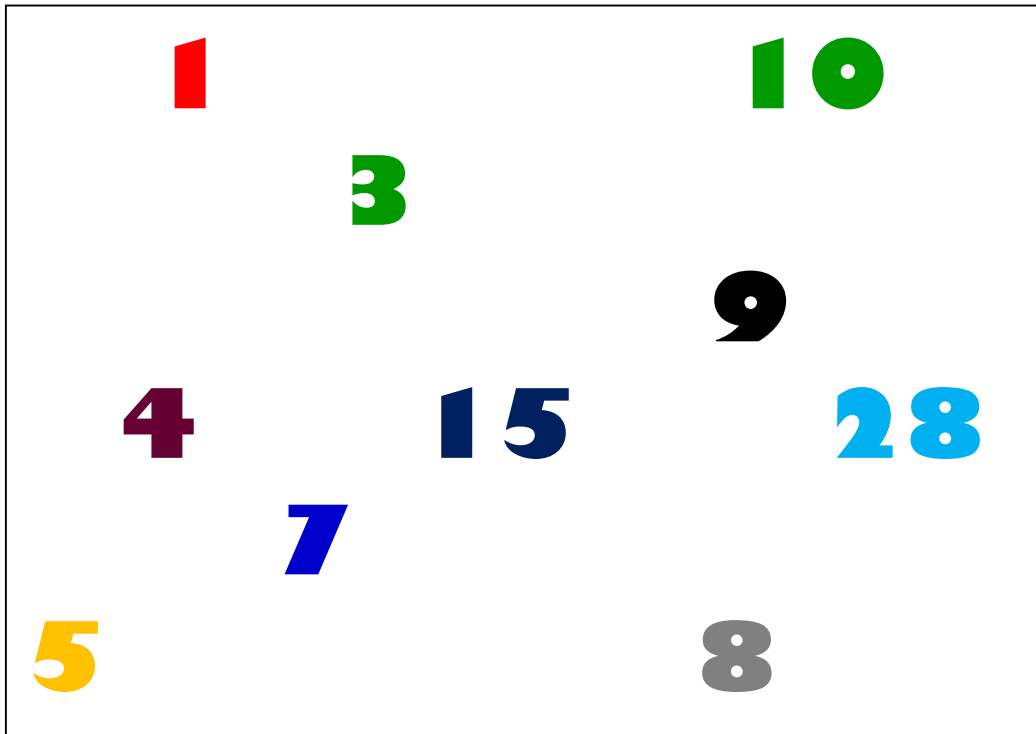


Numerology 1.1



By Freddie Clegg

Additions by Lady Vet

From *Tomorrow's Technology Magazine*.....

Soft Cybernetics – The New Alchemy?

By Jennifer Saxeby, science correspondent

Are we about to see first human robots? Can scientists create zombies?

"Soft Cybernetics" is a controversial new approach to the problem of creating intelligent systems, provides new ways to solve the problems of micro-behaviour management.

To date cybernetics has focused on the use of feedback and control mechanisms to produce self-regulating systems using electromechanical devices. More recently, research suggests that many of the problems associated with programming these devices can be solved by the use of biological organisms as an alternative to mechanisms. The combination of cloning technologies with soft-cybernetics offers the possibility of pre-programmed, designer life forms, able to carry out specific tasks or roles. Early experimentation in this field has attracted considerable ethical debate.

As one of the chief proponents of the concept, Dr. Stuart Waring, of the University of Central England, is exploring the implications of soft-cybernetics through the use of a series of "thought experiments" that examine the consequences of cybernetic intervention to adjust the behaviours of biological organisms. These thought experiments alone have given rise to serious objections from a wide range of groups concerned about both animal and human rights.

Most recently the proposition by Waring and his collaborator, Dr. Anna Fedorova of the Leningrad Centre for Neuroscience, that using by-products of effects of specific forms of synesthesia (where information perceived by one sense gives rise to a sensation in another - for example where numbers are seen as colours) has created alarm that behavioural engineering may become as controversial as its genetic cousin.

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Chapter 1: The Colour of Numbers

I see numbers in my head. And I know what they mean. Some people can hear colours. I see numbers. Suddenly. A seven. Or a four. And I know what they mean. There aren't many numbers. Only zero to nine. But I see them. Bright; sudden; there in my mind; blotting out everything else. I haven't always been able to do this. It is new for me. Since I came here, to the house. Before I came I couldn't see the numbers but now I can. I don't remember anything else before I came but I do know I couldn't see the numbers.

I can see a one. It's green. It's very bright. I know I have to find him. He is somewhere in the house and I have to find him. Wherever he is I have to go there. That's what it means when I see the one. I find him in the library. He is with a woman. He smiles as I arrive and turns to her. "There, you see," he says. "Now do you believe me?"

"That doesn't prove anything," she replies. "There could be a bell, or a light. Remotely controlled. You might have agreed what she was to do."

I just stand there, listening, watching, waiting. There isn't anything for me to do. I have done what I had to do. I have found him.

"You try," he says. He passes a box to the woman. The box has buttons on it.

"OK, but not from here. She might watch me. I'll leave the room. Then we'll see." She gets up and leaves. The man is smiling at me. He doesn't say anything.

I see a five. It's purple. I have to undress. I take off my dress; my underwear; my shoes; my stockings. I'm naked. I have done what I had to do.

The woman returns. "OK," she says. "What else? Could be a lucky guess; there's only ten buttons. You could be colluding."

"Why do you think she would do that? Believe me, this works."

The woman turns her back to me. "Yes, maybe," she says. I see a six. It's white. I start to dress again. Six means I must put on the clothes I see.

The woman sits down. She hands the box back to the man. "Could be interesting," she says, "if it's real."

"Oh, it's real," he replies. He juggles the box in his hand. "Would I lie to you?"

I have finished dressing. Suddenly I see a two. It's yellow, a wonderful, bright, clean, yellow. I know now that I have to go back to my room. That's what a two means. I wonder if the box has anything to do with the numbers.

Chapter 2: Friends

The woman is called Dr. Anna. The man is called Dr. Stuart. I sometimes think I knew them before I came here to the house, but I am not sure. Memories are few. They are transparent, like mist. I am not able to touch them with my mind. Dr. Anna and Dr. Stuart have explained that they are my friends. I am not sure. I feel there is some reason why I should not trust them but I cannot say what it is. They say they are here to help me with my numbers. If that is so, they must be my friends. They know that I see the numbers and that I have to do what they tell me. They explain that this is good; that I will feel happy when I do what the numbers tell me to do. I will feel fulfilled and satisfied. I know this to be true. Perhaps they are my friends after all.

The numbers only tell me to do simple things at the moment. Dr. Stuart tells me this is quite normal. He says I need to get used to performing simple tasks first. I don't know why I must get used to it. I don't know why I do what the numbers tell me. But I do because it is natural and compelling. And it makes me happy. I don't know why I do nothing apart from what the numbers tell me. But that is true as well.

Dr. Anna is interested in how I feel about the numbers. I tell her that they are bright; that I like the light and the colours. She asks me how I feel about the tasks. I tell her that I am happy when I am asked to do them. When I finish them I know I have done what the numbers wanted. I believe that should make me happy too.

She asks me if I ever feel that I should not do a task. I explain that performing the tasks is natural and right. The tasks are easy to do. There is no reason why I would not do what the numbers ask of me. Besides, it makes me happy when I see the numbers. It makes me happy when I do the tasks. Dr. Anna is worried that I might be sad when I cannot see the numbers. I tell her that isn't so. I am happy when I see the numbers but I am not sad when they are not there. It's just that when there are no numbers, there is nothing. No happiness, no sadness, nothing to do, nothing. Except to wait for the numbers.

Dr. Anna writes all my answers down. I wonder if she has numbers to tell her what to do.

