"Hysteria" by Rachel Showers

Nova nervously paced the length of her apartment, moonlight illuminating her lavender hair. She glanced out her window at the decaying city, her building just as decrepit as the rest. She was surprised it hadn't given way to time after all the years the brutal weather pounded against it. She didn't see any point in complaining since she couldn't move. Hell, if she dared to speak out against her government, she might be the next person to disappear. Nova was assigned to this very apartment at age 18 and she would live here until she died.

She plopped down on the couch, drumming her fingers against her thighs as she anxiously awaited the arrival of her very own AI unit. Ever since the outbreak of Malady, the government had been sending each person their own robot for "protection" against the devastating virus. That had to be a lie. Her government never had truly benign intentions. She tried to warn her friends, but no one cared about anything anymore.

A banging on the door jarred her from her thoughts. It was here. Cautiously, she opened her door and peeked into the hall to find nothing but a small black box sitting on the floor. Odd. Her fingers ran along the sleek surface as she brought it inside and opened it slowly. Initially, it was empty, but the sound of static quickly erupted from the box.

She dropped it as it shook violently, the motion making the entire floor tremble from the sheer force of it. A bright blue flash temporarily blinded Nova and she shielded her eyes with her hand. Once the light subsided, she saw a tall man standing where the box was, his dark eyes giving her a once over. He wore an elegant black suit that was almost as black as his hair.

"Hello," he extended his hand to hers and Nova hesitantly accepted it, "I am unit 23708."

"Hi." She muttered shyly, pulling her hand out of his grasp. She hated how human he looked. "I'm not sure I'm gonna remember all those numbers."

"Would you prefer another name?"

"Another name? Like what?"

"I can pull up a list of popular male names. Shall I list them alphabetically?"

Oh god, she was gonna have to name him too? She let him list for a while before stopping him.

"Dalton, Daly, Damien—"

"Just stop," she pinched the bridge of her nose, "Damien's fine. Let's go with that one."

"Name acquired."

She elected to ignore him as much as she could while she showed him around her rather bare apartment.

"I know it's not much, but it's all I have," she shrugged, stopping back in the living room where they had started.

"It is satisfactory," Damien nodded, clasping his hands behind his back. "May I occupy the living room?"

"Sure." She didn't want him in any room of hers, but Nova preferred not to fight him this late at night.

She left him to his devices, hoping that he wouldn't light her apartment on fire while she slept. His protocol or whatever should prevent him from doing anything too bad…hopefully.

The next morning when Nova woke, the smell of pancakes immediately hit her nose. Normally, she'd be ecstatic since it meant that her partner was home, but she wasn't scheduled to visit Nova for another week. She rolled out of bed and headed towards the kitchen, finding Damien at the stove instead of her girlfriend.

"Damien?" She called out nervously, her footsteps cautious as she continued to approach. He answered her with a hum, staying focused on his task. "What are you doing?"

"Preparing breakfast." He gently set the pancakes on a plate and delivered it to the table. "Please, sit."

"Thanks." She eyed the food suspiciously before taking a bite. It tasted exactly like how her partner made them.

Damien sat at the table with Nova, resting his chin in his hand. He stared at her with such intensity that she thought he may be analyzing her for weaknesses to exploit. She preferred to avoid confrontation so she stayed silent for the rest of her breakfast. Nova was never really good at socializing anyways.

Fortunately for her, Damien stayed out of the way for the most part. He was actually pretty helpful in terms of chores and cooking, more than willing to lend a hand wherever she needed it. As the weeks dragged on, she found that she didn't mind having him around as much as she used to. However, trouble did finally come when she tried to leave to meet her partner.

"Damien, please move." Nova asked with an exasperated tone. She had been trying to leave her apartment for ten minutes now and she was reaching her limit. He was so damn stubborn, but so was she. She refused to be bested by this overrated Roomba. "Get out of my way before I make you."

"I'd like to see you try, human." He sneered, leaning down so close that their noses were nearly touching. She took a step back from him, shocked by his sudden aggression. Upon observing her reaction, he returned to his former self in the blink of an eye. "I have your best interest at heart, Nova. My objective is to keep you safe."

"I'm sure." She rolled her eyes, crossing her arms across her chest. How could she escape him? She couldn't force her way past, but maybe she could negotiate. "Can I leave if you come with me?"

"Yes." Damien said after a moment of processing, moving aside to finally let her leave the stuffy room.

The elevator had been broken for years, so they took the stairway. They didn't speak a word to each other. After Damien's display in her apartment, the sense of comfort that had developed over time had been shattered completely. Nova would be lying if she said she wasn't disappointed. She thought she could be friends with him, but he was nothing more than a machine.

