This story was originally posted to the LFN Storyboard Archives by Katherine Gilbert.

Notes

I'm posting some of my early stories that have never seen the light of day on the story boards. This was only my 2nd LFN story, so--once again--your patience with my early work is appreciated. :D Oh, since it's so early, too, there may be later series revelations which aren't reflected here. Sorry! :)

Okay, introduction: The following story bridges "War" and "Verdict"; it's my explanation of the shift in Nikita's attitude between these two episodes. Not surprisingly, therefore, it is *loaded* with "War" spoilers, and there are some fair-sized "Simone" ones, as well--if anyone doesn't know all of that episode by now. There may be a few other minor 1st season spoilers, as well, but those will be the major ones. :

My time line for this story places the events of "War" in late August or early September of 1997 and those of "Verdict" in early October. My reasoning for this should become clear, as the story progresses. The death and funeral of Princess Diana also play a very minor background role here. Remember, as well, that all speculation on the terrorists, etc. in this story is meant to be purely fictional.

As to ratings, I'd guess it's around MA-14; I really stink when it comes to rating these things, but there's nothing any more traumatic in this story than in your average episode of LFN.
I should add an extra disclaimer here for part 5. The following part (and some of the later ones) will include characters and settings from the British show, "Callan"—from several decades ago. If you're unfamiliar with "Callan," don't worry; it won't really matter. Anything you need to know for this story will be explained in either this or later parts.

Oh, one last thing—the title will hopefully be explained as the story progresses. Enjoy!

"It wasn't all a lie."

The words ran through Nikita's mind, as she lay unconscious, recovering from her wounds. Her subconscious, dreaming, was trying to put images together—to understand where she was. She looked around and found herself back in Red Cell headquarters. Only, this time, she wasn't the one being interrogated; she was merely an observer. Ghostlike, she watched the scene in front of her.

The cages were hanging the way she remembered them. Inside one was a man; another man paced slowly outside, nearby. She focused more closely and saw that the man inside the cage was Michael. Bloodied and beaten, dressed in what had once been white, he lay with his head on the side of the cage; he looked defeated—hopeless. The only other time Nikita could remember seeing him anything like this was when he had lost Simone for the second time. His Section face—cold, impassive—was nowhere to be seen; he stared at the floor with eyes which seemed to pray for release.

Nikita was distracted from her study of Michael, however, by the sound of boots treading steadily on steel. The man in front of the cage, Michael's interrogator, was dressed, impeccably, in all-black; he waited nearby, like a well-mannered Angel of Death, his hands clasped behind his back. "You always, eventually, manage to tell her some form of the truth, don't you?" he asked Michael in richly-accented and even-measured tones.

Nikita's mind hummed statically at the sound of the man's voice, too familiar to be real. She examined the interrogator more closely and found Michael, again—the one she knew best—cold, efficient—soulless. His face emotionless, his eyes devoid of any inner light or mercy, he strolled in front of his caged counterpart, waiting for a reply which didn't come. He paused for a second at one end of the platform, sighed, and looked up at the roof. "You're becoming a liability," he noted calmly.

The imprisoned Michael continued to stare despondently, motionless. A tear moved silently down his cheek.

His interrogator shook his head slightly at the other Michael's silence and turned to him. "If you refuse to give her up, if you continue to show this...*affection*," he stressed the word quietly, as though it were a ridiculous and distasteful concept, "for Nikita, you'll be cancelled." His eyes were empty, but they stressed the seriousness of his words.

The caged man continued to stare at the floor. "I'm dead already without her," he responded, almost inaudibly.

Nikita heard a snort of amusement. She looked up to see Operations and Madeline leaning against the desk from her office, watching the scene with pleasure—a Roman emperor and his wife prepared to give a thumbs-down to a wounded gladiator. Nikita hadn't noticed it before, but the Red Cell headquarters seemed to extend out of Section's offices, as though they were parts of a whole. She returned her attention to the two Michaels.
The Section Michael continued to look down at his imprisoned counterpart. "You won't see reason?"

The man in the cage closed his eyes for a second and then looked up at his jailor for the first time. "I already have," he asserted quietly.

The Michael in black looked back at Operations and Madeline briefly; they gave him very pleased smiles. He turned back to the defeated Michael and gave him a smile devoid of warmth. "Then we have no choice." He took out a gun, pointed it at his other self, and cocked the hammer.

The Michael in the cage closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Nikita," he whispered with his last breath. Then, the gun fired.

Nikita opened her eyes to find herself in one of Section's hospital rooms. It took her a minute to remember what had happened to her-- why she was there; her mind was preoccupied with her unconscious vision.

Nikita's recent past came back to her all too quickly, however, and her rage returned with it. She tried to sit up, but her entire body was in pain. Gingerly, she propped herself up against her pillows and closed her eyes, trying to block out the protests of her nerves and muscles at such movement. When she regained control, she opened her eyes and stared at the blank wall across from her.

No one was there to greet her; no one was waiting for her recovery. It was probably just as well, she decided. If Michael had been there, she might well have risked reinjury to try to punch him. She shook her head slightly, slowly. "I can't even get rid of him in my dreams," she muttered.

Nikita's anger--her rage--was still strong. She had been used too many times by him. No matter what walls she put up, he always seemed to find a way through her defenses, a way to gnaw at her soul. No matter how much she hardened herself to him, he always found his way in--every time.

"He's not real," she reminded herself. The Michael with the soft eyes and touch, who spoke of true, deep emotions, was only a mirage. The real Michael had never had an emotion; he was cold and calculating, his beauty a freak accident of genetics. But, she had to admit, he was quite an actor; it was about the only credit she was prepared to give him.

Michael had hurt her before--deeply and often, but, this time, she was determined, would be the last. "Not again, Michael," she whispered quietly to herself. "You're never getting through to me again."

It was a solemn vow, and it gave her the strength she needed to begin her physical recovery.

*************** "You wanted to see me, Madeline?" Nikita asked, trying to act nonchalant, as she walked into the older woman's office. It had been a week since she had recovered enough from her physical wounds to be released from the hospital unit. She had been waiting for the next mission to come; it was sort of like waiting for the other shoe to drop. She had been surprised when it was Madeline's voice which called her in.

Madeline was sitting behind her desk, when Nikita entered; she watched her evaluatingly, as the younger operative lowered herself casually into a chair. "There's a briefing in 20 minutes," Madeline smiled reassuringly. "I just wanted to have a small talk before it."

Nikita smiled back at her ironically. Madeline's "small talks" were more like in-depth profiling. "What about?"

Madeline was reassured; Nikita was getting better and better at trying to hide her thoughts from other people. "This next mission will place you in London. It will require you to share an apartment with Michael and Birkoff."
Nikita laughed slightly, despite the twist of anger she felt twist in her stomach at the mention of Michael. "Sounds like an interesting assignment," she said, raising an eyebrow.

"It's surveillance work," Madeline clarified.

"Ah," Nikita responded, with a playfulness she didn't feel.

"What I need to know is, do you think you can work effectively with Michael, possibly for several weeks?" Madeline questioned.

"Why couldn't I?" Nikita asked.

"That's my question," Madeline returned.

Nikita shook her head, her tone still light. "Michael's just another operative, Madeline."

Madeline raised an eyebrow. "Is he?"

"That's all he's ever been," Nikita challenged.

Madeline looked deeply at the young woman and realized that she was attempting to bring herself to believe this. She looked more closely at Nikita. "That's not what I would have thought a few weeks ago," Madeline said softly.

Nikita smiled, her face rather flat. "You'd have been wrong."

"There's no closer connection between you?" Madeline pressed.

Nikita laughed. "Madeline, I haven't had any contact with him, since I got shot; he never even came to see me. Does that sound like there's something closer?"

Madeline watched Nikita sadly. She knew very well what Nikita didn't--that Michael had stayed near her bed almost constantly until she had started to regain consciousness. She had, more than once, caught him watching the monitors to Nikita's room--looking at them as though his entire soul rested with the woman. He had gone into her room, nightly, whenever she was sleeping deeply, just to be close to her. He hadn't even made much effort to hide his concern from his watchers, seemingly uncaring of what they saw or thought. She knew, however, that Nikita had no way of knowing any of this.

Madeline's silence made Nikita nervous, so she tried to cover with a show of aloofness. "It's not like we're soulmates," she shrugged, trying to convince herself. "We're not even friends."

"And if Michael was caught in the crossfire?" Madeline asked her.

"I'd try to help him, just like I would any other operative," Nikita answered.