Dr. Stuart shows me the box. It is small and dark with many buttons on it. It has a small display. It looks a little like the telephones I sometimes see Dr. Stuart and Dr. Anna using, but it is larger. He tells me that this is where the numbers come from. He says he will take great care of the box so that I can feel safe. Only Dr. Stuart and Dr. Anna understand the box. Only they know how to make the numbers come. I feel safe as long as I can see the numbers. Safe and happy. I am only scared when I think that someday the numbers will not come any more. Then what would I do? If Dr. Stuart and Dr. Anna can make sure the numbers come, they must be my friends.

Chapter 3: Number 8

I am lying on my bed. I see the number 8. It's blue; a very peaceful blue. It tells me to sleep. I am doing my best. Dr. Stuart and Dr. Anna come into the room. They are concerned about me. I hear them talking.

"She seems to be settled now."

"Yes, I am pleased with how well she has recovered from the surgery. The connector area seems to be healing well."

"The bruises on her wrists and ankles are fading."

"Yes. They'll be gone in a few days. It was a shame that I had to restrain her so tightly but I wasn't sure how she would react. It wasn't a problem as it turned out but I'm not sure I could have predicted it."

Dr. Stuart lifts the sheet that covers me and looks down at my naked body.

"I'm particularly pleased at how well the synesthesia appears to have been taken up," Dr. Stuart says. "It seems to work in both ways as predicted; the linkage between stimuli and response is fully effective and absence of stimuli results in complete quiescence." He drops the sheet.

"So, what next?"

"The difficulty is in the tasks, I think. They seem to be of two kinds. The very simple that require constant intervention or the very complex that have too many variables. There needs to be a simpler way of structuring the tasks. There is something we can try, though. I have an idea."

It is good that Dr. Stuart and Dr. Anna show such concern. I am pleased that they are helping with the tasks. I haven't found it hard to perform the tasks so far but what would happen if the numbers told me to do something I could not do? That scares me. I whimper.

"Hush, Natalie," Dr. Anna, tries to reassure me. "Hush. It's all right. Sleep now."

I try to sleep. The numbers told me to sleep. It is difficult. My stomach aches I've been having nightmares. Dreams about before. Before I came to the house. Before I could see the numbers. Before when... but before is a blank screen.

Dr. Stuart and Dr. Anna are not my friends in my nightmares. They come to my room while I am sitting at a desk. They pull the cloth over me. I am swallowed up in it. I cannot see. I cannot move. I cannot speak. Dr. Stuart and Dr. Anna are talking but I cannot speak. I struggle but I cannot move. I cry out but there is no sound. Why do my friends do this to me? I fall asleep. And then I wake up. I am in a white room. The light is bright. As bright as the numbers in my head but the light is above me. There are wizards in white. I cannot see their faces.

They say, "It's all right, Natalie." They tell me not to be afraid but somehow I am very afraid. I am still afraid as I fall asleep again. It is frightening to fall asleep when in a dream. How can I know that I am awake now? Or that I am dreaming now? Or that I was dreaming then? At least I am sure the numbers are real. They are so bright and so clear and so colourful. The numbers are too real to be dreams. The tasks are too real to be dreams.

Chapter 4: They Are Not the Same

I can see more numbers. I woke up this morning and I can see more numbers. As soon as I woke up there was twenty two – bright, yellow, brighter than anything else in my head And I knew what I had to do. I don't know how many more numbers I can see. Only fifteen and seventeen and twenty two. Those are the ones I have seen today and I knew what to do.

I wonder what the new numbers mean. I only know what a number means when I see it. If I can see fifteen and seventeen then I think that I can see sixteen too but I cannot guess what it means. And fifteen – I know I am able to see fifteen and I know it means something but it's only when I actually see it that I know what it means. I saw fifteen this morning and I know I had to do something and I did it but I don't know what it was. That makes it much easier, only remembering when you see the numbers. Most of the time I do not remember the numbers and what they mean. If I had to remember all of the numbers all of the time it would be much harder. It's a useful trick. I wonder how I do it. There isn't a number for now. Life is empty when there isn't a number. I just wait. Wait for the numbers, wait for the bright numbers. I feel happy when I see the numbers, I feel empty when they are not there.

Oh, there is fifteen now. Clear and orange. And I know what to do. I get up, I make my bed. I get the broom and the dustpan. I sweep my room. I dust my room. I clean the sink and bowl in my washroom. That's what 15 means – clean up. How could I not remember it? Then I saw a 1 and went to find Dr. Stuart. He was in the lounge with the box. I saw 15 again and knew I had to clean up there, too. Dr. Stuart watched me do it. He seemed pleased at my work. I just know I was happy because the numbers asked me to do it.

Dr. Anna has been talking to me about the numbers. She has been asking me how I feel about the numbers. She shows me some numbers which are written down. I tell her they are not the same. The numbers in my head are bright. The ones on paper are just, well, numbers. They do not have the meaning that the numbers in my head do. She shows me some colours and asks me if they make me think of numbers. I tell her they do not. The colours on the paper are not the same as the colours in my head, although they look the same.

She shows me a 15. It looks orange. I am sure I know what 15 means but I just cannot remember. Dr. Anna is puzzled but she is very kind. She doesn't mind that I don't remember.

I heard Dr. Anna and Dr. Stuart talking. Dr. Anna told Dr. Stuart that she was surprised by some of the results. The effects of synesthesia seem to be interesting to her. She is surprised by the quiescence response. She suspects it may have something to do with endorphin receptors. I did not really understand what I heard but I think it has something to do with how I see the colour of the numbers. She is surprised that I have no recollection of the time before I could see the numbers, but how could that be important? I don't remember then. There are only my dreams. I am happier without my dreams.

Chapter 5: On the Radio

When I woke up today there were new clothes. A plain black dress and tights. The dress is quite short, the skirt comes above my knees. It is shorter than I used to wear. How do I remember that? But the 6 just tells me to dress, I put on whatever is at hand and today it is the black dress. My life is so easy, I just do what the numbers say. Somehow it doesn't seem fair.

I was combing my hair this morning. It seems to be getting much longer. There is something strange at the back of my neck. I am sure it was not there before. Before... when? Just, before... It feels hard, metallic. Like an electrical connector. The sort you would find on a computer. It doesn't hurt but it doesn't feel like it should be there.

It is much later. I am sitting in my room. Waiting. Dr. Stuart comes in. He has the box. I see a 5, bright purple, and I undress. Dr. Stuart watches with interest. He is obviously interested to see how I respond to the numbers. I have finished undressing when Dr. Anna comes into the room. She looks strangely at Dr. Stuart, as if she disapproves of his interest and concern. I see an 8, a peaceful, blue 8. I lie down to sleep.

It is later still. I am lying on my bed, awake. Dr. Anna is sitting beside me. She seems concerned about me. She turns on the radio beside my bed. The woman speaking has a quiet, Edinburgh accent.

"Hello and welcome to Science Now, your weekly look at the world of technology. First tonight I am joined this evening by Dr. Stuart Waring, who has been at the centre of the controversial thought experiments relating to soft-cybernetics. Dr. Waring, good evening."

"Good evening, Kirstie."

"On one side, your soft-cybernetics theories have led you to be accused of being the Dr. Frankenstein of the post-Freud era. On the other you've been condemned as a charlatan. Which is it – fiend or fraud?"

"Well, Kirstie, I hope I'll be able to convince you that I'm neither. What my team has been doing in soft-cybernetics is pure research, an exploration of what it might mean to combine biological systems and control/feedback systems. We hope to learn what we can about the interplay between biology and the nature of cybernetic systems."

"There's no truth to the accusation that your work paves the way to human robots?"

"Our interest has been in thought experiments; conceptual assessments of the issues involved and the possible outcomes of actions in this area. Most experts agree that it would be a long way from these conceptual exercises to any form of practical application. The real purpose is to help us to understand the nature of control systems and of the ways in which the mind governs behaviour."

"So, no mindless zombies, then?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but no. Our scientific research is much more mundane. Let me pose a problem to you that is typical of our thought experiments. Suppose you could control an animal's every movement. How could you translate that into making the animal perform useful tasks? It would be useless if you had to control it in real time like a radio controlled car. The effort to control it would be as great for you as if you yourself had carried it out. We try to understand the processes relating to how can provide an animal with a goal or set of actions to perform. And what is the mechanism that translates your requests into action? For example if I command a dog, 'Sit' and it sits. Is the dog a robot?"

