamed off his lips when he made eye contact. At her side only a moment later, he ran his fingers over the thick braid trailing down her back.

“Here’s your portion,” he said, handing her a meal bar.

“Where’s yours?” she asked.

His eyes fell to the ground as he scratched his nose. “I already ate it.”

Of course he wouldn’t admit to anything else. At least not too loud. Meals were strictly controlled by IPE and giving portions away meant a dock in pay. She hooked her arm around his elbow and lowered her voice to a whisper. “You gave it away, didn’t you?”

“Of course not,” he said with a laugh. “We’re lucky to have our meals perfectly portioned by IPE. It’s all regulated and prepared ahead of time. We never have to worry about food again.”

He ended in a louder voice than he started, eager for someone else to hear. But the hall remained as empty as it started. Soon they entered a supply closet, which was not only empty, but also void of security cameras. Once inside, she asked, “Who’d you give it to?”

He checked that the door was shut before lowering his voice to a whisper. “Gage,” he said. “He was starving after getting his portion taken away last night. Just because he came in half an inch short on his quota,” Gage finished by shaking his head.

Without a second thought, Tavia broke her meal bar in half and shoved one half into Elson’s hand. He tried to protest, but she turned away and grabbed her protection suit. The thick fabric felt like stiffened gel, but still flexible enough to stretch. She pulled it over her shoes and up the rest of her body. Soon the suit covered every inch of her skin from her neck down to her toes. It still felt weird, but at least it offered protection from the radiation on Earth’s surface.

She ran her suited fingers over her braid, making sure every hair curved neatly in place. When finished, she took a bite from

her meal bar. As always, its chalky texture lingered on the back of her tongue in an unpleasant clump.

Ever since the Fallout, food never tasted all that great. Now that Earth's surface was radioactive, all food had to be grown underground in fake greenhouses with simulated suns. It would be four generations before humans could live on Earth's surface again.

"Thanks, Tavia," Elson said as he popped the rest of the meal bar into his mouth. He pulled her into an unexpected embrace and warmth spread through her.

This.

This was the reason she could make it through each day. Earth was radioactive, people lived underground, and their meals were controlled by a company that was more prison warden than employer. But at least Elson was here. At least she has someone to share this stupid life with.

He kept one arm around her as he opened the door. "We better hurry," he said. "Gage wants to get out early today so he doesn't fall short on quota again."

She nodded and wrapped an arm around Elson's waist. They headed for the hover pods that would fly them out from underground and up to Earth's surface.

Harvesting radioactive moss from an overgrown forest wasn't the safest job in the world, but it was the best an eighteen year old high school dropout like Tavia could hope for. So, she tried not to complain.

"I have big plans for us tonight," Elson said.

She stared up at him through her eyelashes with a barely audible snicker. "Is it as big as the time you served me my regular meal bar but with candlelight?"

His cheeks turned pink. "You said you liked that."

“I did,” she said, and it wasn’t a lie. It was one of their earliest dates and the chalky meal bar had never tasted so good.

“Are you two flirting again?” Nora, a fellow employee, said from behind them. She whipped her tight, black curls up with a scarf before snagging a gas mask from the nearby shelf.

“Of course they are,” Gage said as he pushed past them both. “But flirting is a distraction. If you get attacked by mercenaries because of it, you’ll put us all in danger.”

“Oh come on,” Elson said with a scoff. “We’re not that stupid. I’m allowed to flirt with my girlfriend, so quit whining about it.”

In an instant, Tavia’s shoulders stiffened as every muscle in her body tensed. Elson seemed oblivious, partly because she grabbed her holo pendant a moment later. The heavy black pendant hung from a chain around her neck. When she hit the power button, one new note popped up. From Zara.

If you’re going to the forest today, stay to the southeast. The mercenaries have been mostly in the northwest. As always, message me if you need backup.

Zara’s notes were always helpful. Tavia hit the power button before Elson could look over her shoulder and see the note. Grabbing her own gas mask, she ducked into the hover pod and sat back in her seat, trying to figure out how she could convince them to go southeast in the fewest number of words possible. And more importantly, without giving away that she had an outside source.