"So, it wouldn't be a problem to live in fairly confined quarters with him for several weeks?" Madeline continued.

Nikita shook her head. "I really don't care," she insisted.

Madeline nodded slightly.

"Can I go?" Nikita asked.

"Go ahead," Madeline agreed.
Nikita left as quickly as she could while still seeming casual.

Madeline sighed and looked down at her desk. Michael really had trained Nikita well; she was, unconsciously, trying to become just like him—hard and repressed. It worked for Michael, though, Madeline thought; his denial was what kept him going. For Nikita, however . . . Nikita's mind simply didn't work the same way. They had successfully gotten her past many of her inconvenient bouts of humanity, but the younger woman needed her emotions; they were what let her survive. Without them, Maddy realized, she was going to self destruct.

Madeline sighed again and pushed a button on her com system.

"Well?" Operations answered.

"Send her," Madeline said simply.

"Is she ready?" he asked.

"For the mission? Yes," Madeline replied.

"And for Michael?" Operations pressed.

Madeline repressed a sigh. "If we leave them to their own devices, they'll avoid each other, and this will never get resolved. If we send them on a shorter mission together, it could blow up in our faces. We need an excuse to confine them together."

"What if it goes south?" he continued.

Madeline shook her head to herself. "I don't think it will. Birkoff will be there; that will be enough to keep them in line."

Operations paused for a second. "What if this fails?"

"Then, we'll need to find another approach," Madeline returned. "Possibly a transfer to a substation or some other way to let her vent some steam."

"Is she worth the trouble?" Operations questioned.

"I don't know." Madeline shook her head again. "We'll see after this mission."

"Very well," Operations agreed and shut off the com connection.

Madeline sighed and leaned back in her chair. "Alright, Michael," she thought. "You've got one chance. Use it well."

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The briefing was small, with only five people. Madeline sat at the end of the table, evaluating everyone. Michael and Nikita sat at opposite ends—the placing chosen by Nikita, who had come in second—with Birkoff and several empty chairs inbetween. Madeline had already noted several looks Michael had stolen at Nikita, but the object of his attention had returned none of them; she seemed unaware of his existence.

Operations, as always, ran things. He flashed up a picture on the holograph. "This is Paul Mull, better known as Roderick James—one-time commander in the IRA. He split with the group two years ago, because he thought they were going soft. He has since promised an all-out war with the English, and he will use whatever methods it takes to achieve this." He switched off the picture. "As you
know, England has recently suffered what it considers to be a 'national tragedy' in the death of a princess." He stressed the words ironically, almost mockingly.

Nikita noted something in Operations' manner, as well, which suggested that he knew far more about this than he was elaborating on. Of course, Nikita realized, he seemed this way with pretty much everything else, too.

"This has left much of the country in a state of lassitude," Operations went on. "That, mixed with the present crowd-control problems, make for ideal conditions for terrorist attack. Furthermore, James has a love of symbols--especially Christian ones, and we're coming up to a perfect opportunity for him."

"What's that?" Nikita asked. It was mid-September; the next religious holiday she knew of came in December.

"Michaelmas," Birkoff supplied.

"Mickelmuss?" Nikita seemed confused.

"It's a holiday which begins on September 29--St. Michael and All Saints Day," Michael told her. Nikita stifled a laugh and looked back at Ops. "So, what's the symbolism?"

"Michael is the warrior archangel," Madeline filled her in. "One of his earthly representatives was St. George--the patron saint of England."

"The guy who slew the dragon?" Nikita tried to remember. She was beginning to feel like this briefing was being held entirely for her benefit; she seemed to be the only one who didn't know all this already.

"Precisely." Operations seemed to answer both her question and her unspoken speculation. "Only for James, the dragon is going to try to slay St. George. Now, the three of you will coordinate with our London substation. You'll be staying in an apartment across the street from James, so you can keep an eye on him. You'll meet with him, figure out his plan, and stop it. Questions?"

Nikita thought for a minute. "Why us?" she asked finally. "Couldn't the London substation handle this?"

Operations didn't look very pleased at having his decisions questioned. "Michael has dealt with James in the past; he knows how he thinks. Furthermore, James is unaware of Michael's allegiences; he simply sees him as a contact. Any more questions?" he asked her challengingly.

Nikita shook her head, smiling pleasantly.

The briefing disbursed.

Michael watched Nikita leave the room, but she made no acknowledgement of his presence. He sighed quietly and looked at the floor.

Madeline walked up to him slowly, when they were alone. "You sure you're ready for this?"

Michael looked up at her. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You haven't spoken a word to each other in several weeks," she said quietly.

Michael shook his head. "That won't affect the mission."
"It better not," she returned softly. "You won't get other chances." She looked at him significantly before turning and walking away.

Michael closed his eyes for a second. He had suspected that this was coming. There were others who could have handled this job just as well, but Madeline was giving him a chance to straighten things out with Nikita, before Operations took action. He opened his eyes. He hoped that the lines of communication between himself and Nikita would find a way to clear again, because he had no idea where to begin in working on them. He sighed and left to prepare.

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Michael had become a staple in Nikita's nightmares of late. It wasn't that he hadn't made guest appearances in them before, but, for the past few weeks, he seemed to be all she dreamed about--never pleasantly. She liked to tell herself that she was thinking about Michael less lately, but her subconscious mind thought differently.

Over and over again in these dreams, she had seen the divided Michael--the strong, dark presence and the dying, light one--in the area of her mind which had combined Red Cell and Section One. There were only slight variations each time--different unpleasant scenarios.

This one followed the same pattern. Again, she saw the dark Michael pacing outside the cages--only, the cages' occupants had shifted again. In one, she saw Simone--beaten and broken, as she had been as Glass Curtain's hostage. Not for the first time, Nikita wished she could have met Simone before the torture--wished she could have seen the beautiful, strong, and intelligent woman Michael had loved. In the cage beside her, lay an infant, which she was trying to comfort through the bars.

"You're a weakness," the dark Michael told her, as he passed in front of her cage.

She didn't seem to hear, still talking to the child.

The cold image of Michael walked up and kicked her cage. "Did you hear me?" he insisted.

She looked up at him. "I don't know you," she glared. Her voice was thin and slightly raw through lack of use in making human sounds.

Michael crouched down in front of her and looked at her coldly. "I'm your husband."

Simone laughed. "No--you're not. I love Michael; I understand him. You're just what Section wants him to be--how they wanted me to see him. You don't exist." She turned her head away to talk to her child again, evincing no interest in this Michael at all.

The Section Michael evaluated her coldly and stood up. Then, he took his gun out and shot the child before pointing the weapon at Simone.

"No!" Nikita screamed, running up to him. It was the first time, since she had started having these nightmares, that she had participated in them; up to now, she had merely been an observer. "You can't do this!"

"Why not?" Michael looked at her uncomprehendingly.

"You love them!" Nikita insisted.

The darker Michael lowered his gun slightly and walked closer to her; she was standing between him and the cages. "I thought you said that person didn't exist," he pointed out.
Nikita didn't know how to answer.

The cold Michael smiled and pointed his gun at her. "I'll just have to prove you right, won't I?"

Nikita woke up with a jerk, the sound of the gunshot ringing in her head from the dream. She was on a commercial plane, next to Michael, in a first-class section filled with snoring businessmen. Birkoff sat across the aisle from them, also sleeping.

"Are you alright?" Michael looked at her with concern.

"I'm fine," Nikita insisted, pulling an airline blanket up to her chin and turning to look out the window into miles of darkness.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Michael asked quietly.

"No," Nikita replied simply.

"We'll be living in close quarters together soon," he whispered, trying to keep the conversation between the two of them. "Are you going to have any problems with that?"

"Whatever," Nikita shrugged, back still to him.

Michael sighed. It was terrible to see her in so much pain, but it was worse knowing that he had caused it. He wanted to help her, but she had placed herself far beyond his reach--closed herself down. He understood her impulse only too well; he had mastered the skill long ago. Nikita wasn't like him, though; she still had a soul . . ., but, he knew, if she kept this up, she would lose it.

He reached out and gently pulled the blanket over her shoulder. Then, he sat back, watched her, and prayed that she would be able to stop herself before the abyss opened.

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Their arrival in London was fairly uneventful. Customs proved a small problem for the group, since they were trying to remain inconspicuous and therefore weren't pulling rank, but they managed it. Section sent a car and an operative named Adams to bring them in.

Nikita took in the city, as they rode through it; it was rather dirty, she decided, but--for a large city, especially--it had a certain charm. She wished that she could get the time to really see it.