"No, clearly not."

"Well suppose I were to create a tape of commands including 'Sit' and place it in a player fixed to the dog's back so that it played a series of commands in sequence. If the dog follows each command and then sits is it a robot?"

"Well, no."

"But if I did the same thing with a mechanical representation of a dog and the same actions were to occur, would that be a robot?"

"Yes, yes it would."

"Now does this tell us more about the nature of dogs, the nature of mechanical toys, the nature of commands or the idea of robots? To me the issue seems to involve the freedom to behave otherwise. Some of my critics have suggested that my interest is in suppressing human free will. I would argue that I am interested in understanding what exactly it is that distinguishes us from the mechanical."

"Dr. Waring, thank you. I am sure that many people will have been both reassured and intrigued by your ideas. Now, for our second item this evening. New power for the practical, inexpensive motor car. Can the promise of cold fusion for reducing road pollution finally be realised....."

Dr. Anna leans forward and strokes my hair in a tender way and turns the radio off.

"There," she says, "You see how Dr. Waring thinks so carefully about these things?" I say nothing. I used to have a dog that would sit when I said so. Dr. Stuart didn't mention the numbers, though. I wonder why he didn't tell her about them. They are the most important thing we have.

Chapter 6: Upload

The girl is half sitting, half lying, sedated, barely awake, on a reclining couch. A net cap covers her scalp and carries an array of electrodes. Wires run from each, eventually joining to form a thick electrical umbilical cord running to the electro-encephalograph. A series of green lines on a display trace the activity detected by each electrode. Quiet beeps mark time for her pulse and respiration. He checks the monitors. He opens a folder and checks the paper on the inside cover. He checks the small needle mark on the inside of her arm where the injection was administered.

Satisfied that temperature, pulse, respiration and brain functions all appear normal he nods to his collaborator. He reaches behind the girl's head and fastens the connector in place. A cable runs from the connector to the computer on the table beside the couch. He checks the monitors again. No change in the traces.

The woman starts the drive on the pen recorder of the encephalograph. She looks across at the girl on the couch. The man scrolls down a menu on the computer and selects "load". He presses enter. The girl's eyes open wide. The monitors and the pens on the recorder swing into frenetic activity. Her eyes dart back and forth, unseeing. At times her hands clench and open again but apart from that she does not move. Her breathing becomes shallow, her breaths are shorter, she is almost panting, quietly. It takes only a few minutes. The hourglass icon on the computer's screen stops spinning. The pen traces slip back to a steady line. The green fluorescent lines on the monitors return to their steady repetitive beat. The girl's eyes close. She is breathing easily, now, asleep.

He writes on the scroll of paper spilling from the pen recorder. "Natalie : Upload Nrs. 25 to 50 and scripts version 1.1 Beta." He adds the date and time, folds the paper neatly and tucks it into the folder.

The woman carefully unfastens the connector from the back of the Natalie's head and removes the scalp net and pulse and respiration monitors. They wheel her back to her room and put her to bed.

Chapter 7: Natalie's Paper

I dreamed I was in a white room with the white wizards. The wizards brought me numbers. They gave me lists of things to do. Things to do when I see the numbers. It is still dark but now I am awake. I can see two figures silhouetted in the doorway to my room; Dr. Stuart and Dr. Anna. They are talking.

"Is she awake?"

"Yes, I think so but she will lie still there until she has a stimulus to respond to."

"What are the new scripts?"

"Mainly domestic tasks. Some of them are combos or macros; concatenations of other scripts under a single number to make control easier. It takes too much effort to keep giving individual commands."

"Do we need to do anything about command reception?"

"No, I think it appears to be adequate within the building and the new transmitter will be slightly more powerful. I'd prefer to do things at this end rather than having to do any further surgery."

They stand there, looking at me. I hear Dr. Anna speak. "I read it."

"What?"

"The paper. 'Induced Numerical Synesthesia as a Vector for Operant Conditioning.' Natalie Grahams' doctoral dissertation."

"It was rather good, wasn't it? I felt it delivered an excellent theoretical basis for a practical mechanism for soft-cybernetics."

"Yes. Yes, it was. Don't you wish you'd written it?"

"Well, perhaps. It's the curse of the teacher to be overtaken by his brightest student."

"She never foresaw this, you know. Not the practical application of her work. I don't think she ever thought it would really be possible to link into the frontal lobe of the cerebral cortex. Not in any practical way."

"So you'll allow me my contribution to this project, then?"

"Of course, Stuart. It's extraordinary what you've done."

"Well, maybe." Dr. Waring says, looking at me again.

Dr. Anna says, "She's lost it all, you know. Anything she ever knew, any memories. Her intellect is gone. There's nothing left of her mind. Just the numbers and the tasks." Her voice is sad.

"Hmm? Oh, yes. That seems to be a side effect. A shame, I guess but perhaps it's just as well." They go away, leaving me alone. How strange. For some reason I think that Natalie is my name.

Chapter 8: Number 5

It is afternoon. I am in my room, alone. I see a 5. I undress. That is unusual. I do not often see a 5 until late at night. There is usually a 5 and then an 8 to tell me to sleep. Oh, now I am remembering what some of the numbers mean. I wonder if I am supposed to do that? But now there is just a 5.

Dr. Stuart appears. He is smiling. He approaches me and places a hand on my naked breast.

“You respond very well to your numbers. This is exactly how I expected to find you. Now, come and lie down. I’ll show you something.” He leads me to the bed and lays me down. He positions me with my arms by my sides and my legs wide apart. Dr. Stuart is undressing. He is naked as well. He lies down beside me. I feel his fingers part my labia. I feel his fingers inside me. He moves them in and out. It is uncomfortable at first but then I become wet inside and the discomfort disappears. He climbs on top of me. I feel him penetrate me. I feel a warmth, a tingling excitement. Should I raise my knees? Should I move? There isn’t anything for me to do, there are no numbers now.

Dr. Stuart is stroking my breasts, rolling my nipples between his fingers and thumbs. He tells me I am a perfect doll, his perfect doll, just a doll. His breathing becomes sharper, his voice is deeper, his muscles tense. He moves in and out of me faster, harder, almost frantically. I am warmer. I tingle more strongly deep inside. Little fluttering waves of sensation course around inside me, stronger... building toward... what?

I feel him ejaculate inside of me. The sensation of pleasure and excitement fades. Would there have been more? Should there have been? But there is no more. He lies on top of me and inside me for a time before he gets up and leaves. I see a 7. I take a shower. I see an 8 and lie down to sleep. This time I do not dream.

It is later. I wake up. I hear Dr. Stuart and Dr. Anna. They are talking together again but now they are talking in loud voices. Dr. Anna is shouting.

“Pervert!” Dr. Stuart is quieter. He is trying to calm Dr. Anna, but she is still upset, still shouting. “Is that what this was all about really? It’s nothing to do with the science, is it?” I cannot hear everything she is shouting but she is very upset. The shouting continues for a long time.

Much later I wake again. It is still dark. The shouting has stopped.

It is daylight. I awake. I see a 7 and a 6 and a 1. I shower, dress and go to find Dr. Stuart. He is with Dr. Anna but things are different. She is naked. She is sitting in a chair. She cannot get up. Straps hold her in the chair. She seems to want to get up but she cannot. She tries to talk to me as I enter but there is tape across her mouth. I cannot make out what she is saying.

Dr. Stuart gives me some clothes, the clothes that Dr. Anna was wearing last night. He presses a button. 27 – laundry. I know what I have to do. I leave but I stop in the hallway to watch them. Dr. Stuart is playing with Dr. Anna’s breast the way he played with mine. She struggles to resist him but the straps hold her immobile. He smiles and tells her to be still. She tries to answer him but the tape stops any sound. He picks up a hypodermic syringe. Dr. Anna’s eyes are wide open and filled with tears. She shakes her head wildly. Tears stream down her cheeks. She tries to scream behind the tape. She seems terribly frightened. She doesn’t look happy. Not happy like I am, as long as I can do what the numbers tell me. But I still see 27 and I must do as the numbers tell me.

