

FIREBIRD

by

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EXT. A RUSSIAN FOREST - ANIMATED

Smoke curls from a cottage in the woods, in the muted colors and shadowless details of an Ivan Bilibin illustration of a Russian folktale.

A smiling WOODCUTTER exits the cabin, his red hair wild and uncombed, his axe notched with use.

FATHER (V.O.)

In a certain land, across nine
times nine kingdoms, there lived a
woodcutter who had one daughter.

We see the young DAUGHTER in the window, face framed by straight black hair, waving to father who waves back.

The woodcutter walks into the surrounding forest, keeping to a path bordered by bones.

FATHER (V.O.)

Every morning, the woodcutter would
take the safe path, looking neither
left nor right. Until--

A CROW flutters on the forest floor outside the bone path, caught by a root. Branches move to grab and crush the crow.

CROW

Help help!

The woodcutter chops at roots and branches, laughing as he frees the crow. The crow flies to his shoulder and they laugh together.

But they stop when they realize the woodcutter has stepped one foot outside the safe path.

Something large shakes the trees, coming closer.

The crow opens its mouth, but what comes out is the sound of

EXPLOSIONS

far off, coming closer.

INT. MILA'S APARTMENT LIVING ROOM - DAYBREAK

MILA, 12, presses her face against a dim window, sweeping her wild and uncombed hair out of her eyes.

The world outside the third-story window is barely lit by daybreak and burning buildings. The distant artillery barrage continues, rattling the windows.

Title: STALINGRAD, NOVEMBER 1942

From the next room, we hear drawers being opened, slammed.

Mila fidgets with the buttons of her father's coat, so long on her that its hem sweeps the floor.

ANYA, 40s, comes into the living room, a stained nurse uniform under her open coat, a bite-mark bleeding through the bandage on her left hand.

She grabs an empty bag on the table and shakes it at Mila.

ANYA

Pack now or go across the river
naked, see if I care either way.

Mila looks at the room--the sofa made up as a bed, the ransacked wardrobe, the book of Russian fairytales.

MILA

I'm not leaving, Aunt Anya. I'm
waiting for--

Anya bends down, eye-to-eye with Mila.

ANYA

No more foolishness now, Mila.
Where is your mom's jewelry?

Mila pulls back, but Anya grabs her shoulders.

MILA

She didn't--

Anya waves her protestations away.

ANYA

Where did your father hide money?

Mila looks at her blankly.

ANYA

Fucking hell. Where...

Anya takes a moment to compose the question.

ANYA

Is there something here that your
father loved more than anything?

MILA
I don't--

ANYA
Think, girl.

Mila looks around and then slowly points at herself.

Anya pulls Mila's hand down, not gently.

ANYA
Mila, we need money to get you out
of Stalingrad--

MILA
I'm not leaving, Papa said--

Anya slaps Mila.

She steps back and looks away, massaging her injured hand.

ANYA
(Exasperated)
Fucking hell.

Mila holds her reddening cheek.

An artillery shell hits closer, rattling the window.

Anya picks up the book of Russian fairytales from the dining room table. She pauses on the inscription:

*Mila- Always remember, you descend
from dragon-slayers. -Papa*

ANYA
My brother was too soft on you.

She turns the book over and holds it by the covers, shaking to see if anything useful falls out.

Mila looks pained by the treatment, but says nothing.

Anya throws the book down and storms off to the kitchen.

ANYA
Tell me there's at least food.

Again, the banging sounds of Anya's angry rummaging.

Mila retrieves the book, smooths a bent page, a drawing of Koschei, his back to the viewer, naked on a galloping horse, a specter of rushing death.