When they passed by Westminster Abbey, they saw several people still wandering aimlessly near the building. "You see our problem," Adams said.

"Wasn't her funeral over a week and a half ago?" Nikita questioned.

Adams shook his head. "The country's still in shock. We're sitting targets."

Michael stroked his chin, staring aimlessly out a window. "Have you located James yet?"

"We know where he is," Adams assured him. "He'll be back in the country tomorrow."

Michael nodded.

Their car pulled into a parking garage near the Houses of Parliament and then continued, through a labyrinth of aisles, into an underground tunnel and down to the substation. What Nikita saw, however, when she entered the complex with the others, wasn't what she expected. "Wow," she murmured, under her breath. Unlike the Section she knew, the place was not a maze of industrial

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corridors; you would never have known you were in a bunker here. It had more of an older, refined, professional office feel about it. Nikita blinked.

Michael stared at her when she didn't begin walking with the others. She came back to herself, gave him a fake smile, and followed. "Where are we going?" she asked, looking in front of herself, as she walked.

"Hunter wants to see you," Adams informed them.

"Who's Hunter?" Nikita inquired.

Adams, who had been in the London Section for decades, looked at Michael, confused by Nikita's lack of knowledge. Then, he smiled; Nikita's innocent question was more profound than she knew. "Too bloody right," he muttered.

"What?" Nikita questioned.

"Hunter is the head of the substation," Michael informed her.

"Ah," she replied. She wasn't used to the ones in charge having names.

When they reached Hunter's office, he watched them carefully, as they came in. "So, these are our famous Americans?" He spied Nikita and walked closer to her, a rather unseemly gleam in his eye. "I suppose there's something to be said for the colonies, however."

Nikita looked at him dismissively. "Can we get on with this?"

Hunter smiled at her accent. "Ah, well, one colony or another," he noted, moving back toward his desk. "It appears Operations thinks we need help," he continued, with his back to them.

"Don't you?" Michael challenged.

Hunter turned back toward him. "Ah, Michael, wonderful to see you again. Tell me, how is that lovely wife of yours--Simone, is it?" He sat down, a happily malevolent look in his eyes.

Michael turned his head away slightly. "What do you have to tell us, Cross?"

"It's *Hunter*," the man corrected him sternly.

Michael looked back at him. "Of course." He smiled unpleasantly.

Nikita watched this interaction closely. There was certainly some past working relationship between these men, and it was obviously an unpleasant one.

Hunter sighed and began. "We have the flat ready. It's across the street from James' residence. Your meeting with him is tomorrow."

"Thank you," Michael returned, as he began to leave. "We'll have the usual system of transport ready?"

"Yes," Hunter agreed.

Michael opened the door and let Birkoff out. As Nikita was following, however, Hunter came around his desk and stood close to her. "I'm sure we'll see each other again soon."

Nikita looked back at him casually. "Mmm," she murmured noncommittally, before Michael's voice
behind her ushered her out: "Let's go, Nikita."

Michael gave Hunter a last, challenging look before leaving.

"Do tell Simone hello for me, won't you?" Hunter said, as Michael closed the door.

Nikita noted the look of pain in Michael's eyes, before he passed to walk slightly in front of her to the car. In spite of herself, she felt sympathetic. Then, she reminded herself of all the pain he had caused her and hardened herself to him again.

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A taxi, belonging to Section One, took them to what would be their new home for several weeks—a flat in Chelsea. Michael led them into the building and then unlocked the apartment door to let them in. Nikita entered first and looked around. To her left was a fair-sized living room with a large, curtained bay window; directly in front of her was a *tiny* kitchen. Nikita hoped that she wouldn't need to be in it at the same time as either of her companions. "Sharing a space that small practically qualifies you as lovers," she thought.

Birkoff had slipped in beside her, while she was looking around. She was then brought out of her reverie by Michael's presence near her, as he shut the door. She looked in the direction away from him and saw a bathroom at the end of the hall and a few other doors on the sides. "Are those the bedrooms?" she asked, moving toward and opening them. "They're only two," she noted, looking back at Michael suspiciously, when she found that one door led to a closet.

Birkoff looked back at Michael. "Let me guess. I get the sofa."

Michael smiled at him.

"Figures," Birkoff muttered, moving toward the living room.

Nikita had a hand on one of her hips and was staring at Michael, as he walked toward her. "So, it's just the two of us back here?"

"Yes," Michael replied, getting closer. "Why? Are you frightened?" he asked challengingly. His run-in with Hunter had determined his mood and his present strategy with her.

"No," Nikita responded, meeting his eyes levelly, before finishing her thought to herself: "Fear wasn't what I was thinking." She looked back at the room on her right and turned her back on him. "Is this one mine?"

"Yes," Michael answered. "Your clothes for the mission should be there."

Nikita nodded, as she walked into the room. Then, she turned around and approached him again. His attitude had only encouraged her anger. "Michael," she said, getting *very* close to him, standing between him and his room. "What's the story on you and Hunter?"

Michael looked back at her defensively. "That's none of your business, Nikita."

Nikita smiled at him with a seductiveness which wasn't in her eyes. "Don't you think it would help the mission, if I knew?"

Michael looked at her. "No," he replied definitively. He moved past her into his room and shut the door.
Nikita smiled but then closed her eyes. Although she couldn’t let it go, her constant rage was weakening her. She decided to go talk to Birkoff to try to cheer herself up.

Birkoff looked up at her, as she came into his ersatz bedroom. "Well, the sofa folds out, but I think it’s more comfortable as a couch." He sat down on it and began working with the array of computers the room held.

Nikita smiled at him and went over to pull back the curtains on the bay window to look out.

"Don't do that!" Birkoff stopped her.

"Why not?" she wondered, looking back at him.

"James's apartment is right across from ours," Birkoff reminded her. "We need to be able to control what his people see of us."

Nikita nodded and sat down in the window. "So, what do we do till tomorrow?"

Birkoff looked up from his computers at her. "We wait."

Nikita sighed and got up to walk toward her room. "I'm going to go take a nap."

"Uh huh," she heard him mutter.

"It's not like there's much else to do," she thought. She was trapped in an apartment with a man who enraged her and a computer geek. She shook her head, as she closed the door to her room. She sighed again and went to look at her wardrobe for the mission--pretty standard. Then, having run out of ways to try to avoid thinking while conscious, she lay down to sleep.

Michael spent his time pacing in his room, berating himself. "I'm pushing her further away," he thought. It was stupid of him to let Hunter get to him so much; the man was slime, but he was a minor annoyance. If he continued acting as he just had with Nikita, however, he would only make the problem worse.

Michael, finally, decided to stop pacing, took off his jacket, and sat down on the bed. He began rubbing his lips, as he thought. He needed, desperately, to get through to Nikita, to get her to release some of her pain. He wanted to go across the hall to her room, take her in his arms, and ask for forgiveness, but he knew that such an approach would only leave him with bruises--physical and emotional.

He stopped rubbing his lips and closed his eyes. The easiest route, for him, through this was to close himself down--to shut her out completely--to deny the one part of himself which was still alive. If he took this path now, though, he knew, he would destroy their relationship--and probably Nikita, as well.

He opened his eyes again and held on to the bed, willing back the tears he felt coming to his eyes. He had to get them both through this; they *had* to survive. He just had no idea how.

When Michael knocked on Nikita's door a few hours later--looking, once again, his normal, Section self, he woke her from a nightmare.

In it, Nikita had been shooting at Michael, who was attached to a circus wheel--like those used in some knife-throwing acts. Every time she hit the dark-suited, stone-faced man, however, the wound appeared not on him, but on her.
It had taken a while for her to notice this phenomenon, however. As a result—when her gun ran out of bullets, since she had been shooting at him in fury for quite some time—she found herself bleeding to death—slowly. She dropped the gun and fell to her knees, as the dark Michael approached her. He was now free from the contraption which had held him and was totally unharmed; in fact, he seemed rejuvenated.

The bleeding Nikita looked up at him. "Why?" she asked, as she put her hand down on the ground, losing strength.

"It was your choice," he reminded her quietly, his face giving nothing away.

Nikita had slumped over to continue dying.

"Nikita?" she heard again. She opened her eyes to realize where the voice was coming from.

Michael opened the door slightly to find Nikita looking haunted and frightened. The sight took hold of his heart like an insistent hand and then clenched its fist. She seemed so small and vulnerable. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Nikita insisted. She tried to quietly take a few deep breaths. "What do you want?" she asked, attempting to harden herself again.