Chapter 9: Pleasure Unit

I am sitting in the bedroom. Dr. Stuart and Dr. Anna are there as well. She is standing by the door. He is lounging on the bed. I am wearing my simple uniform dress. She has on a long, black, evening gown. It is cut very low and shows her cleavage. There is a simple velvet band around her throat. Her long hair is dressed and piled high upon her head. She wears long evening gloves that match her dress. Her face is made up perfectly but she isn't smiling the way she usually did.

Dr. Stuart presses a button on his control box. I see a zero. I must smile and recite. "About: Soft Cybernetics Software Version 1.63 : Scripts Version 2.5 : Variant - Utility Unit"

Dr. Stuart says, "Thank you, Natalie." That's interesting. He has not called me that before. I thought that might be my name but he hasn't called me that before. I think I must know something about Natalie but I cannot remember what it is. Would I remember if it were something important?

He turns a small control on the box and presses the button again.

Dr. Anna jerks and stiffens and then she speaks. "About: Soft Cybernetics Software Version 1.63 : Scripts Version 2.75 : Variant - Pleasure Unit." She smiles as I smile but then a tear trickles down her cheek.

Dr. Waring says, "Thank you, Anna." He presses another button and she turns to leave the room.

As Dr. Anna turns her head I see that she has a small connector on the back of her neck, like the ones on computers. I wonder, does my connector look the same? I wonder if that is why Dr. Anna can see the numbers now. I wonder if the numbers will make her happy. I think that Dr. Stuart had something to do with helping Dr. Anna to be able to see the numbers. Do you think the numbers tell him what to do? I don't see a connector.

Chapter 10: Breaking News

From *Tomorrow's Technology Magazine*.....

Brain Drain For Robot Champion Waring

Waring to take up new post in the USA

"Dr. Stuart Waring is citing negative comment in the tabloid press as his reason for abandoning research into soft-cybernetics here in the UK. Protests surrounding the professor's work on "living robots" have rendered work at the University of Central England impossible. Dr. Waring and his collaborator Dr. Fedorova, together with Natalie Grahams, widely recognised as the post-graduate researcher responsible for many of the concepts underpinning Waring and Fedorova's thought experiments are to establish a new research facility in the USA.

"Dr. Waring made the announcement at a press conference yesterday, confirming that Grahams and Fedorova had already left the country for the facility in Colorado.

"Dr. Waring would neither confirm nor deny rumours that U.S. DARPA Defense Department funding was helping to establish the centre and gave no indication of future directions for the team's research."

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Chapter 11: Colorado

I have a new home. I can see mountains now. We are a long way from England. I think we came on an airplane. I think I remember that. Anna and I share a room now. She is happier. I am sure the numbers have made her happier. She smiles much more but she still cries sometimes, crying while she smiles. We each have different tasks to perform. I believe we both see the same numbers sometimes because we do things simultaneously. But we have different numbers, too. There are some things that Anna does not do. Some things that I do not do. I wonder what Anna did before she came here, before she could see the numbers. I wonder what I did, too. I think I must have done more than obey numbers...

Dr. Stuart has a new helper, Dr. Wallis. She tells us that she is helping to make the numbers clearer for us. She says she is our friend. I believe her. She invests a lot of effort to help us see the numbers. She is most interested in how we see the numbers. She shows me pictures of the numbers like... Like what? I think someone showed me pictures of the numbers before but I cannot remember. Could I ever remember things clearly and completely?

Anna often sees numbers at night. I may be sleeping but sometimes I wake up when she leaves. It can only be because the numbers have told her to go. She always goes naked. That is strange because she has so many pretty clothes. She is always restless when she returns. She tosses and turns and whimpers and puts her hand inside her vagina. Her night chores do not make her happy.

We both had new clothes when we came here. Mine are quite dark because of the work that the numbers tell me to do around the house but I still think they are nice. Dr. Stuart thinks they are nice too. He tells me how attractive they make me look; that the short skirts show off my legs and the tight tops make my breasts stand out nicely. I am pleased that he likes them. I just wear them because they are there when the numbers tell me to dress. Sometimes he will touch me, stroke my breasts to make my nipples hard or my inner thighs or between them. Sometimes he puts my hand on him. He puts his hand over mine and moves it to show me how he wants me to move my hand, then he sits back and relaxes until he ejaculates.

Dr. Wallis does not seem to mind. Dr. Wallis likes how my clothes look, too. Sometimes she touches me too but not in the same way. Her touch is softer. I feel something then, especially when she puts her mouth between my legs and I put mine between hers. She taught me to do that without my seeing any numbers. She is happy and relaxed after we do that. I am never relaxed afterward. I don't know if I should do that if I don't see any numbers.

Last night Anna dressed before she left. It was quite strange. She put on her clothes. I know that she saw a 6. That tells us to dress. The clothes are on the chairs beside our beds. Sometimes we put the clothes there. Sometimes they come from somewhere else. Anna put on her clothes. I watched as Anna dressed. She has such pretty clothes. Her bra and panties are lacy. She puts on stockings. Her blouse is very tight, it clings to her breasts. Her skirt is very tight as well. Straight and tight. She puts on shoes. The heels are high and spiked. But then something strange. She puts on more hair. It is a wig. Long and blonde over her own short, dark hair. And then something else. A mask. It covers her face completely but it is a face itself. A perfect, doll face. Long eyelashes, perfect lips, blushed cheeks. Anna looks in the mirror and

straightens her wig. She walks slowly from the room. I can't tell if she is smiling or if she is crying. I think she will be Dr. Stuart's perfect doll tonight.

Chapter 12: Expansion

I think that Dr. Stuart's work is going very well. I do not see him so often now. He is very busy. Mostly it is Dr. Wallis who is helping me with the numbers. The numbers want me to help Dr. Wallis. Today I saw a 1 and went to find her. She gave me a pile of clothes. The numbers said 27 and I knew to launder and press them before returning them to her. The numbers said 18 and I knew that I had to wait until Dr. Wallis told me what she would want.

"Bring me a drink, please, Natalie," Dr. Wallis said. "Some white wine would be nice."

I poured the wine for her. 19 – I helped her to undress. 21 – I helped her to shower. After I dried her she told me to kneel before her and lick her. She held my head gently and enjoyed it very much. 20 – I helped her to dress again. Dr. Wallis presses the buttons on the box that lets me see the numbers. I wonder how she knows what the numbers want me to do.

Something strange has happened today. I am laying on my bed. My stomach aches. Gauze pads cover three small incisions closed with sutures. A part of me wants to touch them feel them, explore them to know what was done to me while I slept but I lie still. There is no need for me to move, there are no numbers.

Dr. Anna looks at the incisions and says something about "tying my tubes." I think that this means that I have been sterilized but I do not know how I know that. I know more than I understand about many things. It is very mysterious. I try not to think about how I know things. It never brings my happiness. Only the numbers do that.

Dr Waring looks at the incisions. He nods. He seems happy. Perhaps the numbers told him to sterilize me.

But now there are more of us, more who can see the numbers and do their will. Today I saw a new number. First there was a 1. When I found Dr. Stuart three women were with him. They were as Anna was, just before she started to see the numbers; naked strapped and silenced. It must help them to prepare for the numbers; the straps. and the silencing. They seemed alarmed when I appeared. I don't know why. I wonder how they got here.

I was smiling but that did not seem to reassure them. Dr. Stuart tried to calm them. He explained how happy I am now that I see the numbers. They could see that I was smiling. It didn't seem to calm them.

I saw 51. A new number. As bright as the others. Bright and blue. I knew what I had to do. I took the leash clipped to the collar of the first woman. I knew where I was leading her. I was not sure how but I knew. I took them to another part of the building. There was a small room for each of them. The rooms have no windows, only a small bed. I put them in their rooms. Each of them has a tag telling who they are. Alice and Crystal and Suzanne. They must wear their tags so that Dr. Stuart and Dr. Wallis know who they are. It is harder now that there are more of us but the numbers always seem to know which one is needed. I closed and locked the doors behind them. I left the straps and tape on them. I had to be sure that they would remain where they were; otherwise they might not get to serve the numbers. They sobbed and tried to cry out. They cannot know how happy they will be when they are doing what the numbers tell them.

