

# Part 1 of Connection Concealed: Aftermath

## Scene 1

*JUNE 8th, 2061. White Sands Army Base, New Mexico, North American Province, 0150 local time.*

"We're not getting anywhere, are we?" Louise said, wincing in frustration.

"Nope," Sergeant Ben Garcia replied. He got up and took off his uniform jacket. He threw it over a chair.

Louise focused on the large screen in front of them. She zoomed in on a specific part of the network and tilted her head. There were red warning symbols flashing all over the display.

She pointed. "The virus took down this server park first..."

Garcia joined her and traced a long line with the tip of his finger. "And it spread through here, taking out everything here and there..."

"How on earth did they get past those firewalls?" Louise asked, staring at another red circle on the screen, shaking her head in disbelief. A drop of sweat rolled down over the back of her neck. It made her want to scream.

Why was it still so damn hot in here? The t-shirt under her uniform top was soaked and stuck to her back uncomfortably. She would never remove her jacket like Garcia just had,

though. She didn't like how informal she looked without it.

Plus, technically, it wasn't even allowed to walk around in your shirt. The only reason she didn't remind Garcia of that was because the air conditioning had been broken for the last 24 hours. It was yet another result of the attack.

"It doesn't make sense," Garcia said, leaning on the table. The short dark hair by his temples glistened with sweat.

Louise rolled her head in an attempt to loosen the muscles in her neck. "We're getting nowhere," she sighed.

"Let me run the simulation again," he said, meeting her gaze. "I can start where the attack ended and work my way back. You never

know what that tells us." He picked up his wireless keyboard.

Louise couldn't help but snort. "Not the keyboard again!"

Garcia glanced over his shoulder. "What? I think it's easier than typing on a screen."

Louise smiled tiredly. "You're so old school. I'm surprised they even let you bring that ancient thing in here."

Garcia shrugged and looked away.

Louise frowned. "Don't tell me, Garcia. Run the simulation," she said and walked over to the desk with her personal terminal. Her whole body felt heavier than usual in this heat.

"Yes, ma'am," he said and started typing.

Louise sat down in the corner of the dark office. There was a large glass wall that separated the room from a long hallway with many other offices just like it. It was the middle of the night so she hadn't seen anyone walk by recently.

She looked at the thin screen that was propped up on the desk. Louise let the camera scan her face. Her picture, name and rank flashed by before her terminal unlocked.

"I'll take another look at the logs," she told Garcia, rubbing her cheek.

Louise needed a break from their frustrating attempts at analyzing the origin of the attack. They had made almost no progress in the last 24 hours and she was on edge. She needed answers. And she needed them soon.

Her team had been working non-stop and had nothing to show for it so far. It was their job to find out how the terrorists had pulled off the attack on the global network. The clock was ticking and her superiors were getting increasingly impatient.

Louise would stay here, in this insanely hot office, until she understood exactly what had happened. She had sent most of her team to the break room for a few hours of sleep. She couldn't, though. She was too pissed off about someone outsmarting her.

In the 10 years Louise had served the Cyber Command of the global army, she had never seen anything like this. Nothing had come even close. It was the worst terrorist attack in 3 decades.

Large parts of the world had gone completely offline for a whole minute. That didn't sound

like a long time until you thought about all traffic coming to a halt, blackouts turning cities into chaos, hospitals shutting down and, most importantly, the stock exchanges closing.

Louise rested her chin on her fist, too tired to sit up straight. "Maybe I'm looking at this from the wrong angle," she thought as she scrolled through the logs. "Maybe I should be looking at who did it and not how they did it..."

Louise certainly had a long list of suspects to consider. She opened the database with information on rogue hacker groups and terrorist organizations. There was a list of groups that were capable of an attack on this scale. She had created it yesterday after Captain McConnell had demanded a report within the hour.

But the truth was, 2 days ago, Louise wouldn't have believed anyone was capable of taking down most of the global network. But it had happened and so she had to find what she had missed before.

"Who would want to do this?" she thought, frustrated. She tapped a random name. A picture of one of the most famous terrorist leaders popped up. Louise took in the woman's cold, grey eyes for a moment.

A sudden flurry of movement pulled her from her thoughts, though. She glanced in Garcia's direction to see what the hell he was doing. The Sergeant was hurrying to put his top back on over his sweaty shirt.

Louise's eyes focused on the hallway behind the glass wall. Her mouth went dry as soon as she realized why Garcia was buttoning up his



jacket at lightning speed. "Oh shit," she whispered.

It had only been a matter of time before Major Becker showed up, she knew. But that didn't mean she was prepared for it. She rubbed her clammy hands on her pants nervously.

The shiny wall that doubled as a writing board offered her a reflection of herself. She could see enough to know her dark hair was still pulled back in a neat bun. Her uniform seemed fine too.