"There's some supper," he replied. He wanted to walk over and take her in his arms, but he didn't dare. She was like a small, wounded lion cub; she might need comfort desperately, but the comforter could be seriously wounded in the effort—especially if, like himself, he had been the one to inflict the original pain.

Nikita was trying to pull herself together outwardly. "I'll be out in a minute," she stated flatly.

Michael nodded, seeming haunted. Nikita looked so much like she had when he had met her for the first time in the white room; she was lost. But, this time, she was getting lost in herself and not in Section. He took another look at her and then left, unable to withstand the guilt and pain she brought with her.

Nikita sighed. The combination of her nightmares and her constant exposure to their cause was wearing on her already. She shook her head again and then moved to get up, hoping that she would be able to be hard enough to get through this.

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The next day, Nikita and Michael met with Roderick James for the first time. They found him in a corner of St. Paul's Cathedral, looking every bit the average tourist, examining religious art.

He looked up and smiled when they arrived. "Michael!" James greeted him with a hearty handshake. "It's been too long. Where've you been keeping yourself?"

"Here and there," Michael responded, slightly more low-key, returning the greeting.

James turned to look appreciatively at Nikita. "And who's your lovely companion?"

"This is Nikita," Michael replied, slightly offhandedly.

"Charmed," James purred, taking her hand and kissing it.

Nikita gave her best flattered smile. The man had a certain slimy charm to him.
James looked back at Michael. "What happened to that last looker I saw you with--Simone, was it?"

Michael's heart twisted at the sound of her name, but he kept up his best shady businessman air. "She got boring," he replied.

James looked surprised. "She didn't look like she would."

Nikita tried to keep up an attitude of gentle insipidity. Inside, however, she was wondering how Michael could stand hearing this, much less give the cold responses he managed.

"Looks can be deceiving," Michael replied casually.

"I'd like to give her a call," James went on, "if you're done with her. Know where she is?"

Michael's soul was screaming, but it didn't show. He shrugged. "Around, I guess. I lost track of her."

"Too bad," James sighed, completely oblivious to the effect his questions had had. "Anyway, on to business. You'll excuse us for a minute?" He and Michael walked away, leaving Nikita alone to stare at a painting.

"Don't you get bored at these sorts of things?" a voice behind her asked.

Nikita jumped slightly and turned around. "What do you mean?" she questioned the woman who had spoken to her.

"All these meetings in churches," the woman said. "Roddy seems to do all his business in places like this. Does your guy do the same thing?"

Nikita gave her best arm-candy smile. "Sometimes."

"Boorr-rrring," the woman intoned, staring glassy-eyed at the painting.

James and Michael returned, saving Nikita from vapid small talk. "It's a beautiful painting, isn't it?" James said of the work.

"What is it?" Nikita asked. It was fairly abstract.

"It's St. George and the dragon," James informed her, pointing to the blobs which were supposed to represent these ideas. "Up in the corner is the Archangel Michael, watching the battle."

Nikita smiled at him, playing her role.

"It's a fascinating story, don't you think?" he continued. "So many different ways to interpret it. Carl Jung..."

Nikita looked baffled. Actually, she had heard of him, but she figured she shouldn't admit it.

"A famous psychologist, dream researcher--that sort of thing," James filled her in.

"Oh," Nikita nodded, as though she were lost.

James smiled; he liked feeling superior to women. "Jung suggested that the dragon represents the lower parts of ourselves--the parts we're supposed to battle and overcome to become better people." He laughed softly. "Ironic that the representative of England supposedly slew that, isn't it? It usually works the other way around with this country." He sighed happily. "I just love Michaelmas."
Nikita smiled insipidly.

"Anyway," James went on, feeling safe having told this to Nikita, whose i.q. he supposed to be around 80, "we should go. C'mon, honey." He took his companion's arm. "Michael," he looked back at him, "we'll finalize the deal as planned."

Michael nodded.

"It was a pleasure to meet you," he sparkled at Nikita.

"Likewise," she smiled.

James, his companion, and a few bodyguards—who had been standing around other parts of the cathedral—left.

Nikita looked at Michael, as they began to leave. "Well?"

"We meet with him again in three days," he informed her, not looking in her direction.

"Michael," Nikita went on, "those things you said about Simone . . ."

"He'd met her before," Michael interrupted her.

"I realize that," Nikita continued, "but . . ."

Michael stopped walking and looked at her. "Does this have something to do with the mission?"

"No," Nikita admitted.

"Then, can we save it for another time?" Michael's eyes were haunted.

Nikita sighed but nodded, just as Michael started walking again.

When they got back to the flat, Michael shut himself in his room to write a report. He had been incredibly quiet all the way back.

"What's with him?" Birkoff asked.

Nikita shook her head, staring toward Michael's door. "Ghosts," she murmured.

"What?" Birkoff wondered.

Nikita shook her head and looked at him. "Nothing," she said. "I'll be in my room."

Birkoff looked annoyed and wondered what he had screwed up badly enough to warrant being stuck in an apartment with these two for any period of time.

Back in her room, Nikita was sitting on her bed. She missed her own apartment, where she could be tormented in private. She missed being able to stand on her balcony, watching the night sky. Here, there was no escape from her emotions; Michael was there at every turn. She wanted to be furious with him, but it took so much of her energy. Even her dreams weren't any help.

"God, those dreams," Nikita thought, putting her head in her hands. They were all so vivid and so frightening.

She sighed, looking up, trying to distance herself from them by thinking about the events of the day.
"How can Michael talk that way about Simone?" she wondered. She knew he had needed to--to keep up pretenses, but she understood his ability to distance himself from his emotions no better.

She thought back, not for the first time, to their interrogation by Red Cell. "No," she decided, "his greatest fear isn't that he'll dishonor himself. It's that he'll be weak." Every time she could remember that he had shown her any signs of gentleness--weakness, according to Section--he had punished her for it soon afterward. It *always* seemed to be a trick of some sort.

Nikita needed, desperately, to believe that Michael didn't care. It was so much easier; it gave her an excuse to shut him out. If she admitted that he might be capable of love, then she had to try to process--to understand his motives.

She knew all the reasons for his actions, of course, but she knew just as well that they were excuses; they couldn't make up for her pain. And, she couldn't understand how anyone could possibly survive cutting off their emotions the way Michael did to coldly proceed with their tasks. The fact that she was now attempting to take the same path herself eluded her.

Maybe, she thought again, Michael was her weakness--her dragon. And, as St. George had, she wished to God she could slay him.

************

Time passed very slowly for the next couple of days. The tension between Michael and Nikita continued.

Birkoff felt like he was trapped in the middle. Nikita looked to him for support or diversion, neither of which he knew how to provide, and Michael was simply curt and professional. Madeline was demanding updates on their emotional health fairly regularly, as well; if she had sent the two of them on this mission to straighten things out, though, as Birkoff strongly suspected, it didn't seem to be working.

The early afternoon of the second day after their meeting with James, Hunter came by. Birkoff watched Michael let him in. "Oh great," he thought. "This'll help."

"I just wanted to see how you were getting along," the older Englishman smiled at Michael.

"We're fine," Michael informed him flatly, as Nikita emerged from her bedroom to see what was happening.

"Ah, Nikita," Hunter beamed, walking toward her. "Lovely to see you again."

Nikita was leaning against her doorframe, arms folded. She gave him a half smile.

"What do you want?" Michael asked from behind him.

Hunter grinned lasciviously at Nikita, who simply cocked her head and stared at him.

"Cross," Michael said warningly.

The Englishman finally turned back to him. "It's *Hunter*."

Michael gave him a very cold stare. "If you've got business here, then tell us. Otherwise, you're endangering our cover."

Hunter walked up closer to him. "Yes, you wouldn't want to get any more of your women killed,
now would you?"

Michael bristled. It was taking all of his self-control not to shoot the man. "Tell us what you want, or leave," he instructed, very quietly.

Hunter smiled back at Nikita and then looked back at Michael. "I just brought by a present for your friend. She must be terribly bored being left here with you." He took out a book and handed it to Michael.

Nikita couldn't see what it was, but she saw Michael's reaction. His eyes showed a flickering of horror, and the rage he was obviously containing went up several levels, although--to the casual observer--he would have seemed controlled. He looked back up at Hunter. "We'll be in touch," he said, *very* coldly, waiting to usher him out.

"Of course," Hunter smiled. "See you soon," he said to Nikita.

When the door closed behind Hunter, Nikita approached her former trainer. "What is all this, Michael? You and Hunter act like you're dogs fighting over a tasty bone."

