

Light Source

By E.S. Strout MD

No longer are laser guns the stuff of Hollywood and Strategic Defense Initiative fantasy. The Pentagon inside of a decade could be armed with such a beam weapon.

Oakland Tribune October 19, 2003

You are the one, Neo.

The Matrix

1.

Friday May 2, 2014. 1830 hours:

Professor Paula J. Lynch plopped her duffel bag to the steel deck and waited. The space station's air lock wheezed open in slow motion.

"Welcome to Delta Echo, Dr. Lynch. Haven't seen you since Antarctica," the red haired, freckle-faced Air Force officer said.

Paula broke into a grin of recognition. "Major Raglan. Lou. How did you land this cushy job?"

"I requested off-world duty after the AMANDA mission," he said. "My first time in space. And you?"

"NASA consultant. Your weapons problem."

Raglan sealed the airlock with the manual override. "We've got odd power outages too. Lighting, computers, airtight hatches. Started right after the laser shot."

"Any ideas?"

"Big mystery."

"There should be a document for me."

Lou handed over a slim titanium-acrylic attaché case. “From Colonel Reichart. Our C.O. The lock responds to your spoken ultra-Q password. Come on, I’ll show you to your quarters.”

“No need. 8-Charlie, outer ring. I’m a regular.”

“The Colonel is expecting you. His office 0900 hours tomorrow.”

“What’s the scuttlebutt, Lou?”

“Weapons guys have clammed up.”

2.

Dr. Lynch engaged the deadbolt, tapped the light switch. Nothing. “Damn.” Emergency lighting kicked in with an inconstant glow.

Paula stowed her gear in the cramped locker. She removed her *Florida Gators* cap and shook curly auburn tresses loose, then donned a heavy blue NASA sweater. Her flight boots were kicked into a corner and she slipped bare feet into scuffed brown penny loafers. “I’m ready. Let’s kick ass.”

The attaché case’s lock was a shiny, featureless black square that glinted in the tenebrous light. “Spook Central,” Paula whispered. The lock disintegrated in a shower of glittering particles. Paula read and reread the single-spaced typewritten sheet through wire framed reading glasses perched on her nose. She nodded. “You do have a problem, Colonel Reichart.”

She booted up her laptop. A flood of varicolored geometric shapes flooded the screen. She blinked, rubbed her eyes. “Knock it off,” she said. “NASA tech report on laser weapon malfunction.” The screen went black. “Now, please.” Several seconds later the information appeared.

“Hmm. Laser checks out. All electronic components replaced. Old parts retested. All good,” she read.

A soft whisper came from the audio as she logged out.

3.

Morning. 0900 hours:

Air Force Colonel William Reichart, a tall black man with a shaved scalp and trim, graying mustache, rose from his desk and greeted Paula with a firm handshake. “Dr. Lynch, good to see you. Your quarters okay?”

“Barely. Light’s messed up. My computer screen too. Circles, squares and triangles in rainbow colors. There was some weird faint vocalization when I shut down.”

“”You’re kidding.”

“I may have dreamed it. I was pretty bushed.”

A smile from Reichart. “So even a Nobel Prize winner can have an overactive imagination.”

She shrugged. “I’m not so sure. Got any coffee?”

Reichart filled a Stoneware cup from the Mr. Coffee behind his desk. “You drink it black, I recall.”

She inhaled a slug of the steaming brew, then another. “Wow. That’s almost nuclear. I’d forgotten how potent Delta Echo coffee was.”

“You’ll need it. We’re on a tight schedule, gotta have some answers before I report to NASA and D.O.D. You’ve read my report.”

Paula gulped more coffee. “I’m a problem solver.”

“We’ll be taking a shuttle over to the weapons platform soon. Let me show you our only laser shot.” He loaded a chip into the Video Trac and pressed PLAY. “First test firing. Target was a big rock in the asteroid belt.”

Paula shielded her eyes and turned away as an intense column of silvery light blistered the screen. “Yikes! That could fry a few rods and cones.”

“There’s been no direct observation of the beam, Reichart said. This image was bounced off a new ultra-polarized mirror to mute the brilliance and it’s still hot. One of our orbiting monitors recorded this. Its optics were burned out. Our weapons people say the problem is electronic.”

“And all the components checked out. A mystery indeed,” Paula replied.

The intercom beeped. “Major Raglan here. Shuttle’s ready.”

4.

The airtight exit hatch required manual override. “Any electrical problems like this with your shuttles?” Paula asked.

A reluctant nod. “Similar to Delta Echo. Instrument display failures, lights, loss of communication. We had to manually control the steering jets twice. Time is my enemy here, Dr. Lynch. Pressure from NASA and the Pentagon,” he said. “Beat North Korea, Iran and Israel to an effective laser space weapon.”

“That’s why I’m here, Colonel. There should have been a focused proton-enhanced beam on each firing,” Paula said.

“All systems were in the green. Hit the switch, nothing happened. Two more tries, same result.”

Paula twirled an auburn curl around a finger. “Weird. Something besides the electronics. But what?”

5.