When I woke up this morning and the numbers told me to dress I had some nice new clothes. I have a new black dress. It has a square collar and short sleeves. It buttons at the back. The

skirt is very short and flares a little. It has "Natalie" embroidered in small letters upon it. I have some new tights. They are much finer than the ones I wore before. And new shoes. With higher heels. Perhaps they are a present from the numbers.

I see a 1. I go to find Dr. Wallis. She is in the large meeting room with Dr. Stuart. There are four others, Anna and the three newcomers. They are wearing the same dress I do, the same tights, the same shoes. We all have our hair done identically. Each has a name embroidered on her dress, as mine does. "Anna", "Alice", "Crystal" and "Suzanne". They are standing quite still with their hands by their sides. They are smiling. I join them. We are all smiling.

Dr. Wallis turns a control on the box and presses a button. I see a 0 and start to recite, "About: Soft Cybernetics Software Version 2.54 : Scripts Version 3.8 ".... I become aware that we are all reciting the same thing, simultaneously. How remarkable.

Dr. Stuart is pleased that we are all seeing the same number at the same time. He smiles and exclaims, "Excellent!"

Another button. I see a 5 and start to undress. Again all five of us have seen the number together. I see a 10 and stop. We have all taken off our dresses and now just stand in bra, panties and tights. Dr. Stuart is pleased. He grins at Dr. Wallis.

"That is very good," he says. How good that the numbers help us to please Dr. Stuart so. He touches each of us while Dr. Wallis watches. We all stand still – that's what the 10 tells us to do. Crystal stands next to me. Dr. Stuart strokes her cheek. She stands still while he does this. He reaches around her and unfastens her bra. Her breasts drop a little when the cups fall away. He tells her to put her arms straight above her head. She complies. He squeezes and molds her breasts. She is still smiling but somehow she does not seem happy. I wonder if I should put my arms above my head. But there are no numbers to tell me to do it.

It is nice that there are five of us now. Sometimes the numbers ask us to do things at the same time. Somehow that is better than when we do them alone. I like it when the numbers ask Anna and I to do things at the same time. The numbers often ask Crystal and Suzanne to do things at the same time. Often at night. Sometimes they use the same doll face masks that Anna had. Sometimes they wear nothing but their masks and wigs. The numbers don't seem to ask Anna to wear her mask and wig any more. I do not know if that makes her sad. She still smiles. We all smile.

Chapter 13: Limitations

Dr. Wallis came to my room when I was lying on my bed last night. It was very late. She didn't turn on the light. Then she did something strange. She put tape across my mouth. I don't know why, I never talk unless I am asked a question. I have had my mouth taped before. It is not necessary. She locked my wrists to the bed rails with metal bracelets. I don't know why she did that. I never move unless the numbers tell me too or I am instructed to by one of the doctors. I suppose she might have been worried that the numbers would suddenly take me away.

She had a small computer. I think the numbers come from inside computers. I have seen a bigger computer in the white room but she had a small one in my room. There was a cable. I felt her plug the cable into my connector. Dr. Wallis could see that I was a little afraid. She told me not to worry. She told me that the numbers wanted me not to worry. That was strange because usually the numbers tell me themselves. But I believe Dr. Wallis. She is my friend.

Dr. Wallis pressed some keys on her computer. I felt a tingle in my head. Like when I am in the big white room with the big computer. But it was only a little tingle. I didn't cry out or struggle. Dr. Wallis didn't need the tape and the bracelets at all. I expect she was only being careful. She took them off and left me. I fell asleep. I dreamt the same dreams that I dream when I have been in the big white room. I wonder if I will see some new numbers now.

It is sometime later. It is dark I have been sleeping. I suddenly see a very bright number 1. I get up and go to find Dr. Wallis. I am still naked, the numbers did not tell me to dress. Dr. Wallis is with Dr. Stuart. They are arguing. He is shouting, waving some papers at her. He says she has betrayed him. She asks him where he thought the funding was coming from. He says she is trying to cheat him. He says her friends are trying to steal his ideas. Dr. Wallis lunges at the box. She presses a button. I see 90 glowing bright in gold. It looks so pretty but I don't like what it tells me. I must shoot Dr. Stuart. Can that be right? But the numbers must be obeyed.

All the numbers have always been right before but I have never seen this one. It does glow brightly, though, so it must be right. There is a gun on the table. I pick it up. Dr. Stuart pulls Dr. Wallis between us just as I pull the trigger. The bullet hits her in the throat. There is a lot of blood. I didn't mean to do that. I hope the numbers do not punish me. Dr. Stuart pushes Dr. Wallis away. She falls to the floor. I have not done what the numbers told me to do. Now I must. Dr. Stuart tries to run. I point the gun at him and pull the trigger again and again until it only clicks. The noise is terrible. The bullets hit Dr. Stuart as he reaches the door. He collapses to the floor. He doesn't move. Neither does Dr. Wallis.

I have done what the numbers told me to do but now what must I do? There are no numbers, nothing. The box has fallen from Dr. Wallis' hand. There are no numbers. Could I make numbers appear by pushing the buttons? I don't think I am allowed to touch the box. There is nothing for me to do. I stand and wait. Nobody comes. I guess that the numbers did not ask the others to come.

Chapter 14: In the White Room

I am in a white room. It is like the one in my dreams, in my nightmares. There are no wizards in white here, just people; people in white. I think they know about the numbers but I don't see numbers any more. I think they know about the box. I have seen some of them with it. But no one seems to want to use it anymore. Perhaps they are frightened of what happened to Dr. Wallis and Dr. Stuart? Perhaps the box is broken? Or perhaps the numbers will not come for them even if they have the box?

I was in the room with Dr. Wallis and Dr. Stuart for a long time. I saw no numbers to tell me to leave. I watched them bleed and then they stopped bleeding and then the blood turned brown. I was still holding the gun when the policemen came. I didn't know to put it down. I think the policemen were quite frightened because they shouted so loudly. They took the gun away from me. Then they took me away. And Crystal and Alice and Anna and Suzanne.

We each have a white room here. It's not as comfortable as our rooms at the house but it doesn't matter. I just hope that I can get to see the numbers again. There is another doctor here, Dr. James. He tells me that I have nothing to worry about. I don't believe him. How can I be happy without the numbers? He has given me a special jacket with arms that lace behind my back. The jacket is very stiff. It has many buckles and straps. They remind me of the straps that Dr. Stuart used. Why do I remember that?

Dr. James says he is worried that I might hurt myself because I cannot see the numbers. That is why I must wear the jacket. And Crystal and Alice and Anna and Suzanne.

He tells me it wasn't my fault about Dr. Stuart and Dr. Wallis. I know that, of course. I only did what the numbers asked of me. He says he will help me to sleep. A nurse gives me an injection. It does help me to sleep. But doesn't he know he need only have asked the numbers to be an 8?

Chapter 15: Number 9 Dream

I can see the numbers again. Terrible things have happened but I can see the numbers again. I was asleep. Well, not asleep like when I see an 8, but resting, resting after an injection. There were loud noises, like the sounds of the gun when I saw the number 90, the big gold 90. Men came into my room. They were wearing masks. They were carrying guns.

They put me on a gurney and wheeled me from my room. There was smoke in the corridor. There was blood in the corridor. I saw Dr. James lying in the corridor. He wasn't moving. I saw the nurse lying in the corridor. She wasn't moving, either. The doors at the end of the corridor were broken. The masked men pushed me through the doors to an ambulance. The driver was lying on the ground. There was a lot of blood. He wasn't moving. Crystal and Alice and Anna and Suzanne were there as well. They seemed safe but they were scared, just as I was. I saw Dr. Stuart's computers and Dr. Wallis' files. And the box.

The ambulance took us a long way. We flew again in a plane but not a big plane. The attendants were all armed.

