

# Taken

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She was only four when it happened.

Snow was falling outside. The delicate flakes sank into glistening white drifts. Her mother hummed and baked sugar cookies. Curled up in her blanket, Anova smiled. Her gray-blue eyes reflected the sky outside. Then there were angry voices. The door was thrown open. There were four men wearing navy blue coats and hats covering their heads. They grabbed her mother and dragged her away, her mother yelling for Anova. Another bang, and her home was afire.

Smoke filled her lungs. She coughed, desperately trying to breathe clean air, but it was impossible. Darkness engulfed the girl, and then everything was gone.

When Anova opened her eyes seven hours later, everything was different. She sat up and looked around. Sleeping women and children surrounded her. She appeared to be in a very large wooden box. It stank of excrement. It was dark and damp inside. She was scared and she wanted her mother. Tears began to pour down her face as she longed for her mother's warm, soothing touch. Her muffled sobs became louder. A woman beside her stirred and sat up.

"Are you alright?" she whispered.

Anova sniffed quietly.

The young woman scooped Anova up in her arms and cradled the girl, singing her a gentle song. She introduced herself as Melaea and asked where Anova came from, and Anova told her all she remembered from the morning. Melaea explained to her where they were.

"We are all being taken by *Stålbekyttelsen*, The Steel Guard. They are taking men to be fighters and we are being taken to a camp so they can inhabit our village as an army base. It appears that you were not found until after your mother. You were brought into this train car five hours ago. I have been here for four days, and some have been here longer. Look around to see if you can find your mother."

Anova glanced around at the sleeping, but to no avail. She shook her head.

"She will be in another car. We should arrive at dawn." Melaea rocked Anova in her arms until Anova could no longer stay awake. She slipped into darkness.

"Out, hurry! Hurry!" said a dark man with a heavy accent. Anova recognized him as one of the men who took her mother. Anova was hit with sunlight like a wave in the ocean. She blinked, and was pushed out of the train car. She took in her surroundings.

Large tents the size of the train cars littered the land. It smelled of cow dung and . . . death? She clutched Melaea's hand.

They were directed to a tent close to the middle of the area. Children were crying into their mothers' shoulders. It made Anova want her mother, so she sat down in Melaea's lap. Nightfall seemed to come quickly. The prisoners were given gray porridge that tasted of dirt. Some refused it, but Anova forced it down when Melaea mentioned that would be it until the next night. She fell into a restless sleep. Her dreams were filled with her mother, the fire, and the men who took her. She woke up in the night in a cold sweat. Hushed voices were echoing through the tent. She glanced to the corner of the room that the noises were coming from and

saw the women talking. Silently as possible, Anova crept towards them, and then tapped Melaea.

Melaea jumped. She turned, face white, but relaxed when she saw her. Anova crawled into her lap. It was obvious that whatever they were talking about wasn't supposed to be heard by children. Anova pretended to fall asleep so they could continue.

"Whew. Scared me there, didn't she?" whispered Melaea. "Thought she was one of them."

"Yes, well. How will we do it?" said another woman.

"We must sneak out tomorrow night. If needed, we'll fight," stated an older woman.

"But how, Mishka? We have no weapons!" said the first.

"Ladies, sometimes we need to get our hands dirty." There was a murmur of agreement. "We'll be forced to fight with our bare hands under such circumstances."

"And the children?" said a quieter voice.

"We will have to send them with some of us," Mishka replied.

"What about the others?" It was Melaea who spoke now. Anova could feel her warm brown eyes land on her.

Mishka sighed. "I don't know, Melaea. It will be hard to alert everyone."

"The more we have, the better our chances are! We cannot fight those men alone. They are trained and have 12 times our population. If others help us, not only will more lives be saved if we succeed, but our chances of succeeding will be higher." Melaea spoke with determination.

"But how?" spoke one woman. "It would be impossible to alert everyone that we are leaving by tomorrow night."

"We could tell the others surrounding us and keep the message passing around. It isn't foolproof, but it's our only hope."

"We should try. But we need sleep. Goodnight."

The next day, Anova's mind raced and her belly ached with hunger. She was terrified. She noticed women passing the message throughout the day. Finally, night came. The women kept the children awake. When the night was silent, the plan began.

"Quietly, children," said Mishka. "Follow Deya and Sephie. They will take care of you."

Anova and the others followed. She saw children from other tents leaving, too. They were heading the direction the train cars came from. Women were beginning to sneak out. Then a bell sounded, and the *Stålbekyttelsen* were upon them.

"Run!" yelled a woman, and they bolted. Gunshots rang, and people screamed. Anova saw women fighting. It appeared the *Stålbekyttelsen* were retreating in shock! With a cry of victory, the women ran towards the forest that the train had come through.

Then, Anova tripped. A woman grabbed her and hugged her.

"Mama!" cried Anova. She felt her mother's tears of joy mixing with her own. Together, they ran for home.