“We’re there, Dr. Lynch” Major Raglan said. “Eight solar panels. They provide 200 watts of ionized solar energy. Newest hi-tech power source,” he explained as the shuttle orbited in a slow circle.

“Hmm,” Paula mused. She massaged her temples with fingertips. “Standard CO₂ laser enhanced by high energy photons colliding in a resonant cavity. A beam weapon of destructive capability never before seen in nature.”

“True,” Reichart said. “Every shot should have been a no-brainer.”

Paula tapped on her laptop’s keyboard, gaped at the screen. “Wow. This beam could reach targets outside of our solar system. Does the Pentagon know?”

“Not yet. I’m waiting on your report.”

Paula exhaled an exasperated sigh. “You set me up for this little jaunt, Colonel, right?”

Reichart’s face darkened in a blush. “I’m in trouble here, Dr. Lynch. Pentagon and NASA up my ass daily, and you have EVA experience.”

Her gaze shot sparks. “Continue.”

“Major Raglan says you walk on water.”

Her glare faded to a forgiving grin. “Hah. Walk on water indeed. I’d sink faster than the Titanic. Figured you were in on it, Lou. Where’s my EVA gear?”

“Right here, Prof. Your COMM system is voice activated.”

6.

“I’ve got static, Lou.”

“Copy. Switching to backup frequency. How now?”

“Same.”

“Another power glitch. I’m working on it. Colonel Reichart says you’re go to board the satellite.”

“Roger that. Ten meters, closing.”

“Steer clear of those solar panels. The ionic pulse could fry you good.”

“

Copy. Reaching handhold . . . What the hell?”

“You okay, Dr. Lynch?” Reichart asked.

“Are you seeing this?” she asked.

“Say again?”

“The stars are gone.”

“I’ve got stars,” Major Raglan said.

Paula touched the CO₂ thrusters and backed off. “Damn. They’re back. Something concentrating over the satellite. Blocking it.”

“You’re breaking up, Dr. Lynch,” the Colonel said. “Abort EVA now.”

“There’s a voice. Say what?”

You are the one.

7.

She stared at the pale green walls and dark viewport. “Where am I?”

“Dr. Lynch? It’s Lou. Major Raglan. You’re in the Delta Echo infirmary. You gave us quite a scare.”

“I heard a voice.”

“I was on the COMM line.”

“Different. Sounded synthetic.”

A young Hispanic physician was scanning spiky tracings on a CRT screen. “Alicia Hernandez, Professor Lynch. I’m concerned about your EEG.”

“Bet you my hazardous duty pay it’s abnormal.”

“No way, Prof. There’s paroxysmal alpha wave activity consistent with an overstressed cerebral cortex. You were unconscious but with no delta wave activity. Were you dreaming?”

A vigorous head shake. “There was a voice. Not Lou’s.”

“You said the stars were gone,” Major Raglan told her.

“You imagined a voice?” Dr. Hernandez asked.

Paula sat up and jabbed an accusing finger. “Dammit, stop trying to psychoanalyze me. A voice said I was the one.”

“Colonel Reichart wants you to rest,” the physician said. She held out two white tablets and a paper cup of water.

Paula batted them to the deck. “No meds. Must stay alert. Some one or something trying to contact me.”

“You may have had a small stroke. We’ll be doing an MRI.”

Dr. Lynch jammed both hands over her ears and squinted her eyelids shut. “Just leave me alone, okay? Both of you.”

The infirmary lights failed all at once, leaving them in utter darkness.

8.

The light source. Not natural. Killing us.

“I hear you,” Paula said. She slid from the bed, tiptoed barefoot to the viewport.

A crash as Major Raglan stumbled against an instrument cart. “Say what, Dr. Lynch? I didn’t hear anything.” He groped in the darkness, found Paula’s arm.

“I’ve got her, Dr. Hernandez. She’s staring out the viewport.”

Light expanded the room as emergency power kicked in. Paula turned, looked around, baffled. “Lou? What happened?”

“You were babbling, not making any sense,” Dr. Hernandez said as she dressed Paula’s arm where the IV needle had pulled loose.

Paula sat on the edge of the bed, running fingers of both hands through tangled, moist curls. “My laptop.”

“Right here, Dr. Lynch,” Raglan said. “What are you looking for?”

She stared at the dark view port. “An answer. Something out there. My clothes, please.”

9.

Quarters 8-Charlie, outer ring:

Paula booted up her laptop. Swirling multicolored geometric patterns as before. “Tell me, dammit.”

You understand.

Paula exhaled a sigh. “I don’t.”

You have the extraordinary cerebral capacity to communicate. We’ve tried the others. They don’t respond.

A high-pitched giggle. “You mean they’re Salieri to my Mozart? Oh sorry. I’ve been a little stressed. Let’s introduce ourselves. I’m Paula.”

We are a subatomic construct. A confluent particulate entity.

“So you’re a bunch of mixed up quarks, leptons, neutrinos,” Paula retorted. “Subatomic particles. Dark matter?”

As you wish. Solid form is an alien concept.

“Well pardon the heck outta me. I like being a solid alien.”