"It's none of your business, Nikita," Michael returned, turning away from her, toward the kitchen.

"None of my business?" She grabbed his arm and pulled him back to face her. "I'm the one who's stuck in the middle here. Tell me what's going on!"

Michael just looked at her.

Birkoff watched this whole exchange from the living room. He had been afraid some confrontation like this was building. Now that it was here, though, he could do nothing but watch it play out and hope for the best.

Nikita was growing even angrier. "You can at least give me my present, Michael."

Michael's eyes looked a little frightened. "You don't want it."

"Shouldn't I be the one to decide that?" she challenged.

Michael searched her eyes and realized--sadly--that, without a physical battle, he couldn't avoid giving her Hunter's present. His eyes still locked with hers, he held out the book to her.

Nikita took it and looked down to see George Orwell's *1984*. Her expression changed completely; all the color drained from her face.

Michael swallowed, watching her. "I told you you wouldn't want it," he said--without recrimination.

Nikita walked into the kitchen, staring at the book the whole time. Hunter, it seemed, had a perverse sense of humor; having read her file, he had sent her a small reminder of her recent experiences with Red Cell--as if she needed it. Her memories of the rat mask were still altogether too fresh; having a torturer who was well-read had been a dubious comfort.

Birkoff watched all of this silently. He didn't know what the gift had been, but it hardly mattered; its effect on Nikita was clear enough. He wanted to help her. He knew, though, that--no matter how contentious their relationship was at present--Michael was the only one who could reach her. He watched Michael's back, waiting for him to go to her, but the man seemed lost in his own thoughts.

Nikita leaned against a counter, still staring at the book. It seemed an appropriate metaphor for
Section, really, she thought. Like the citizens of the fictional state in the novel, she, too, was constantly monitored, lied to, and manipulated; she had been berated, time and again, for her thought crimes—her continuing belief in free will. And, she was also caught in the middle of a fictional war which never seemed to end—and which supposedly justified all of the pain she had been caused.

Section, furthermore, Nikita thought, had its own definition of "sexcrime." Unlike Orwell's distopia, though, their objection was not to the temporary freedom the act represented or its possible non-procreative functions; indeed, procreation was a crime in itself in Section. No, Nikita realized, it wasn't really sex which was a crime to Section One; it was making love. Caring about someone, loving *anyone*, was the Section's high treason, and they and Michael had proven it to her time and again, through innumerable punishments. Nikita rubbed her thumb over the book's cover, still slightly in shock. She had been forced to read the novel in school; she had never expected to live it.

Michael continued to stand with his back to Nikita and the kitchen, staring at the floor. Just at the second when Birkoff was seriously considering slapping him on the side of his head if he didn't go to her, he looked up, slowly turned around, and walked toward her.

Nikita had opened the novel at random. She saw the words of Big Brother in capital letters: WAR IS PEACE
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

Michael came up close behind her and saw the words as well. He put a hand on one of her shoulders and then gently pulled the book from her grasp and threw it in the trash. "It was a bit too appropriate a gift," he noted softly, as though he were reading her thoughts.

Nikita turned to him and looked up, eyes red.

Michael opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. "Let's go find somewhere to talk," he suggested quietly.

Nikita looked too worn down to argue with the idea.

Michael stepped aside to let Nikita pass him. He then followed, picking up Nikita's coat and helping her put it on. He took his own coat, as he told Birkoff, "We'll be back soon."

Birkoff nodded.

Michael opened the door, and he and Nikita left quietly.

Birkoff watched the door, after they left. He shook his head. "Good luck, Michael," he thought. "You're going to need it."

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Michael and Nikita walked for a while in silence. Nikita was walking blindly—lost in thought, unsure of where she was going. Michael took her arm and silently led her along.

When they reached their destination, Nikita looked up, a little surprised. "Interesting choice," she noted, as they entered Brompton Road Cemetery.

"It's quiet," Michael replied.

They walked for a while down the lanes between mausoleums and monuments—the sort of monuments only the Victorian and Edwardian wealthy could afford. Finally, Nikita stopped. Michael
paused, as well, and looked at her, letting go of her arm. "What's the story on you and Hunter?" she asked finally, looking at the ground.

"We worked together several years ago," Michael answered.

"That's obvious," Nikita returned, looking up at him. "What part does Simone play in it?"

Michael looked up at the sky and sighed. "Simone and I were gathering information on the IRA. We were working through James. Cross was our contact."

"Why do you keep calling him that?" Nikita wondered.

Michael, slightly confused, looked down at her. "Calling him what?"

"Cross," Nikita returned.

"'Hunter' is a code name, Nikita," Michael informed her. "It's given to anyone in charge of the London substation."

"So, there've been others before him?" Nikita pressed.

Michael nodded slightly. "And there'll be others after him. Section is constant, Nikita; the operatives are interchangeable. You know that."

Nikita looked at him angrily and shook her head. "No, they're not, Michael. *No one* is interchangeable."

Michael looked at her sadly.

Nikita continued to shake her head. "That's what all that crap with Red Cell was about, wasn't it? Just another little reminder to me that none of us really matters, right?"

Michael's eyes were filled with pain, but he couldn't answer.

"What about Simone, then, Michael?" Nikita challenged. "Was she dispensible?"

Michael turned his head away. "No."

Nikita nodded, eyes growing red. "I get it. It's just me and everyone else you can do away with, when need be, right? We're just 'acceptable collateral'?" She stressed the last words with heavy irony.

Michael looked back at her, eyes red, his breathing a bit labored. "No."

Nikita shook her head, growing more enraged by the moment. "I don't believe you anymore, Michael; I'm sick of your lies." Her eyes bored into him. "Go to Hell." She turned and started to stalk off.

Michael closed his eyes for a second and then followed her. "Nikita," he called huskily, catching her arm to turn her toward him.

"What now, Michael?" Nikita glared at him. "You have some more pretty lies to tell me?" She looked at him more closely. "So, what's the strategy today? What weakness of mine will you choose this time?"

Michael was still holding onto her arm. "What do you want me to tell you, Nikita?"
"The truth," she emphasized, eyes burning.

Michael let go of her arm and then nodded. "Alright. I fed you the location; I let you get captured; I led you to think we would die to make my revelations believable. All the time, I hoped you would break... You were our only chance."

"How comforting," Nikita returned, ironically.

Michael sighed, his eyes still red. "Do you want to hear the rest of the truth?"

"Is this where you tell me it was all for my own good, and I should thank you?" she asked.

Michael looked at her seriously. "If you want me to lie to you, I will."

"Oh, now that'd be a change," Nikita replied.

Michael continued to watch her.

Nikita threw her hands up. "Okay." She slapped her legs. "What the hell." She walked over and sat down on the edge of a raised ground vault, propping her hands on her thighs. "Tell me this 'truth.'"

Michael watched her, then studied the ground for a second before reexamining her. "I never *want* to hurt you, Nikita."

"I've heard this before," she reminded him.

Michael sighed and turned away. "It was Operations's plan. He and Madeline thought they could use you." He walked over to a stone obelisk and turned back to her, leaning against the monument, looking at her.

"So, you were an innocent bystander?" Nikita pressed.

"No," Michael continued, then nodded. "I knew they were probably right."

Nikita's eyes were watering. "Did they tell you what to say to me, as well?" She cursed herself silently for the raw emotion her voice reflected.

Michael sighed and looked down. "Nikita." He focused on her again. "I have lied to you. I have tricked you," his eyes were getting redder, "but not everything I say to you is a lie." His voice was very quiet.

Nikita raised her head slightly and looked more deeply at him. "So, what was, Michael? I mean, when we were stuck in those damn cages--like animals--how much of it was a lie?"

"That we'd never get out alive," he answered quietly, eyes locked with hers.

"That's it?" she prodded.

Michael nodded slightly. "My reason for telling you was a lie, Nikita--not what I said."

Nikita closed her eyes and then looked down at the ground. She didn't know how to feel.

"I don't blame you for not trusting me," Michael said softly. "And you have a right to be angry... but I meant everything I told you." He was almost inaudible.

Nikita's emotions took their battle stations again; they were becoming so conflicted and entangled she
could no longer see a way through them.

Michael watched her painfully. More than anything, right now, he wanted to take her in his arms and just hold her, but he knew he had given up his right to that a hundred times over. He couldn't very well will it back into existence now.

Nikita sighed and looked up at him. "So, what about Simone and Hunter?"