We are in a new house but it is not near mountains. The countryside is very dry and hot. I do not mind because I see the numbers again. I see the numbers and I am happy. I think that Anna and Crystal and Alice and Suzanne can see the numbers because they look happy too.

I have a new friend. He tells me he is Mr. English. He knows how to make the numbers come so he must be my friend. He has friends who help him, Mr. French, Mr. Dutch and Miss Scott. Mr. English has made copies of the box so that all his friends can help us with the numbers.

Mr. English says I must not worry about Dr. Waring and Dr. Wallis. He says Dr. Wallis was helping Dr. Waring so she could bring us here. Why would I worry about Dr. Stuart and Dr. Wallis? I did what the numbers told me. It must have been right. We do not have to wear our jackets anymore. I think that Mr. English knows we are happy now and will not hurt ourselves. We do not have any clothes but it is warm here so I do not mind. Mr. English seems to like watching my body just as Dr. Waring did. I do not mind, I have the numbers again. I am happy, I have not been Mr. English's doll yet, I wonder if I shall be.

I was with Mr. English today when something interesting happened. Mr. Dutch and Miss Scott came into the room. They brought a woman with them. She didn't seem to want to be there. Her arms were strapped and she had a cloth in her mouth. She struggled when Mr. Dutch sat her in a chair. Her clothes were torn. Mr. Dutch seemed to like that.

Mr. English said that she would help them with some programming. The woman shook her head. Mr. English asked her if she would like to be like me. She shook her head again. She cannot know how good it feels to see the numbers. Mr. English suggested that she think again. He asked if she would like to spend more time with Mr. Dutch. She shook her head again. It seems so hard for Mr. English to get her to do what he wants. What a pity Mr. English does not have a box for the woman. What a pity she does not have a connector. Perhaps he will provide her with one. She will be happier then.

Later on I was lying on my bed and she came to me with Mr. Dutch. She has an identity badge clipped to the pocket of her torn blouse. It says "Heather Blanik, Research Assistant, Department of Computer Science, University of Colorado at Boulder". It has numbers and a bar code on it. It has a photograph of her. It must have been taken before she came here. It doesn't show her black eye or the bruises on her cheeks. It doesn't show her torn blouse or the burn marks on her right breast. She looks happier in the photograph. Do you suppose she could see the numbers then? Mr. Dutch tells her that she will help me with my numbers. She nods but she

doesn't look happy. I am sure she would be happy if she knew how good it is to see the numbers.

Heather is very kind to us. She works so hard to help us with our numbers. Mr. Dutch gives her a lot of encouragement. He watches her all the time when she is working with us. She helps me and she helps Anna and Crystal and Alice and Suzanne. Mr. Dutch has found her different clothes to wear. She doesn't have to wear her torn blouse and skirt any more. She wears metal bracelets too, more elaborate than any I have worn. One set joins her wrists. Another joins her ankles. They are joined by a chain. They make it hard for her to do her work, to type or write or handle files but Mr. Dutch likes her to wear the bracelets.

I saw Heather later this morning. She was with Mr. English when the numbers asked me to fetch him a drink. She was kneeling down in front of him. Her blouse is torn again. And her skirt. She has red marks on her legs, as if she has been struck with a cane or a stick. The chain between her wrist bracelets is behind her back now. She cannot use her hands at all. She has her mouth around Mr. English's... Mr. English's what? She has her mouth around the thing that Dr. Stuart used to push into me when I was Dr. Stuart's doll. Mr. English seems to enjoy having her mouth around him. Mr. English is smiling and holding her face against him. She doesn't seem to be enjoying it. I can hear her moaning. Mr. English is talking to Heather.

"Now do you get the idea?" he asks. "Do you think you can get your little computer to tell these robo-chicks to do this? Hmmm?"

Heather seems to think she can. I think she tries to say yes but it is hard to tell. She gags each time that Mr. English thrusts into her mouth. He fills her mouth until she is choking. He seems to be enjoying it but I do not think Heather is. I wonder what a robo-chick is.

Mr. English pushes her away. She is sobbing. She spits and tries to raise her hands to wipe her lips. He takes his drink and picks up the box. I see a yellow 2, a nice bright yellow 2. I go back to my room, happy to have seen the number.

Chapter 16: We Can Remember it for You Wholesale

I see a 1, a bright, green one. I must find the controller. Miss Scott has the box. She straps me to a chair. I wonder why she does this. I will not resist her. Heather comes into the room, holding her small computer awkwardly between her bound hands. I think that she will give me more numbers.

Heather has been crying. There are more red marks on her legs. She is still wearing her bracelets but her hands are in front so she can work. She plugs a lead from her computer into the socket at the back of my neck. It feels strange. I think that this has happened before. It's very like what happens in my dreams, but I am asleep when it happens in my dreams. I am not sure that she should be doing this while I am awake but I am sure that Miss Scott knows what Heather should be doing.

Heather presses some keys on her computer. Suddenly my head is filled with numbers, whirling, spinning, terrifying numbers, bright and shining, one after another. I shake my head. I cry out. I scream. Miss Scott tries to hold me down. I struggle in the chair as I feel my head filling with numbers. So many, all at once, so bright. They scare me there are so many. How can I hope to do all that they wish? And then it stops. As quickly as it started. I am calm again. There is no rush. My head no longer feels filled.

Heather tells Miss Scott, "There, do you see why I said she should have been sedated?"

Miss Scott swings around and slaps Heather's face. Heather cries out in pain and tries to put her hands up to defend herself but the chain between her bracelets is too short. He rains blows on her head and face until she collapses to the floor.

"Don't get cute with me, cunt," Miss Scott says. "You just do as you're told or Mr. Dutch will be back to pay you another visit."

Miss Scott is always kind to me. She unfastens my straps and reaches for the box. I see a 2. I leave to go back to my room and as I do I see Anna and Crystal and Alice and Suzanne in the corridor. I see an 8 and I sleep. I don't dream. Perhaps it is all to the good. Dreams can be puzzling and unsettling.

It is evening when I awake. I see a 1 and go to find the controller. Miss Scott is waiting for me. I see 18, she asks me for a drink. I get it for her. As I am pouring the wine Mr. Dutch brings Heather in again. I think that Heather must have upset Mr. Dutch again. She wears her bracelets with her wrists behind her again but she is tied up, too. The ropes look very tight. They criss-cross her chest, crushing her little breasts and pull her arms back behind her so that her elbows touch. She has a cloth stuffed deep into her mouth. There is a leather strap tied around her head to keep the cloth in place. The strap looks very tight. I think it must be painful for her. She is squealing and struggling. Mr. Dutch does not look concerned.

Miss Scott reaches for the box. I see a 60. I don't think I have seen that before but I know what I have to do. I kneel before Miss Scott and lift her skirt. She is not wearing panties. That is good because I know I have to kiss her, lick her and tongue her. The 60 is very bright and I am happy to do what it tells me. Miss Scott is happy for me to do it. She holds my cheeks and guides my mouth. Mr. Dutch seems happy, too. He is laughing. Heather is screaming into her cloth. I see a 10 and stop.

Miss Scott speaks to Heather. "See," she says. "Your programming skills are perfect."

I see a 51. I haven't seen that for a long time. I remember that it means I have to take Heather to her cell. Mr. Dutch gives me the rope that is tied around her neck. "You'd better follow her," he says to Heather. It seems unfair to put Heather back into her cell. After all, Heather has been so kind to me. It's unfair not to take off her tight, uncomfortable ropes, unfair not to remove the cloth. But the numbers didn't ask me to do any of those things. They just said put her back in her cell. I guess they know what's best.

Chapter 17: Rewind & Reload

Something strange happened today. I saw a number and I didn't know what to do. I was with Mr. English. He had his box. I saw the number 16. It wasn't as bright as the numbers usually are but I could still see it. It was grey. Usually the numbers are bright colours the same unique colour for the each number. But this was grey. I am sure that 16 was not grey before.