The light source has annihilated billions of us.

A temporal artery throbbed. Paula massaged it with a fingertip. “Okay, you’ve got my attention.”

You must deactivate the light source.

“You guys stopped it.”

It remains a threat.

“You are the freaking threat here,” Paula screamed, an octave just short of high C.

Canceling the beam costs us billions more.

“I’m only a scientist. The military controls . . .”

We can create havoc.

“Hah. More half assed outages?”

Our collective is concentrated now. Listen.

The intercom came to life with a raucous squawk. “Dr. Lynch. NASA just went black!” Major Raglan yelled.

“Lou, I could use some coffee here.”

10.

Lou poured fresh Delta Echo coffee from a thermos. “I can get you something stronger, Dr. Lynch.”

“Not possible.” She swallowed a large noxious jolt, made a gagging sound. “So NASA went dark, but Delta Echo’s power is back on?”

“As of twenty minutes ago. Real sudden like. I don’t get it.”

“Seems they can be selective.”

A puzzled grimace. “Who? How can you know that?”

“It’s from an unusual, ah, alien source.”

Lou gave his nose a nervous pinch. “Why hasn’t anyone else . . .?”

Paula smiled. “I’m the only one susceptible to confluent subatomic particle entity suggestion.”

Raglan viewed the multicolored geometric display on Paula’s screen with a dubious eye. “Are you feeling okay, Dr. Lynch?”

“A voice spoke to me when I was EVA at the satellite,”

Major Raglan sat cross-legged on the deck, staring at his hands. “You know I respect you, Dr. Lynch, but this is crazy.”

“Trust me on this, Lou. Was I wrong in Antarctica?”

A sudden electronic voice permeated Paula’s quarters.

Shut down the light source.

Lou's eyes widened in panic. "I heard it."

The intercom beeped. "Dr. Lynch, Colonel Reichart here. Power is steady here at Delta Echo now, but the outage at NASA has spread to all of Cape Canaveral."

"I'll get back to you, Colonel."

11.

"Neat trick. What are you bodiless freaks up to now?" Paula asked.

We can cancel electric power anywhere on your world.

Paula's vigorous headshake sent auburn curls cascading down her cheeks. "That's impossible. Only in movies like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Black and white 50's sci-if classic. A robot named Gort with a laser eye. You'd like that."

Silence.

"It figures. Sorry. Can't help these little outbursts. They relax me."

Keep watching.

Colonel Reichart's voice shrieked over the intercom. "Houston now. Oh holy crap. Our whole Eastern seaboard. Iran, Pakistan, North Korea, Israel. Still more."

"Stop before you really piss me off," Paula said.

It costs us billions to control the light source. Help us.

Paula squinted in concentration. Her sudden bilateral finger snap reverberated in the closed stateroom space. "How many billions do you lose shutting down electrical power plants?"

None. It is a natural source.

Paula mopped her face with a tissue. "There's our impasse, Lou. I may have an idea here. A compromise."

Explain, please.

“This will cause you some pain, but I must provide proof.” Her explanation took several minutes. The response took only a second.

Agreed.

“Lou, let’s go see Colonel Reichart.”

12.

The second asteroid target was atomized in the brilliant flare of the activated-photon enhanced laser.

“It’s perfect. The Pentagon will be pleased, Dr. Lynch,” Colonel Reichart said as he gloated over the test data. “What was the problem?”

She gave him an enigmatic smile. “They weren’t strong enough to stop your first shot, but now they have mustered their forces, They have become a menace.”

Puzzled shrug. “Who is a menace?”

“Trust me. Bring up the planetary blackout areas.”

He stared at the screen. “I’ll be damned. Power restored here, Iran North Korea, all others.”

“They fixed it. Now you must dismantle the laser weapon.”

Reichart’s face turned a dark apoplectic hue. “I appreciate your efforts, Dr. Lynch, but that can’t happen. We have the ultimate orbiting laser weapon now.”

“We were lucky. We were looking at permanent worldwide blackout, but I made them a deal.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Dr. Lynch?”

“I arranged it. A demonstration of their trust. Cost them big time.”

Paula laid a manila folder on the Colonel’s desk. TOP SECRET was stamped on its cover in red. “You had best read this. The Pentagon has received an authenticated copy. So have other countries working on space laser weapons. It explains in concise details of the responsibilities

the involved parties must agree to. And the consequences for failure to comply.”

13.

This type of resolution in your jargon is called what?

“A Mexican standoff. No winners or losers,” Paula explained.

And if the light source is reactivated?

“No coffee, toast, television or computers for us. No communication. But mess with our electricity without provocation and there won’t be enough of you left to turn off the juice.”

Agreed.

“You guys should try solid form. Kick back, relax, chug a couple of brewskis. Eat some popcorn. Watch a good sci-fi flick. I like the oldies. *The Thing*, for example. 1951, with James Arness as a space traveling malignant vegetable.”

No thank you. Good bye.

“No sense of humor,” Major Raglan observed.

“You owe me a drink, Lou. Stoli on the rocks with a twist would be nice.”

The End