Nova waved at the receptionist, Elizabeth, offering her a wide smile. When Elizabeth saw her with her partner, she never gave Nova any trouble, unlike the others. Being in a relationship of any sort was generally frowned upon, but it hadn't been made illegal yet.

"Where is our destination?" Damien asked once they stepped outside. The bitter air of winter nearly took her breath away, instantly sending a chill throughout her body. She didn't remember it being this cold.

"Oh, just around." She turned a corner abruptly, deciding on taking the longer route to the park. She would do whatever need be to lose him.

"Hey do you have a GPS function or something?" She asked when the two were far enough away from the apartment. Damien raised a brow, nodding hesitantly. Did he realize what she was trying to do? "Cool. Will you give me directions to the nearest grocery store?"

"Why—" She pressed a finger to Damien's lips before he could further question her.

"Say yes," She demanded, waiting until he finally nodded.

"Scanning the area for potential routes." She started backing away as his eyes flickered around and before he could get another sentence out, Nova ran.

It was easy to spot her partner when she got to the park. Her bright white hair against the murky grey grass made it difficult to blend in. She was sitting on a bench, resting their head in their hands, soft sobs escaping her lips.

"Angel?" She reached out to lay a hand on her shoulder, but Angelica recoiled from Nova as fast as possible. As soon as their eyes met, Nova knew what was wrong. Angelica's once vibrant

green eyes were grey, glassy, and sunken into her sockets. Her skin was pallid, seeming as if it was going to flake away at any moment.

"No, this can't be real." Nova ran her fingers through her tangled lavender hair, trying to think of some way she could fix this. Sure, she knew that Malady had killed two thirds of the world's population, but this wasn't supposed to happen to her Angelica. "We can fix this somehow. I know it. I'll just talk to Elizabeth or Crystal or Sage—"

"Nova," she rasped, her voice barely above a whisper, "it's okay." Nova could tell that Angelica wanted to console her, but she couldn't risk spreading the disease.

"When did this happen?" Nova asked, doing her best to push her tears away. She had to be the strong one this time. Angelica deserved at least that much.

"I'm not sure. The only thing they said is that it started in my lungs."

"How long do you have?" Her voice cracked, a lump forming in her throat. The feeling of utter helplessness clouded her mind. This can't be real.

"A day, maybe two."

A tear slipped past her defenses.

"Hey, none of that." Angelica teased with a smile. "You'll be okay. At least I got to spend a few years with the most beautiful girl in the world, right?"

"Right."

"There's something you need to know." Her expression turned serious, carefree smile forgotten. "I've heard rumors about a breakthrough. Scientists think they've found someone that's immune to the virus."

A hand on Nova's shoulder ripped her away from Angelica, sending the girl forcefully to the ground. In front of her, Damien already had his hand clamped firmly around Angelica's throat. She wasn't struggling, wasn't fighting back. She gave Nova one last somber smile.

"No!" Nova screamed, scrambling to her feet. She rushed at Damien, only to be stopped by his hand around her own neck. He was careful not to injure her, just merely restrain.

"It is for the greater good." He glanced at her with an emotionless expression, no guilt or regret in his eyes. Within a fraction of a second, Angelica's neck was snapped and her lifeless form dropped to the ground with nothing more than a dull thud.

"You bastard!" She screamed. Damien didn't respond. He simply took her in his arms and carried her home.

Upon reaching her apartment, Nova was tuckered out from struggling and crying. She was limp in Damien's arms, allowing him to take her to her bed.

She barely came out of her room for days, keeping Damien locked out of it and away from her. Talking to him was the absolute last thing she wanted to do after what happened. She knew that death by android was kinder than death by Malady, but she still couldn't help but feel betrayed. That was Angelica's decision to make, not Damien's.

When her growling stomach became too much for her to bear, Nova finally left her room. After grabbing some cereal from the kitchen, she turned to find Damien, standing right behind her stiff as a board. She jumped, spilling the cereal both on herself and the floor.

"Are you kidding me?!" She growled, ready to rip into him. That was until Nova saw his eyes. Those brown eyes that normally held no anger, no venom, yet here they were, completely blacked out and ice cold.

"Damien, are you okay?" She asked cautiously, more out of fear rather than concern. She tried stepped around his looming form, but he blocked her off with his arms. "You're freaking me out."

"Virus detected." Damien moved to lunge at Nova, but the cereal bowl slammed into the side of his head before he could react.

She stepped around him while he was stunned, making a beeline straight to the door that seemed impossibly far away. Just a little closer, come on. Almost there and—she was tackled to the ground. Damien flipped her around and wrapped his hands around her throat. She vainly clawed and hit at his arms, trying to do anything to just live. No, she couldn't die. Not underneath this stupid robot that she never even wanted.

"I've made a miscalculation." Damien's grip loosened as his smile reappeared. "You, Nova, are immune."