Mr. English seemed angry. Angry with the box. He pressed the buttons again and again. I saw 16; the grey 16. But I still didn't know what to do. Then he pressed another button. It was 2. As bright and as yellow as before. And I knew what to do. I went back to my room. Mr. English looked puzzled. He put the box down and picked up the telephone as I left.

I have been lying on my bed. I have been thinking about number 16. It was a very odd feeling. And then another thought came into my head. I cannot say I remembered it because I do not know where it came from. All of a sudden I heard myself say, "It is possible that prolonged excitement of the cortex through induced synesthesia could result in deterioration of higher brain functions (Jacobs, pp 17-19) while others (Mayerling, Fedorova, Castle) have suggested that the effects of induced synesthesia will decay over time."

What an extraordinary thing! Perhaps it is something I heard Dr. Anna say before she became happy with the numbers. Perhaps it is something I heard Dr. Waring say before... Before what? Is it something that I knew? I wonder what happened to Dr. Waring? How strange that I remember some things and not others. How strange that I said something like that. I feel as though it was something that I knew and understood very well.

I can see a 1. A big, bright, grey, 1. I wonder what it means. I still feel happy when I see the grey numbers. It's as though the numbers have decided that I have done enough tasks now. I don't need to do things any more. The grey numbers still come to comfort me but I do not have to do things anymore.

I am lying on my bed. I can see an 8. It is grey. All the numbers are grey now. I am sure that the numbers used to be coloured. Then I hear myself say, "Synesthesia as a phenomenon has been observed in a number of different forms where individuals hear colours, taste shapes, or experience other sensory confusions. It is estimated that 1 in 25,000 individuals is born with some aspect of (Cytowic, 1989, 1993). In this paper it is suggested that some forms of synesthesia can be artificially stimulated in higher mammals through electrical excitation of the frontal lobe of the cortex." Where can that information be from? How could I know anything like that? And other memories bubble up. Strange memories of a man. We are together, talking, laughing. Then we are in bed and we are happy doing... something.

It is strange that I am saying and remembering these things now. Strange that the numbers no longer tell me what to do. Perhaps the numbers want me to decide what to do? That would be stranger still. Imagine, not having to wait for the numbers, just knowing what to do, deciding for myself what to do. Can that be what is happening to me? Is it even possible? I hear voices at the door of my room.

"You know what is happening?" It is Mr. French.

"I know she's not responding to the box." Miss Scott is there too.

"It sounds like function decay. I think I can fix it"

"Function decay?"

"Yes. It's always a good idea to read help files, you know. I checked it on the lap-top that we picked up. You know, the upload program?"

"Yeah, sure. Heather was using it yesterday to program the Anna unit with more domestic tasks."

"Well, on the menu bar is a drop down labeled 'Tools'. The answer is in there."

Their voices recede as they walk away down the corridor. I remember more about Anna. She and I worked together, before the numbers. We worked in a big school. No, a university. She worked with Dr. Waring and I worked with Dr. Waring. He had been really impressed by something I'd done. I remember he was very excited. I overheard him discussing it with Anna. I remember them coming to my room. They wanted to explain something to me. They showed me some plans. I remember being very upset by their plans but I don't remember what they were. I just know that this was before the numbers.

I see an 8 again. I wish I knew what it meant. I only know that I feel tired. I only know that I want to sleep. But sleeping is hard when thoughts crowd into my mind.

Chapter 18: The Right Format

Natalie is lying on the couch, naked, struggling hard against the straps. A Whitehead gag forces her mouth open wide. Miss Scott is wearing a white coat and a surgical mask. She thrusts a hypodermic needle into Natalie's arm and watches as her struggles slowly subside. She is still conscious but heavily sedated.

She hears Miss Scott say. "I think we are doing this just in time. We had to force her on to the gurney. It wasn't easy. This had better work or we're really in trouble." Miss Scott fastens the cable from the computer to the connector at the back of Natalie's head. She walks across to where Mr. French is working with the computer.

"You see," he says, calmly, "It's always worth reading the manual." He moves the cursor to the menu bar, click Tools and the menu opens. There are three tabs, 'Numbers', 'Scripts' and 'Target'. Under 'Target' there are four buttons. 'List'; 'Defrag'; 'Recharge' and 'Format'. He clicks on the last button. Natalie twitches on the couch. A message appears on the computer screen. "Target is already operating under Soft Cybernetics software. Are you sure you wish to reformat?"

Mr. French clicks on 'YES'. Another message, "Caution : Reformat will cause loss of all scripts and numbers in the target. Upload of scripts and numbers will be required. Do you wish to proceed?"

Mr. French looks at Miss Scott. "Here we go." He clicks the button, 'YES'.

Natalie's eyes swing wide open. In spite of the gag; in spite of the sedative; she is screaming. She tries to escape from the couch but the straps hold her down. The strap across her forehead ensures she cannot lift her head. The connector stays in place as the counter works its way across the screen of the computer. 15% ... 25% ... 50% ... 75%

The computer screen announces, "Format Complete – Soft Cybernetics Tools Version 1.0a ©S. Waring 2023". Natalie is still twitching against the straps but slowly her struggles and strangled screams subside. The sedative takes over. Miss Scott checks the straps. Natalie's wrists and ankles are badly bruised but the straps are secure.

"Now the first numbers and scripts," says Mr. French. He presses more keys and initiates the upload. This time Natalie hardly reacts.

"Finally we have to re-charge," says Mr.. French. "Look here." He points to a series of CAT-scans of Natalie's skull on a light box on the wall. The connector is clearly visible as an opaque block at the nape of her neck. In front of it, another opaque block, the receiver. And from the receiver thin lines stretch out through the brain into the frontal lobe of the cortex, wires that carry signals. "This is the receiver and this is the emitter," says French. "They're right behind the connector but their batteries only get recharged when the cable is connected. We haven't uploaded or modified numbers for a while so the batteries in the receiver and the emitter are low. See." He points to the screen of the computer.

Miss Scott is looking at the panel labeled 'Receiver Power Status'. It is flashing red. A message says 'Low Power – Warning – Signal Reception or Command Interpretation May Be Impaired.' Mr. French clicks on a button. The message changes to "Charging". Miss Scott checks the straps holding Natalie to the couch. She removes the gag. Natalie is quiet now.

"We'd better run the others through this before they hit the same problem," Miss Scott says. They leave Natalie, resting sedated, the cable still connected, the message still flashing "Charging" on the screen.

Chapter 19: Recycling

I see numbers in my head. And I know what they mean. Some people can hear colours. I see numbers. Suddenly. A seven. Or a four. And I know what they mean. There aren't many numbers. Only zero to nineteen. But I see them. Bright; sudden; there in my mind; blotting out everything else. I haven't always been able to do this. It is new for me. Not long ago I couldn't see the numbers but now I can. I don't remember many things from before I came here but I do know I couldn't see the numbers.

I see a one. It's green and very bright. I know I have to find him. He is somewhere in the house and I have to find him. Wherever he is I have to go there. That's what it means when I see the one. I find him on the patio. Mr. English is with Miss Scott and four other women. Three of them are wearing black, shiny jumpsuits. They are wearing ski masks that cover their faces; except for their eyes; blank, cold, passionless eyes. The fourth woman is wearing white. Perhaps she is another doctor who has come to help us with our numbers. She doesn't try to say anything. Tape covers her mouth. Ropes hold her wrists and arms. She is struggling but one of the masked women holds her tightly. Miss Scott is holding a box. She presses a button and the three take off their masks. It is Crystal and Alice and Suzanne.

Mr. English asks Miss Scott, "How did it go?"

"Very well indeed!" she answers. "Blanik did a good job on the scripts. It's quite scary to watch these three going through their paces in unison but it definitely works. They did the whole snatch pretty much solo. They jumped the doctor here, left two nurses trussed up and got the doc back to the van in ninety seconds. I didn't have to touch the box at all after I gave them the go code. I could have just sat in the van."

Mr. English seems pleased. "So, no problems like the Waring incident?"

"There will always be a risk," Miss Scott replies. "You cannot programme everything and they are only human, after all. They didn't encounter any resistance, either. Everyone was terrified by them. Still, based on this trip, I doubt we'll have any problem equipping ourselves with new units. We just need the doctor to play her part."