Michael looked at the ground. "Cross made some moves on her she didn't want." He shook his head. "Nothing happened, but . . ." He looked back up at her.

"You haven't forgiven him," Nikita finished.

"No," Michael said simply.

Nikita nodded and then looked away for a minute. "Michael, do you think there'll ever be a time when we'll be able to be open with each other?" She looked back at him.

He watched her, incredibly unhappily. "I don't know, Nikita."

Nikita nodded, then stood up, and walked over to him. She put her hand on the lapel of his coat. "I'll see you back at the flat." Then, she walked away.

Michael closed his eyes and lowered his head. As usual, Nikita's touch, even through several layers of clothing, aroused emotions in him he was afraid to admit he was still capable of. He opened his eyes. He couldn't call his feelings love, though; it scared him too much. He had been hurt too deeply when he had lost Simone; he couldn't bear to admit that he was that vulnerable again.

He had no idea, as well, where today had left them. Nikita seemed less angry, but he had no way of knowing for certain.

He sighed and looked up at his surroundings. It had been an appropriate, if unconscious, choice to pick this place. Like Section, it was cold and full of death. Also significantly, there was a haunting beauty in the appearance of the stones—the individuals, but all any of them really covered was decay. He was glad Nikita had left; she was the only one of them who didn't belong here. He shook his head and left to follow her.

***********

The apartment, for the rest of that day, was filled with a sort of uneasy silence. While the tension between Nikita and Michael had lessened, it hadn't disappeared.

Not having an official chef had been a problem for the new roommates. They had quickly discovered that allowing Birkoff into a kitchen was a sublimated death wish, and, while Nikita's cooking was quite acceptable, her range was limited. Both Birkoff and Nikita had been surprised at Michael's culinary skills; Nikita wondered if they had been the result of some mission, but neither quite managed to ask. Mostly, the three had survived on take-out from the area's plentiful restaurants.

That night, however, Michael quietly went about making them dinner; it gave him something different to concentrate on. When the three operatives sat down to eat, however, Nikita and Michael spent most of the time between bites stealing glances at each other; neither one managed to eat very much.

Nikita, once again, was pondering Michael—trying to figure him out. She began to realize, now, just how unhappy the man was; nothing seemed to give him any joy. She had seen him dimly pleased
once or twice, but he mostly seemed to regard life as a rote process to be survived. She wondered if he had ever known any real pleasure or if he had always seen existence as merely a string of attempts to avoid additional pain.

Birkoff watched the two of them and sighed. He wished, once again, that Madeline were here to make her own damn reports.

***************

Nikita spent the rest of the evening continuing to think about Michael, Hunter, and the interchangeability of operatives. She had always known that she was replaceable; Michael had made that clear from her first day, but she had never really considered that the ones in charge might be.

Nikita lay down to sleep that night with her mind still sifting through her life. She knew that she had been sleeping more than normal lately. She supposed that she should be grateful that her depression was taking this form rather than giving her insomnia, as it frequently had, but, given her recent, disturbing dreams, she wasn't sure.

Her nightmare, this time, put her back in Section One headquarters. She was standing in Operations's office--only, the man being called Operations was actually Hunter. Nikita had never thought that she could miss the Operations she knew, but Hunter's Operations made her reconsider. The old Operations's completely cold demeanor was infinitely preferable to the detached lechery of Hunter.

Nikita left his office in search of Maddy, looking for answers. While Madeline could never be called trustworthy, there was a streak of almost brutal honesty in her nature which Nikita had always found strangely reassuring. "Madeline?" Nikita asked, entering her office.

"Yes?" a voice which wasn't Madeline's answered.

Nikita looked up to see the back of a tall, blonde woman standing on the upper level of the office. She was wearing one of Madeline's tailored suits.

"What can I do for you, Nikita?" the woman asked, turning to reveal an older version of Nikita herself--face flat, eyes probing.

"No," Nikita whispered. She backed up and then bolted out of the office, running toward Michael's.

When she got to the room, however, it was dark. She entered, hoping he was inside. "Michael? What's going on?" she asked pleadingly.

"What do you mean, 'Kita?" she heard Michael answer her.

Nikita was relieved to hear his voice. "Everybody's different," she said desperately, trying to make her way to Michael's desk to turn on the lamp.

"Everything that needs to be is constant," Michael replied, from somewhere nearby. "The rest doesn't exist, anyway."

Nikita finally found the lamp and turned it on.

"Remember?" Michael asked, as Nikita saw him. The body, the hair were Michael's, but, where his face should have been, there was nothing--just a canvas of blank skin.

Nikita screamed.
Nikita woke up shaking. She practically wanted to bolt across the hall to reassure herself that he was still there. She sat up and took a few deep breaths, pulling herself together.

As much as she hated to admit it, especially given his fairly recent actions, Michael was her main reason for continuing. If he hadn’t been there, there were many days she would have just lain in bed, waiting for them to come cancel her. He wasn’t enough to make her like Section, though, and his very presence reinforced daily just how trapped she was. She knew, too, that if the walls of the Section ever closed in too tightly, the fact that he was there wouldn’t be enough to get her through. Regardless, though, the thought of life in Section without him was one she couldn’t bear. It really didn’t help matters any that she hated herself even more for that realization.

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Hunter, too, was having a sleepless night but not for the same reason as Nikita. He had been completing reports, when Madeline called, her probing eyes evaluating him from the com screen.

"How did it go?" she inquired.

"It's hard for me to say, really," Hunter informed her. "I haven't a clue what I'm supposed to be looking for."

"You gave her the book?" Madeline continued.

"Yes," Hunter nodded. "Well, I gave it to Michael, actually, but-- whatever the message was--I believe he got it."

"Good," Madeline smiled.

"I don't suppose you'd like to explain it to me?" Hunter asked.

"No," Madeline looked very pleased. "But your help is appreciated. I'll tell you if we need you to intervene again."

"What's going on with the two of them?" Hunter went on.

Madeline just smiled. "Good night, Hunter."

Hunter sighed. He knew Section too well to inquire further; if he were the type who asked many questions, he would have been dead years ago. "Have a pleasant day, my dear."

Madeline shut off the com connection, sat back, and smiled. Between Hunter's actions, Birkoff's grudging reports, and Michael's obviously shifting moods, she judged that things were going rather well.

****************************************

Nikita and Michael's next meeting with James went off as planned the following day. From it, they were able to piece together James's plan.

"So, why can't we just move on him now?" Birkoff asked, as the three unlikely housemates sat on his temporary bed, teleconferencing with Operations and Madeline.

Madeline shook her head. "There's someone higher up at work here. We need to know who."

Nikita looked at her fellow operatives. "So, what's our plan?"
"We wait," Michael told her.

"We've got operatives following James, as he arranges some things on the continent," Operations explained. "You three will keep an eye out for his return. Michael's next meeting with him isn't until the 29th, when he's supposed to put the bombs in place to start James's attack, but we're going to see if we can move that up."

"So," Nikita pulled things together, "James goes to the continent, gets his mercenaries in line, comes back, and buys his weapons. When he gets back to his house . . ." She pointed at the bay window.

Michael nodded, rubbing his chin. "We find out where the weapons are, figure out who his contact is, and stop the assault."

Operations looked seriously at the three roommates. "Until James comes back, one of you stays on surveillance at all times. Is that clear?"

They all nodded.

"Fine," Operations concluded. "We'll contact you when necessary." The com connection ended.

Michael stopped rubbing his chin. He was in full mission mode. "Alright. We work 8-hour shifts. If the person on watch needs a break of any sort, they contact one of the other two to relieve them." He looked seriously at Birkoff and Nikita to make sure they understood. They both nodded resignedly. "Fine, I'll take the first watch--unless either of you wants it."

Birkoff and Nikita looked at each other.

Michael nodded, got up and took a seat in the window, watching the street from behind the curtain.

"It's going to be a long few days," Birkoff muttered, staring at the dark figure planted in the corner of his living space.

Nikita couldn't have agreed more.

***********

Days had passed with no sign of James; the flat had become claustrophobic. Nikita slept fitfully now--another nightmare. In it, she was in a huge London department store; it looked like Harrod's on bad acid.

The store was crammed with people--all of them living out their own personal hells. Nikita slept fitfully now--another nightmare. In it, she was in a huge London department store; it looked like Harrod's on bad acid.

The store was crammed with people--all of them living out their own personal hells. Nikita looked up at the ceiling to see a huge banner, which read: CANCELLATION DAYS. The scene was like something out of a Fellini film--if Fellini had ever shopped in an American mall on Christmas Eve.