“Are we going south again today?” she asked as everyone else piled into the hover pod.

“Yep,” Gage said, typing the directions into the control panel. “Southwest.”

Tavia bit her lip, but didn't protest. Maybe southwest would be okay.

"We went southwest yesterday," Nora said with a groan. "Why don't we go southeast?"

Tavia almost jumped in to agree, but that would require more talking, which wasn't her favorite thing. Besides, agreeing with Nora was unnecessary. Nora would win the argument. She always did. This way, they would go southeast like she wanted, plus she could sit back and do what she did best. Keep quiet.

Nora and Gage's voices got louder as the hover pod rose from the ground and up to the surface.

"Who was that message from?" Elson asked.

Tavia's muscles tightened again. She whipped her knees away from him with arms folded over her chest. "You said *girlfriend*. We go on dates with each other, but let's not label it."

Elson rolled his eyes as he let out a sigh. "Really?" he asked. "We're still doing this after three months?" His jaw flexed into an expression just short of a sneer. "Are you going on dates with other guys besides me?"

"No," she said, grateful that Nora and Gage were still arguing loudly with each other.

He turned toward her with only the smallest hint of fear in his eyes. "Do you *want* to go out with other guys?"

"No." she said. Of course she didn't. They had talked about this repeatedly.

With a final flex of the jaw, he asked, "Do you want to keep dating me and only me?"

"Yes," she said in a tiny voice.

He let out an exasperated sigh as he ran a hand through the short, stiff hairs on top of his head. “Then why can’t I call you my girlfriend?”

She swallowed as she stared back. She hated making him sad, but she wasn’t going to budge on this no matter how much pain danced behind his eyes. What was the use explaining when he’d never understand anyway?

“Sounds like your girlfriend is as radioactive as the forest we’re about to enter,” Nora said with a snicker.

When had they stopped arguing?

Gage snorted, trying to hold back the bubbles of laughter in his throat. That only made Tavia sink back farther into her seat. The last thing she wanted was to lose Elson. But how could she stand her ground when everyone seemed to agree with him?

Elson glared at Nora and Gage and started to turn away from all of them. Even her. At the last second, he shifted and scooped up Tavia’s hand into his own.

She knew he was still angry, and maybe he had a right to be. But at least he remembered to follow their rule. They could be mad, but they had to be mad together, not apart.



Tavia pulled the gas mask over her mouth, making sure the gel-like fabric surrounding it covered the skin on her face. Once everything in was in place, the only exposed part of her body was her thick brown braid hanging down to her waist. Every hair still neatly in place.

Once everyone had their gas masks in place, Gage opened the door to the hover pod. The radioactive forest always took

Tavia's breath away. The trees glowed blue with streams of sunlight escaping the branches. A blue shadow cast through the air making everything a lot prettier than it should have been considering it could kill anyone without a protective suit in seconds.

She pulled a knife from her backpack and marched to the nearest tree. The thick moss spread over every inch of the trunk, and best of all, glowed the brightest blue she had ever seen. That was her assignment this week. Collect three feet by three feet of the brightest glowing moss every day. Elson had the same assignment, but Gage needed the wispy moss and Nora needed the extra thick moss.

IPE used the glowing moss to convert radiation into energy. They sold off the wispy and thick moss to other companies who then used it for all kinds of purposes. The glowing moss wasn't always easy to find, but this particular patch of the forest was like a gold mine. She stuck her knife under the moss until she could pull it away from the trunk. When she had a several inches peeled off, she rolled it up and stored it in her backpack.

Now, on to the next spot.

"Can we please talk about how awful that flute playing was last night?" Nora said as she cut a portion of moss away from a nearby tree.

"OH MAN!" Gage said as he doubled over in laughter. "It was so bad last night. I mean, it's usually bad, but I swear it sounded like someone was wearing pots and pans and falling down the stairs. Loudly."

