

Zu Asche, Zu Staub

a *Babylon Berlin* fanfic

by **Rodo**

for *bold_seer*

ONCE UPON A time, there was a girl. She lived a happy life, or as happy as a life as a girl could in those days. While half the country was living in squalor and unrest bubbled beneath the surface, in barracks and shipyards, while the nobility wasted their riches on decorative, bejewelled eggs, she lived a comfortable life, neither rich nor poor. Her father's employer was a kind man, and the boys from the big house treated her almost like one of their own. Together, they all played together on the rail yard, hiding in the tank wagons waiting to be towed to Moscow or Saint Petersburg or faraway Vladivostok. It was a good life, for a while at least, and the girl thought the world was her oyster, despite never having tasted one of those. That was before the war, of course, and before she realised that being almost one of the family wasn't the same as actually being one of them, for better and for worse.

Now, there is only a woman, and she is so very tired. Years of planning, years of working, and nothing to show for it. The conservative black mourning dress suits her, as does her new stage name. The Black Countess and her sorrowful song about the death of her lover will entice many to visit the *Cabaret du Néant*, she's sure of it. In the end, she will make do. She always does.

The fake blood trickles down her throat, past the itching rubber that still clings to her skin. With a sigh, she tears off the annoying substance and the remains of the bag that contained the blood. Then she takes a tissue and wipes away the blood, carefully checking in the mirror of her little changing room that she catches all of it. She doesn't relish the thought of having to do this again and again, night after night, and with a pang, she misses her performance as Psycho Nikoros.

The door opens and her eyes shoot towards it in the mirror. Her hand stills, and for a moment, she forgets to breathe. Behind her stands a dead man. As he

closes the door behind himself, her thoughts flit to the gun in her handbag, hanging from the hook by the door. Out of reach. And she remembers

—his hair between her hands as they kissed for the first time; the way he lost himself when he played the violin; the first time they made love in her flat, paid for by her other lover – he was better at it than Nyssen; the fake smile she plastered onto her face whenever he started lecturing her about Trotsky; how he loved to run his hands along her throat before nipping at the skin of her collarbone; but most of all, she remembers the look of betrayal on his face as he fell backwards out of the attic window with a bullet in him, a bullet she'd put there—

“Sweta,” Alexej draws. She can see the manic glint in his eye, reflected in the mirror, and wonders where the gun is. Not that it matters. He is bigger, stronger, and stands between her and her only weapon.

“Ljoscha,” she replies cautiously, wiping away the last of the fake blood.

“You were as good as ever, but the grand finale was a bit too much melodrama even for you, don't you agree?” He takes another step, like a leopard ready to pounce on his prey. He's standing behind her now, in the cramped little room. She can feel the warmth of his body close to hers as they stare at each other in the mirror. A hand settles on her shoulder. Outside, in the distance, she can hear the next act on stage.

“Was it worth it?” Alexej asks sharply.

She just raises an eyebrow at him in the mirror, not deigning that question worthy of an answer. Of course not. But it would have been, had she succeeded. Everything would have been worth it if only she'd managed to get the gold. By the look on his face, he knows it too.

His hand leaves her shoulder and closes around her lower throat instead. It's to be like this, then, she thinks and feels him lean forward to press a kiss onto the crown of her head.

“Goodbye, Swetlana,” he tells her. “For Sergej, Yurij, Nadia ...”

Yet the second hand doesn't join the other to choke the life out of her. Instead, she feels a sharp pain, and a sickeningly familiar sticky warmth. In the mirror, she sees her blood run over his hand. She whimpers, and all vision fades. She feels Alexej press his lips to her ear like the lover he once was, ready to whisper the opposite of sweet nothings.

“For Wladimir, Nikolajew ...”

There are other names, but she doesn't hear them.

All the girl hears are the echoes of the boys' laughter inside the tank wagon, beckoning her to follow.

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