Nikita passed a mirror and saw her reflection. She was wearing a flowing, gauzy dress (not her style at all); it looked like it had once been white, but it now seemed to be more grayish in tone. She looked more closely and seemed to notice a black outline surrounding her--almost an aura of evil. She backed away from the mirror.

Nikita wanted to run--to flee, but she was stopped instead by a very jovial Operations. "Welcome!" he greeted her, hand outstretched. "Welcome to Cancellation Days!"

Nikita tried to pull away, but he seemed oblivious to her objections.

"You're just in time," Operations beamed, continuing, putting his arm around her to lead her along.
"Let me introduce you to your personal assistant--Michael."

Michael stood before her dressed in his usual all-black suit. He smiled at her, but there was no warmth in it. He was in his full-on charm mode--frightening and fake.

Nikita tried to break free of Operations and run. She had long ago learned to distrust and fear Michael when he was like this; it was only the thinnest veil over the workings of pure evil.

Operations kept his grip on her, apparently unaware that she was trying to escape. He led her over to Michael. "Michael will take care of you," he assured her. Nikita didn't want to know how.

Michael took her arm in his in a gesture which seemed chivalric but was merely controlling. "I know just what you're here for," he smiled.

Nikita wanted to flee desperately, but none of her actions seemed to have any force or effect.

"Let me show you our special this week." Michael led her along to an old, gated elevator. "We've saved him just for you." They rode down what seemed to be hundreds of feet to arrive in the basement. "He's over here," Michael smiled, leading her along.

Nikita noticed that they were, once again, in the combination her mind had compiled of Red Cell's interrogation facilities and Section One headquarters. In the corner were the cages. On approaching them, she again saw the beaten, bloodied Michael she had in her first of these dreams--when she was recovering. Again, he sat, slumped against the side of the cage--hopeless.

Connected to him this time, however, by an electrical line which linked them to each other's hearts, was another version of herself-- one who, like the caged Michael, was also bloodied and wearing clothes which could barely be discerned to have been white. They were both connected--somehow--to heart monitors, as well; Nikita knew, without asking, that the cord connecting their hearts was a lifeline--that if either died, the other would as well. "Why have you brought me here?"

The Michael beside her smiled again and put a gun in her hand. "This is what you wanted, remember?" he told her quietly.

"No," Nikita insisted, looking down at the caged Michael. "He's the one I like."

The Section Michael turned her toward him. "You've already started this," he explained. He spoke again before she could interrupt: "He doesn't exist, remember? That's only who he pretends to be."

"*No*," Nikita shook her head. "I won't do this."

"You can't turn back now," the Section Michael insisted. "You've progressed so well. You're becoming what we've always wanted." He helped her c--- the gun and aim it toward his caged counterpart. "Now, rid yourself of this weakness, and you'll be whole."

Nikita wanted to scream, to shoot him, to run--*anything*, but her actions were being controlled by the darker Michael. "*Please*--no," she begged.

"Yes," the Section Michael said simply and turned her back toward the man in the cage--the Michael she cared about. He put both arms around her, helping her hold and aim the gun. "Now," he whispered, close to her ear.

"I love you, Nikita," the caged Michael said, meeting her eyes for a second, before he died. Both his and the caged Nikita's monitors flatlined.
"*NO!*" Nikita screamed, able finally to pull away from Michael. She was crying, near hysterical. She stared at him, horrified, for a second, before lifting the gun at him.

"It's no use, Nikita," Michael smiled unpleasantly. "You're one of us now." He pointed toward a mirror beside her and left.

Nikita turned and saw her reflection. She was dressed exactly like Michael, and the darkness around her had grown. Then, she woke up.

Nikita started upon waking. The nightmare had scared her; she felt like it had taken hold of her heart. When she reached up to rub her eyes, she realized she was crying. She sat up, pulled her knees up close to her, and rocked herself for several minutes.

When she had calmed down enough to stop shaking, she got out of bed and went through the hall to the bathroom. She ran some cold water, splashed her face, dried it off with the towel, and took a few deep breaths before going back into the hallway.

When she opened the door, Michael was standing there, waiting for her. She started for a second upon seeing him but tried to hide it and return to her room.

"Are you alright?" he asked quietly.

Nikita was in her doorway with her back to him, when his voice stopped her. She closed her eyes for a second, regaining control. "I'm fine," she insisted.

"You haven't been sleeping very well lately," he noted.

Nikita looked at him sadly and shook his head. "I just want to know you're alright."

"When was the last time any of us was `alright,' Michael?"

Michael looked at the floor. "I just wanted you to know that I'm here, if you need me."

"Whatever," Nikita replied, by instinct. She was about to turn and go, when Michael looked up at her, and she froze, staring at him--her eyes confused and full of pain.

The dream was haunting Nikita. While she was actively trying to avoid interpreting it, her subconscious's message had made it through to her emotions. As little as she usually liked it, she and the gentler side of Michael were linked. Just as she represented the only living parts of him, so, too, did she become harder--less human--in denying his humanity. Still, she didn't want to be his plaything ever again; she was tired of the pain.

While Nikita couldn't have put these thoughts into words, she felt the conflict. She stared sadly at Michael; as usual, part of her wanted to go to him, while the rest of her simply wanted to hit him. She closed her eyes for a second and then turned back toward her bedroom.

Before Nikita could get very far, however, Birkoff's voice sounded from the living room. "Guys! Movement!"

A few seconds later, Nikita and Michael were with Birkoff. Michael was, once again, in full mission mode. "How many came back?" he asked.
"Just James and the woman," Birkoff clarified.

"Any signs of the weapons?" Michael pressed.

"I didn't see any," Birkoff replied. "They've made the deal, but there are probably better places to stockpile weapons than a flat in Chelsea."

Michael nodded. "We're about to find out. Nikita," he looked at her, "be ready in three."

She nodded, and they both left to prepare.

Birkoff smiled, once they were gone. As annoyed as he was at having to give Madeline reports on them, their ever-shifting relationship could be interesting to watch. "One day," he thought, "they're either going to make ferocious lovers, or they're going to blow each other up." He wasn't sure which.

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Michael and Nikita were about to leave the apartment, when Birkoff called out, "Hold it! New arrival."

"Can you tell who it is?" Michael asked, as they joined the younger operative near the window.

Birkoff shook his head. "Can't tell. Black Rolls. White guy, late forties or so--business suit." He looked back at Michael. "Looks like something's going down."

Michael nodded. "Notify Hunter and have him send some people on stand-by. Keep our channels open and monitor. If the situation becomes unwinnable, send them in." He looked at Nikita briefly, and they headed for the door.

"How will I know, for sure?" Birkoff looked back at them.

"If you hear me say, 'Don't you think we can come to an agreement?' --end it," Michael instructed, as they left.

Birkoff let out a breath. "Good luck, guys," he murmured before alerting the substation.

As Michael and Nikita approached James's door, Michael looked back at her.

Nikita nodded.

An argument could be heard behind James's wall, as Michael knocked. It halted abruptly, and then James answered the door. "Michael--and the lovely Nikita. I wasn't expecting you for another few days yet." He let them in suspiciously. "Why the change in plans?"

Michael entered confidently, with Nikita behind him. "I heard some rumors. The word is the government's onto you."

James smiled reassuringly. "Why, Michael, that's my concern, isn't it?"

Michael turned and looked at him. "Not if you make a deal to throw me to them." He turned to the older businessman. "Who's this?"

"He's an old friend," James replied.

Michael turned back to James and walked up close to him. "You can either let me in on what's happening, or you can lose me now." He pointed toward the door.
"How do I know I can trust you?" James asked.

"When have I ever let you down before?" Michael looked closely at him.

Nikita, standing near the wall, thought, "Can I start counting?" She managed, however, to do her best impression of a piece of furniture.

James laughed and slapped Michael's shoulder. "Ah, Michael--you never were the trusting sort."

"I'm still here," he challenged.

James evaluated him for a moment and then nodded. "Alright." He walked over and put his hand on the businessman's arm. "My friend here is a publisher of several large newspapers--some of the ones with the most stringent anti-IRA stances."

"Odd choice of friends," Michael noted.

"Peace is bad for business," James smiled.

The man nodded. "If the negotiations ever went through and worked, there'd be too much time on people's hands to examine the problems at home."

James smiled. "My friend here also consults at a fairly high level."

"And you want a war?" Michael asked.

"Certainly," the man replied. "War is good for the economy. It brings the country together."

"And it's a convenient way to rid yourself of anyone who makes trouble," Michael finished.