Nora chortled, but Elson only frowned. “It’s not that bad,” he said. “You shouldn’t make fun of it when you don’t even know who it is.”

“Trust me,” Nora said, scraping the last bits of moss from the tree trunk. “Whoever it is knows he’s bad. The only person who could like it is the guy’s mother.”

“No,” Gage said, gripping his knee as peals of laughter escaped him. “I bet his mother hates it too. If his mother heard it, she’d probably sell him off to the sweat shops.”

Elson twirled around and seized Gage’s shoulder. “That’s not funny,” Elson said. “Some parents really do sell their kids to sweat shops and it’s disgusting. Don’t joke about it.”

Gage’s face fell as he pulled away. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

They worked in silence for a few minutes, but at last, Nora was brave enough to break it. “Can I take the hover pod down a few miles? This moss isn’t thick enough for my quota, but I saw some yesterday that will be perfect.”

“You’re not taking the hover pod when mercenaries are roaming the forest,” Gage said as he knitted his eyebrows together. “What if we get attacked? We’ll have no way to get back to the plant.”

Rolling her eyes, Nora said, “Come with me then. It will take less than an hour.”

Gage considered for a moment, then nodded. As he marched toward the hover pod, he asked, “You two coming?”

Tavia waved her hand through the air, shoos them away. She had just found another brightly glowing patch of moss and wasn’t ready to walk away from it.

“I’ll stay with Tavia,” Elson said. “Just be back in an hour.”

Elson found a tree next to hers while the others flew away. She shoved her knife across a tricky spot, careful to cut the backside of the moss, but not through it.

“How much do you think they get?” she asked quietly. “When a parent sells their kid to the sweat shops?”

“Ugh,” Elson said as a shiver ran from his shoulders down to his knees. “I don’t want to think about that. Can you even imagine? What kind of a parent could *sell* their child?”

Tavia curled her sheet of moss into a tight roll. “Your parents never would have. They love you, right?”

He pulled away from his tree to stare at her. “Yes,” he said, though his eyes narrowed as he said it. “And yours loved you before they died, right?” His desire for an answer was almost tangible.

The best response she could muster was a half shrug and a sort of smile. She turned her attention to the tree in front of her and started sawing off the moss with an increased intensity.

“Tell me about them,” Elson said. His attention was nowhere near the tree or the moss or any part of the forest. He looked into her eyes as if nothing else existed in the world.

She gulped and turned her head away. “Will you please stop calling me your girlfriend?”

His jaw clenched as he shoved the blade of his knife into the tree bark, giving up all pretense of work. “Why?”

Her eyes fell to the dirt covered ground sprinkled with glowing blades of grass. “I hate it,” she said.

“But *why*?” he asked. He shook his hands through the air with each syllable as if to make his point.

She turned away from him and hugged her arms in front of herself. “I thought I was enough for you,” she said. “Why do we need a label?”

Elson let out an exasperated sigh as he slammed a fist against the tree in front of him. He took several breaths, but finally relaxed. He walked over to her and all the stiffness in his muscles seemed to have melted away. “It’s not about the label,” he said. “I won’t call you my girlfriend if you don’t want, but that doesn’t make the issue go away. I want to be a part of your life.”

“You are a part of my life,” she said, grabbing his forearm, hoping to make peace. “We see each other every day.”

He let out a sigh while his lips fell into a frown. “And yet, I hardly know anything about you.”

She pursed her lips into a tight line and jerked her head away. “You know more about me than anyone else does. We spend lots of time together. Why do you need more than that?”

He came closer and she was instantly at odds with herself. One part wanted to slide into his arms and let him be everything he wanted to be. But the other part held her back. Even with him so close, she had to stay in control. She had to keep her distance.

He reached out to her, but by the time his hand found hers, her muscles had tightened and her blood felt cold as ice.

With a grimace, he said, “Every time I start to learn something personal about you, you put up a wall. You never let me in. Spending time with you is amazing. Dating you is amazing. I like you a lot, but I want to *love* you. How can I do that when you won’t let me in?”