Louise opened a desk drawer and pretended to be looking for something while she stole a few glances at Major Michelle Becker storming in the direction of the Captain's office. Not a good sign.

She couldn't help but notice how good Michelle looked. "Really, does she ever wake up looking

like shit?" Louise wondered. She had never seen Michelle with a single hair out of place, a blemish on that perfect skin or even a hint of shadow under her eyes. It was maddening.

She quickly closed the drawer when Michelle seemed to slow down for a second and searched the office space with laser sharp eyes. Louise focused back on the screen in front of her.

She made a show of scrolling through the list. She swore she could feel Michelle's gaze on her, so she squinted and tried to look lost in thought. After a few more uncomfortable moments, she felt like she was in the clear. Just to be sure, Louise waited 3 more minutes before she glanced up.

The hallway was completely empty again. Thank God. She blew out a breath. She needed to get

out of here for a few minutes. Get some fresh air. Or coffee. Maybe even some food.

It was 2 in the morning and she hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. She swiped the screen to lock it. "I'll be back in 15," she told Garcia as she pushed herself up.

Louise walked into the hallway as quickly as she could. She looked around nervously as she rushed to an office a few doors down. She knocked on the open glass door softly.

Officer Jim Arthur looked up from his terminal. Louise nudged her head in the direction of the cafeteria. "Got time for coffee?"

"No, but I sure need some," Jim replied.

**End scene 1**

**Scene 2**

"Nothing?" Jim asked.

The cafeteria was completely abandoned. Louise noticed the soft buzzing of the food terminals built into the wall. She shook her head.

"Nothing."

Jim sighed. "Yeah, we got nothing too." He walked over to the coffee machine.

Louise scanned the list of dinner options displayed in front of her. The machine was almost out of hot meals, she noticed. There were plenty of sweet snacks available. All sugar free stuff, of course, but she wasn't in the mood for any of it.

"Heads are going to roll for this one," Jim said, leaning against the wall as he waited for his coffee.

"Careful," Louise murmured. She never liked to gossip. She thought it was unprofessional. She wasn't going to let stress and lack of sleep ruin her carefully guarded reputation of strict professionalism. Especially not now.

"Of course, sure," Jim sighed.

Louise looked up. "I do think they should fire whoever is responsible for this ridiculous food selection," she joked in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Jim grabbed his coffee and joined her. He looked at the meals and wrinkled his nose. "Yikes, veggie schnitzel with green beans."

"It's either that or gluten and sugar free pancakes."

"At least it's cheap," he said and took a sip.

"High price to pay, though."

Jim chuckled. "Yeah. That looks disgusting."

Louise reluctantly tapped the screen to select the schnitzel anyway. She held up her watch to confirm the purchase. The machine started humming louder as it began to prepare her food.

"Major Becker is here," she said and turned to face Jim with her eyebrows raised.

"Again?" He said and swallowed more coffee.

Louise quirked her head to the side. "She was here before?"

"Yeah, I saw her in the late afternoon."

Louise rubbed the back of her neck. "I wonder why she's here twice in one day."

"Why wouldn't she be? It's a fucking mess out there and we're the ones who are supposed to know why it happened."

"Except we don't know," Louise groaned.

"I bet things are getting pretty heated. Even the press is giving the Council a hard time."

Louise nodded in agreement. "She needs answers and she needs them soon."

"Yup. Wouldn't want to be in her shoes."

Louise scoffed. "Oh, don't worry about her. Michelle will just find someone..." She stopped herself.

Jim glanced around the room. "Careful now," he said and winked back at her.

Louise felt a blush creeping up her neck.

"I get nervous when she's here," she admitted quietly, angry at herself for the lapse in judgment. Jim had been her friend for many years and she was getting too comfortable around him.

"Everyone gets nervous when she's here," he said. His voice was quiet, but Louise still looked over her shoulder.

The machine chirped to let Louise know the food was ready. She waved her watch at it again and picked up the plate that was now waiting for her. She looked at the food and groaned.

Jim laughed. "I thought you loved German food."

"Schnitzels originally are from Austria. Not the same," Louise grumbled as she grabbed a fork and knife.



She walked over to a table carrying her food and plopped onto a chair. After another look at her dinner, Louise reluctantly poked at the schnitzel. It looked so dry. She decided to start with the green beans. At least these looked somewhat fresh and juicy.

"Can I ask why?" Jim asked.

Louise swallowed down the beans. "Why what?"

"Why does..." He glanced at the door. "Why does she get under your skin?"

Louise cut a small piece off of her schnitzel.

"You know why," she said without looking up.

Jim put down his coffee. "Does it bother you she's so high up the chain?"

"Of course it does," she said and chewed. "But it's not like it's surprising," she added af-

ter swallowing down what tasted like a piece of cardboard. "God, I need water to get this down."

Jim ignored her food commentary. "Why not? It's crazy how fast she was promoted."