"Precisely," James smiled.

"Perfect," Nikita thought silently. "That's the lesson of Section One; all the sides are the same."

"Okay," Michael seemed to accept.

"We just need to start this sooner," the publisher argued to James.

James shook his head. "Give them a few more days in peace; Michaelmas will be upon us soon enough." He started to try to lead Michael toward the door. "So, I'll see you in a few days?"

Michael didn't move. "No. I need to see the charges."

"Why?" James asked.

"You need the explosions to be impressive?" Michael questioned.

James nodded.

"Then, I need to make certain of the product's quality," Michael concluded.

"You don't trust me to judge?" James asked, coming up close to him.

"You're a firearms man," Michael pointed out. "If you want this to take out a block instead of just shaking a few houses, I need to see them."

James looked reluctant but then nodded. "Alright." He looked back to his friend. "Let's go."
A half hour later, James, his female companion, his publisher friend, and Nikita were all walking into a warehouse, with several of James's men following. James led Michael over to the explosives. "Well, what do you think?"

"Give me a minute with them," Michael requested.

James nodded and walked away.

Michael and Nikita were standing behind the crate of explosives. "Birkoff," Michael whispered, as he seemed to be examining charges, "take the publisher and James alive."

"Got it," Birkoff said over the link.

Michael looked at Nikita for a second, before the operatives came in shooting.

James and two of his men managed to get the warehouse doors shut, locking themselves in with Michael, Nikita, the publisher, and the bewildered girlfriend.

"Tell them to hold fire," Michael instructed. The shooting outside ended. He looked at Nikita and nodded his head toward James's bodyguards. With two surgical shots, they took out the guards and covered the rest of them. "Put down the gun, James," Michael instructed, as he and Nikita came out from behind the crate slowly.

James, however, grabbed his girlfriend and put his gun to her head. "Let me go, or she dies."

Michael shrugged. "So?"

James looked a little surprised then smiled. "You really are that cold bastard you pretend to be, aren't you?"

Michael smiled at him. "Shoot her and find out how much it matters." He walked closer to him. "You're out of options. Put the gun down, and you'll live."

James looked at him, then shook his head. "Not on your life." He put the gun to his own head and pulled the trigger.

The girl screamed and fell to her knees.

Nikita had to use all of her resolve not to look away or be sick. Instead, she pulled the girl up and led her over to the wall.

Michael approached the publisher. "Do you want to try the same thing?"

"No," the man replied quickly. "I surrender."

Michael nodded. "It's over, Birkoff." He unlocked the door and let the operatives in. "Call housekeeping."

James's girlfriend was near hysterical, as Nikita turned her over to an operative to be led away.

Michael turned back to Nikita with eyes which were suddenly sad. Nikita just shook her head.

Later that day, after they had debriefed via teleconference with an approving—if not overly-pleased—Operations and Madeline, Nikita stopped Michael, as they were both heading back to their bedrooms. "What are they going to do with her, Michael?"
"Who?" he questioned.

"James's girlfriend," Nikita clarified. "Does she have to be cancelled?"

Michael shook his head. "I don't know, Nikita. They'll have to evaluate the level of risk she poses."

Nikita shook her head. "What about him--the publisher?"

Michael looked down. "He's just a cog in a machine."

"So, they'll let him go?" Nikita wondered.

"No," Michael shook his head. "He knows too much." He looked back at her. "There'll probably be an accident."

Nikita closed her eyes and shook her head again. "Don't you ever get sick of this, Michael?" she asked, looking at the floor.

"None of this ended how I wanted, 'Kita," he said softly.

She looked back up at him. "There's a good way for this to end?" she challenged.

Michael just looked at her sadly.

Nikita sighed and let go of her anger temporarily. She shook her head and then went into her room.

Michael stood staring at her door long after it closed. "I'm sorry, Nikita," he whispered.

Back in her room, Nikita tried to sort through her emotions. The mission hadn't ended well, but it had gone no worse, really, than many before it; their essential goals had been reached, and the world might be better off without Roderick James.

"It'd probably be better off without any of us," she thought. That didn't give her a way around her problem, though.

Nikita, still dressed in her clothes from the mission, lay down on her bed. She wasn't as angry at Michael as she had been when this mission had begun, but her emotions were still unsettled.

Michael was her dragon, she realized, but he was also her St. George. By trying to deny him completely, she simply became more like all of the parts of him she hated. She wouldn't let that happen. In the end, she decided, she would simply have to balance her anger with her other emotions; letting *any* of them win, with him, was dangerous.

With that return of things to their normal state of affairs, Nikita rolled over and went to sleep.

************

The mission was over, but Madeline had decided that one more night in the flat would do them good, so, without specific explanations, they were ordered to stay. The tension between Michael and Nikita had dissipated to its normal level, as Nikita had let go of much of her fury. Her nightmares were subsiding, as well.

Nikita now lay in her bed in the flat, sleeping, when she heard someone enter her room; she felt no sense of danger, however. She opened her eyes to find Michael looking down at her, watching her. Then, he sat down on the bed next to her. "What is it?" she wondered.
Michael's eyes were filled with emotion. "We'll be home tomorrow," he said softly.

Nikita stifled a laugh at his choice of the word "home."

Michael reached out a hand to brush the hair gently from her eyes. "I needed a chance to talk to you."

"What about?" she asked.

Michael brought his hand back to his lap and looked down. "I'm sorry I hurt you, 'Kita. . . . I'm sorry for everything."

Nikita looked at him evaluatingly. "Will being sorry stop you the next time?"

Michael appeared saddened and looked back up at her. "Probably not," he admitted, then paused. "I do what I have to do."

"No," Nikita disagreed. "You do what Section tells you to."

Michael shook his head slightly. "Not always."

"Enough," she insisted, with resentment.

Michael looked away.

Nikita sighed and looked down. "I'm tired of being angry, Michael. It's not healthy."

"Are we still finished?" he asked, looking up at her.

"I don't know, Michael." She looked back up at him. "I don't know *what* we are. I never have."

Michael nodded and said softly, "I never *want* to hurt you, Nikita."

"That doesn't stop you, though," she countered.

Michael's eyes were filled with pain. "I'm sorry." He rose to go.

"Michael," Nikita stopped him. He turned back to her. "This isn't an apology, but . . . I'm sorry, too--about everything that's happened."

Michael walked toward her and leant down, his face near hers, his eyes searching hers. "I love you, Nikita," he whispered and then gently kissed her.

Nikita opened her eyes to find herself alone. She shook her head. "Another dream," she murmured.

Nikita stretched for a moment and then reached up to touch her lips. She could still feel Michael's ethereal kiss there; she had *felt* his presence in the room. "Typical," she thought. Every gentle encounter between them seemed, a few seconds later, to have been a fantasy. The line between reality and illusion with them had been blurred into nonexistence. At least, though, it represented a status quo she was used to.

With this none-too-comforting thought, Nikita rolled over to wait through the rest of a sleepless night.
Michael, across the hall in his own room, shared Nikita's restlessness. He had woken suddenly--although this wasn't abnormal for him. This hadn't been one of his usual nightmares, though. He sat up, trying to remember details but received only dim images.

He knew the dream had involved Nikita. This wasn't unusual, however. He, Simone, and Nikita were the major representatives of almost all of both his dreams and his nightmares. This dream, though, while he didn't think it had been entirely pleasant, had left him feeling slightly more assured about his relationship with his former trainee. He couldn't remember why.

It would be hours, he knew, before morning would come--before they would leave, but sleeping any further seemed to be pressing his luck. Any other dreams that night might simply leave him less settled.

Michael rubbed his lips with his fingertips, unsure why the action made him feel so much calmer than usual. He shook his head and rose to get dressed--to wait the several hours until they could leave.

*********************************************************************

On the plane back, much later that day, Nikita made up for her lack of sleep the previous night. Michael watched her, trying to block out the desire he had to draw her close, to listen to her gentle breathing, as she slept.

Their relationship had returned to its normal, unsettled state. It wasn't pleasant, but they both understood it, and it allowed them to work together in relative harmony.

Michael noticed that Nikita didn't seem to be troubled, as she slept this time. He hoped her nightmares had subsided for a while; she deserved that much, at least. Maybe, too, she would get some time to herself, once they got back, to recuperate. He rather doubted it, though. He had a meeting with an old friend--an informant--when he returned, and he had a feeling that her news wouldn't be good. He sighed and stroked Nikita's cheek lightly. "Pleasant dreams, Nikita," he thought. "Enjoy them while you can."

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