Was it worse that he knew what she was doing or was it worse that she'd never stop? Maybe if she wanted Elson, she would have to open up.

Before she could contemplate any further, a whip cracked through the air. Elson threw his body in front of her as a blue-suited mercenary came into view, cracking his whip again.



The mercenary's gas mask had a cruder design than theirs. It was built to circulate air, but not vocals, which meant they couldn't hear him even if he tried to talk. Yet, even through the mask, his eyes communicated one thing: *Give me your moss or die.*

Giving moss to a mercenary in exchange for life seemed like a good trade on the outside. But if Tavia came back to IPE under quota, she'd lose food portions or could get fired if the manager was angry enough. She knew better than to take that chance.

"Back off!" Elson shouted. "You're not getting our moss or knives or gas masks or anything. Just move along and we won't have any trouble."

The mercenary ran his eyes over both of them, as if sizing them up. He seemed to think Tavia would be an easier target. He lunged for her, but Elson threw himself in front of her to protect her from harm.

Elson's willingness to protect her sent a ripple of guilt through her. If he'd risk his life for her, was there anything he wouldn't do? He stepped in front of her again just as the

mercenary slammed a fist into his gut. In this case, his protection was sweet, but totally unnecessary.

The mercenary reeled his arm back just as Tavia slipped out from behind Elson. His eyes grew wide, begging her to stop, but she ignored it.

The mercenary swung his fist at her, going straight for the gas mask. If it came off, she'd be dead in seconds. His fist came inches from her face, but she easily blocked the hit with the side of her wrist.

He barely had time to react before she shoved a knee into his groin and slammed her heel into the top of his foot. He gasped in surprise, but had his fists up and swinging in no time.

She blocked a hit and smacked his gut. Blocked a hit, smashed his shoulder. Blocked a hit and this time his eyes were growing wider, almost afraid to make his next move.

Taking advantage of his hesitation, she swung her leg for a roundhouse kick to his chest. As he teetered on the ground, she straightened her hand as flat as a board and slammed the side of her palm into his neck, making him black out before his body even hit the ground.

She checked that he was still breathing, then clapped the dust off her protection suit. Mercenaries usually worked alone, but not always. They needed to leave area to be safe. But holo pendant's couldn't send messages through the radiation unless the pendant had an upgrade.

Tavia's pendant had one, but neither Nora's nor Gage's did. They needed a hover pod and there was only one person who could receive a message. On instinct, Tavia reached for her braid. It no longer resembled a neatly woven rope. Now the hair strands stuck out at every angle. Loose and open.

She swallowed and clicked her holo pendant before she could think too much. She messaged Zara, who quickly messaged her right back.

I'll be right there, Tavia. Don't move!

Finally, she turned around. Elson stood with his mouth gaping open underneath his gas mask. His eyes were wide, but the twinkle that normal glinted in them was missing. He blinked at her, but seemed unable to form words of any kind.

"I know how to fight," Tavia said.

Elson let out a sarcastic laugh. "Uh, yeah. I saw that. Thanks for giving me a head's up."

"I'm trying to tell you about myself," Tavia said, shifting her eyes to the ground. She grabbed her braid, running a finger over the loose strands. "I'm trying to be open and... let you in."

"Oh," Elson said as the tension in his shoulders relaxed. "I'm sorry," he said. He stepped toward her until their eyes met. Even behind his gas mask, she could see he attempted a smile. "Tell me more."

"I ran away from home when I was seventeen. I knew I'd never graduate from high school that way, but I didn't have much of a choice. I had to get away from my parents."

He narrowed his eyes in a look that wasn't quite angry, but definitely confused. "You told me your parents died."

"I lied," she said averting her eyes. "They lost a lot of money in the Fallout. Once we moved underground, we were barely scraping by. They missed their old comforts, they hated the food. After awhile, they hated me." She sunk her head to her chest and frowned. "They tried to sell me to the sweat shops."

“Wait, what?” Elson said with horror painted on his face. “How did you get away?”