The doctor doesn't look as though she is looking forward to this. Mr. English picks up his box. I see 51. I am so happy to see the numbers, the bright, big numbers. She struggles to break free. Mr. English grabs her. He tells her that she had better co-operate. Her white coat and her blouse get torn. I think I see what must have happened to Heather's blouse, now. Mr. English seems to like the fact that the Doctor's blouse is torn. He tells her that he has lots of friends who will want to take turns with her. She tries to struggle some more. The others look on. I have to take the doctor to her cell. She does not want to come but I have to make her. If I did not I wouldn't be doing what the numbers tell me and then I couldn't be happy. Surely the doctor would want me to be happy?

It is a little later. I can see a one. It's green. It's very bright. I know I have to find him. It makes me so happy when I see the numbers, so happy that they are so bright. I find him in his study. He is with another man I have not seen before. He smiles as I arrive and turns to the man. "Well what do you think of her?"

He replies, "You've solved the problem that you thought you had, then?"

Mr. English shrugs. "It wasn't too hard. Fortunately Waring did a good job on documentation. We sorted it out and we picked up a useful little programmer from the Boulder campus. She's able to program scripts but she needs an unfortunate amount of encouragement. I've got some other resources I can call on to replace her."

"And further units?" the man asks.

"Not quite so easy but we'll have it under control soon. The neurosurgery skills are not easy to come by although the procedure itself is apparently straightforward. Waring didn't have very complex facilities in back in the UK or in Colorado. We can replicate those. We've managed to find a competent surgeon and she has joined us now. It's just down to how quickly we can get her working."

He is holding the control box. He presses keys I see "18" pure and silver. I have to fetch something.

"Bring us two glasses of wine" he says and I know what I have to do. It is so good to do what the numbers ask of me. I am so happy when I see the numbers, so happy when I do what they say. I pour their wine. Mr. English hands the box across to the other man.

"Here, you've paid for this. You might as well start now." He presses a button. I see a zero, a pale, beige zero. I must stand straight with my arms at my sides and my feet together, smile and recite. "About: Soft Cybernetics Software Version 1.63 : Scripts Version 2.5 : Variant - Utility Unit".

Mr. English tells him to press five. I see the number glowing bright, beautiful purple. I undress and stand naked before them, hands at my sides. The man smiles broadly. Mr. English tells me to stand before him with my left hand on his shoulder and my legs apart. He spreads me with his fingers and instructs me to rub my clitoris with my index finger. I do it slowly, touching my little point carefully because it is very tender when I am dry. He pushes his fingers into me after a few minutes and smears my lubricant on my clitoris. I don't know why but I begin to rub faster and harder without him telling me to. It feels good. It makes me want... need... something. I continue to rub myself while he fingers me. The man watches intently. I rub myself faster while we make me wetter. Mr. English likes to be inside me when I am very wet. I rub myself harder. I feel warm all over. My nipples stiffen. I need to breathe faster and deeper. My cheeks flush.

"Does she get aroused or is that just a programmed response?" he asks.

"She does actually become aroused," Mr. English answers, He pulls his fingers out of me and holds them up to show the man my wetness. "Well, physically anyway. As you can see, she lubricates heavily." The man nods he seems to approve.

Mr. English tells him to press the zero button on the control box. I stop touching myself, close my legs, stand straight and recite "About: Soft Cybernetics Software Version 1.63 : Scripts Version 2.5 : Variant - Utility Unit." Mr. English explains that pressing the zero button will interrupt whatever routine I am executing and reset me. I feel my wetness dripping down my inner thighs. My nipples and clitoris tingle. I want... I need... something. What is it? I dimly remember doing something... feeling something... having something done to me... that created a sensation of great pleasure... but there is no number for it. It can't be important if it has no number at all. But it must have been important sometime or I would not have any memory of it. I have very few memories. Why do I remember this?

"Lubrication and excitation are basic physiological functions, a simple response to a stimulus" Mr. English explains. "Climaxing is a different thing entirely. She can't do that."

"Can you program her to?"

“Certainly,” he replies. “We program pleasure units to climax if their owners want it. Orgasm is a quite complex neurological and physiological process. The subroutines are very complicated. That makes pleasure units more costly than utility units like Natalie. Does her being able to climax matter to you?”

“I don’t know,” he replies. “Let me try her out.”

Mr. English instructs me to assume the position. I face away from them and get on my hands and elbows with my forehead against the floor, the way Mr. English has taught me. I wait for the belt. He always beats me with it before he uses me. I hope he will not do it too hard or long this time. But there is no belt.

“I want her on her back,” the man says. Mr. English instructs me how to lie, with my hands at my sides and my legs apart, knees raised. The man pulls his shoes and pants off and mounts me.

“She’s nice and tight!” he exclaims. He squeezes my breasts hard, then he sucks and nips my nipples. Mr. English smiles down at us while the man has sex with me. I feel strong, pleasant tingles. I dimly remember that someone used to make love to me tenderly. It is almost like a shadow or perhaps imagination. It must have been before the numbers. His name... what was his name? Yes! His name was Husband! What happened to him? Why can’t I remember? But that must have been very long ago. It doesn’t matter now. I surrender to a strong urge to tilt my hips. I look up at his face. His sweat falls on mine. He pounds into me hard. Our bodies slap together with each of his thrusts. He stops moving to catch his breath.

“Does she enjoy being fucked?” he asks. I wonder if I enjoyed it when Husband had sex with me. I think I must have because I remember it a little, like a shadow or a puff of smoke. He could have asked me if enjoy fucking but he acts as if I am not actually there under him with my vagina around him, exciting him, satisfying him. I perform a service by lying under him. He ignores me because I perform a chore or task like a number might tell me to do. I am a receptacle to him. Nothing more. But if he asked me I would tell him yes, it feels good and makes me want more... something more... much more... to feel something wonderful... to move and scream and moan and... and what? But he doesn’t ask. I must remain silent and still beneath him with my legs far apart.

“I don’t know if she enjoys it,” Mr. English replies. “I never thought about it. Does it matter?”

The man slaps my breasts, pinches my nipples hard and begins to pound into me again. After a few minutes he grunts. I feel him cum inside me. He climbs off, wipes himself with his handkerchief and dresses, wearing a satisfied smile. I feel like I want to rub myself to make the sensations stronger after he is out of me. I want to do it. I need to do it. But Mr. English has not told me to and there are no numbers for that. It is not a chore and numbers only have chores with them. I lower my hips and take deep breaths. My heart slows and stops pounding. My labia feel cold where they are wet with our fluids. My clitoris and G-spot slowly stop tingling. The tingling is strange. It feels in my cunt like the numbers feel in my brain. How can that be?

“Well, do you want her to have climaxes?” Mr. English asks. “I’ll have upgrade her. That’s a pleasure unit, There would be installation and maintenance fees on the application if you do.” The man looks down at me and shakes his head.

“No, why bother with that? She’s fine like she is,” he replies. “Hell, I don’t care whether she cums or not as long as I do.”

I lie on my back the way Mr. English instructed; hands at my sides, thighs wide apart, my swollen, sticky labia exposed, while the tingles and warmth and excitement slowly run out of me like the man’s semen. I feel empty, hollow, nervous, anxious, unsatisfied... many different feelings at once. I wonder if this was how I felt after Husband made love to me. Why can’t I

remember what I felt then? I think I must have felt better... much better... but memory can be confusing and deceiving. Trying to remember makes me sad. I must put it out of my mind. I think I might feel this way if a number appeared and somehow I was not able to complete the chore it told me to do. That could never happen but if it did, I might feel just the way I do now. I wonder if there is a number that would instruct me to feel whatever it is that I think I used to feel. That would be wonderful. I continue to lie there with my thighs apart while they sign the contract. The floor is hard. I wish the numbers would tell me to shower and sleep.

Mr English looks at me. So does the other man. They shake hands and laugh. They're happy. Perhaps they can see the numbers too.

THE END

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