Louise shoved her plate aside. Her appetite was gone. "She was always extremely ambitious."

"Really? Even back when you knew her?"

Louise frowned and thought. "Yeah," she finally said. "Climbing up the ranks was all she cared about. She was always telling me I didn't have enough ambition. That I was not committed enough."

Jim leaned forward, his eyes wide. "Are you kidding me? You are..." He seemed to be looking

for the right words. "You're the most committed and talented cyber warrior I know."

Louise tried to smile. Jim's words were nice, but deep down, she didn't believe him.

"If I'm the most talented person you know, we're in even deeper shit than I thought," she joked. "Because I got nothing on these terrorists." She pushed herself up. "We need to get back to work. We don't have time for this."

Jim gave her a long stare. The compassion in his eyes made Louise itchy all over.

"You gotta stop believing what she told you," Jim said, taking Louise by surprise.

Louise picked up her plate, averting her eyes. "Don't go there. You know I'm over all that stuff."

Jim got up with a groan. "Okay, whatever."

Louise's watch beeped just as she tried to come up with something else to talk about.

"That can't be good," Jim said.

She looked down at the screen and pursed her lips. "Captain wants to see me straight away."

**End Scene 2**

**Scene 3**

"Sir, First Lieutenant Thomas reports as ordered," Louise said and saluted.

"Sit," Captain McConnell barked. Louise didn't understand why he always had to yell at her like they were in a noisy war zone instead of in a building filled with computer nerds.

She took a seat. She squared her shoulders and made sure she was sitting perfectly straight. She was relieved the Captain was alone. Michelle must have left already.

"Sit at ease. Thomas, there's a development I need to discuss with you," McConnell said gruffly. His large hands were folded on his desk. He looked every bit as tired as Louise felt.

Louise nodded slightly. "Yes, sir"

"We know who's behind the attack."

Louise struggled to mask her surprise.

"New intelligence came in," he continued.

"We're confident it's the Fireblue rebels."

Louise's eyes widened. Her mind flashed back to the picture of the terrorist leader she had

studied just 20 minutes ago. The Fireblue rebels were the largest rebel group on the North American continent.

Officially, they were still on the terrorist list. But they had been keeping a low profile. If they were the culprit, this was their first attack in over a decade.

"We suspect their new leader, Lucas, is more combative than she led us to believe," McConnell continued.

Louise frowned. The threat analysis team had done a thorough risk assessment on Eleanor Lucas when she got elected just over a year ago. Louise knew better than to think Lucas was a saint, but there had been no reason to believe she would pose a threat in the near future.

"The intel so far didn't give any indication of that, sir," Louise stammered, feeling the need to defend her coworkers.

"I've read the report, Thomas. I don't think it's in your best interest to remind me of how badly one of our teams failed. "

Louise nodded mutely, a sinking feeling coming over her.

"I was given the order to organize a field mission to verify this new intelligence," the Captain said and sighed. "You weren't my first pick for this mission though, Thomas."

"Excuse me, sir?" Louise asked, her heart speeding up.

"I'm sending you into enemy territory."

"What will be the objective of my mission, sir?" Louise's mind was racing. She felt like she was missing some key information here.

"You will go to 6 locations in the Fireblue territory and gather all evidence that links these terrorists to the attack. The Global Council wants hard proof before we retaliate."

Louise suppressed an eye roll. Of course they did. The Council consisted of a bunch of civilians who were reelected every 6 years. There was an election in just 2 months.

"Your team has dropped the ball too these last 24 hours," McConnell said coldly. "Your investigation into the attack has given us nothing so far."

Louise clenched her jaw and stared ahead. Speaking up now would only get her into more trouble.



"But Major Becker requested your involvement in this mission."

Louise's eyes widened. Michelle was behind all of this? What the hell?

"She will brief us in," he checked his watch, "10."

Loud alarm bells started ringing in Louise's head. She usually avoided being in a room with Michelle at all cost.

"Yes, Captain McConnell," she managed to say, her voice sounding strange even to herself.

"I will see you in briefing room C in 5, Thomas," McConnell barked, clearly picking up on her reluctance to be at the briefing.

Louise jumped to her feet and stood at attention. "Yes, sir. Will that be all, sir?"

The Captain nodded dismissively. After her salute, Louise was able to walk out calmly. As soon as she had closed the door behind her, she bent over, though. The taste of bile in the back of her throat was disgusting. She quickly straightened and looked around.

After inhaling deeply a couple of times, Louise put one foot in front of the other until she was walking steadily again. She hoped no one had seen her.

Her heart was hammering in her chest. She bit her bottom lip hard. The pain would keep her focused. "Get it the fuck together!" she reprimanded herself.

So what if she had to be in the same room as Michelle? She was a professional. She could handle this. Louise nodded, clenched her jaw and kept walking towards the briefing room.

She had no choice but to face the woman she  
was still in love with.

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