Tavia balled her hands into fists. “I heard them talking to each other about how the slave traders would pick me up in the morning. I stole my mom’s protection suit and used my best friend’s hover pod to get to the surface. I tried to sneak into an empty building on the surface, hoping my protection suit would get me through the night. It would not have, by the way. But luckily, I had stumbled into someone’s hideout. Zara. Zara had escaped the sweat shops a few months earlier. She taught me how to fight and she helped me get the job at IPE. Her parents sold her too.”

“Tavia,” Elson said as he put his hand into the small of her back. “I think I hate your parents, but also I’m so glad you’re okay. I had no idea.”

Again, the two parts inside her fought. One begging to lean into his comfort, the other forcibly pushing back. She swallowed and scratched her arm. “They tried to sell me because they didn’t want me. You say you want me, but how can I trust you when I couldn’t trust my own parents? Do you want *me* or do you just want a girlfriend?”

“I want you,” Elson said pulling her closer. But then he stepped back and shook his head. “No, words aren’t enough, are they?” He rubbed his temples while his face screwed up in concentration. Finally, he took her arm in a tender squeeze. “What can I do to show you how much I care about you? I want to earn your trust. I don’t just want to earn it, I want to deserve it. How can I show you you’re more than a label?”

She stared back not sure how to respond. For some reason, she had expected him to get mad again. She never thought he

would understand. Once the initial shock wore off, she considered his question. What *could* he do?

“Tell me a secret about you,” she said suddenly. It seemed fair. If she shared one about herself, then he should have to share as well.

“Okay,” he said excitedly, but a moment later, his face fell. “I don’t have that many secrets. I’m trying to think of one, but... oh.” He looked down at the ground. “Okay, I do have one, but you have to promise not to laugh.” He shook his head. “No, you can laugh. It’s embarrassing and I deserve it.”

He sucked in a huge breath and just when she thought he would release it, he sucked in even more. Finally, he let the air out with a long sigh. “I’m the one who plays the flute at night.” He spit the words out as fast as possible, then turned around with his shoulders hunched over.

“I sound horrible, I know,” he said. “My mom used to play in a symphony before the Fallout. She taught me how to play and definitely passed on her love of music to me. Unfortunately, she didn’t pass on any of her talent. I love playing and I love the music even though I know I’m not any good.”

Now that her shock had worn off, she stepped toward him and placed her hand over his arm. “But you play with your soul. I can feel it in your music, even if the notes aren’t perfect.”

Elson snorted and shook his head. “Well apparently my soul is covered in pots and pans and falling down a staircase because that’s what I sound like.”

“It helps me fall asleep at night.”

“What?” he asked, turning his head down to look into her eyes.

She bit her lip and turned away. Two confessions in one day were more than she had managed in all her life. But for the first time, it didn't seem like too much. She gulped and said, "I have a hard time falling asleep because I'm afraid my parents will find me. Listening to you play the flute distracts me enough that I can fall asleep. I like it."

He laughed and tried to run his fingers through his hair before he remembered his hair was covered by his protective suit. With a frown, he said, "You like being distracted; you don't like my playing."

"I do like it. I'm not just saying that."

Before he could protest, the whirring of a hover pod sounded behind them. He jumped in front of her, and then shook his head. "Sorry, I forgot you can fight. Maybe I should jump behind you when there's danger."

With a smile, she took her head. "Maybe I'll just teach you how to fight. This isn't dangerous though, this is Zara. She can fly us to Nora and Gage."

When the hover pod opened, Zara's violet eyes seemed to pierce right through Tavia. A scar spread out from Zara's temple with several lines that each looked like a lightning strike. The lines spread over her cheek and forehead. She glared at Elson and shook her ash blonde hair over the scar until only a corner of her violet eyes peeked out. "Who's this?" she asked when the hover pod door closed behind them.

"This is Elson," Tavia said, wrapping an arm around his waist. When he put his arm over her shoulders, she looked up into his eyes and said, "He's my boyfriend."

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