

The White Blade

A tale of Dunyasha from *Crooked Kingdom* by Leigh Bardugo

The inky stillness of the night was suffocating. As Dunyasha crept along the monastery's roof, she couldn't even hear her own footsteps. None of the monks stirred as she slipped through an open window and landed with a soft thump. *Idiot monks*, a voice inside her hissed. *Do they really think they are safe, protected by their paltry gods?*

Dunyasha stopped, trying to quiet the voice. It couldn't take over, not again. Tonight would not be like last time. She wouldn't let it. Struggling to regain her composure, she padded through the rows of sleeping monks. *It has to be done. You've come too far to fail now.*

Taking a deep breath, she slipped into the hall. A guard marched past outside, his bonelight shining through the window. Dunyasha ducked below the windowsill and crawled the remainder of the way to the doors at the end of the hall. Rising with barely a whisper, she pulled the lockpicks from her belt. She squinted to make out the complex tumblers in the faint moonlight. Slipping the picks into the locks, she turned one slightly, sliding it past the tumblers.

A soft click sounded and then she was approaching the raised pedestal. Dunyasha could just make out the glitter of the ring's crystals. She struck a match and light flared in the room, reflected in a thousand directions by the diamond-shaped gems laid in an orderly row along the ring. She reached for it, gently raising it from its velvet cushion. *Put it on*, the voice whispered, *and you will be unstoppable. You could leave those weak-minded fools you serve behind and-*

"Enough." The word echoed through the room, painfully loud in the dead silence of the night. *Saints*, she thought. She hadn't meant to say that out loud. Down the hall, she heard the guards coming to investigate, opening doors as they made their way through the monastery. Slipping the ring into her pocket, Dunyasha blew out the match before sneaking from the room, carefully closing the door behind her. *You could take them all on. If only you would take this power, you wouldn't need to run.* She silenced the voice. Had she stayed quiet, she would have locked the door behind her, but there wasn't time now.

The guards grew closer as she looked for an exit. Without time to pick the locks on the doors nearest her, she ran down the hall until finally one of the handles turned. Dunyasha slipped into the room, no more than a shadow. As she looked around, her heart sank. It was a bedroom, sparsely furnished with only a bed and a wardrobe. A figure slept soundly on the narrow bed. The only exit was the door behind her, and with the guards only a dozen yards away, it was no longer an option. Spotting a corner perfectly cloaked in darkness, she stepped towards it, the old floorboards squeaking beneath her step. She froze as the occupant of the room stirred, sitting up.

Whirling, Dunyasha drew her blades from their sheaths and lunged toward the man now reaching for his sword. Just as he had grabbed the blade, her dagger pierced his heart. Freezing, he looked down in shock at the dark stain spreading across his chest. Then the man's body thudded back onto the bed, his weapon clanging to the floor.

Cursing, she darted for the door only to skid to a halt at the sight of her friend Alessandra standing in the doorway. With moonlight now spilling across the room, Dunyasha turned back to the man she had killed. Alessandra moved from the doorway, and his face was sliced with light. Gasping, she whirled for her friend, who was staring at the body in shock, tears spilling down her face. Slowly, her eyes turned to Dunyasha's.

“Why?” Alessandra said in a broken whisper.

“I-I don’t- I didn’t-” Stumbling backward, Dunyasha fled the room, slamming through the door across the hall. She ran to the window on shaking legs.

“How could you do this?” Alessandra sobbed. “Why? Why would you kill my brother?”

“I-I’m-” Dunyasha took a shuddering breath. She opened her mouth to apologize, but how did you repent for such a thing? Shaking her head, she backed away from the window and then leapt forward, shattering the glass. Wind whistled past her as she fell two stories to land on the soft, pine needle-covered ground. Wiping her tears, she took off, slipping into the shadows she was born from.