

## Hearken

### by Veronica Roth

#### “BLACK OR RED?”

The woman in the lab coat held up two small containers: one with a red substance caked inside it and one with black. It sounded like she was asking Darya a question of taste, rather than the question that defined her future. The only question, Darya believed, that would ever matter this much.

The question was not “Black or red?” It was “Life or death?” And Darya would not have been able to answer before that moment.

**She had been** seven years old when her father first realized what she could become. Her older sister, Khali, had been playing piano in the living room, an old piece by Schubert. Darya sat on the couch, humming along, a book in her lap.

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She reached out and shifted her sister’s index finger one note over. Then she moved Khali’s pinkie finger, and her middle finger.

“There,” said Darya. “Now do it.”

Khali rolled her eyes and began the piece. Darya smiled as the notes came together, ringing when they touched each other.

“Oh,” said Khali. Her skin was too dark to reveal a blush, but her sheepish expression betrayed her. “You’re right. I read it wrong. It’s supposed to be in B minor.”

Darya smiled a little, walked back to the couch, and picked up her book again. Her father moved the towel in circles even when it started to squeak against the dry dish.

A few weeks later, Darya’s father started her in music classes. There they discovered that Darya had perfect pitch—one of the prerequisites for becoming a Harkener.

Khali quit piano after Darya surpassed her in skill, which took only a year. It was useless to try to play piano when you were in the same family as a Harkener.

#### “Come on. Today’s the day!”

Darya yawned over her cereal. It was too early to

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Her mother dozed in the recliner, her mouth lolling open. Darya thought about drawing a mustache on her face. She wouldn’t notice it when she awoke. She would be too dazed by the alcohol. Even at seven, Darya knew. But it was not uncommon, with the world as it was. Half her friends’ parents had the same problem.

Darya’s father stood in the doorway, listening, a dish towel in his hands. He turned it over a plate to the rhythm of the notes, which came in stilted intervals as Khali tried to read the music. Darya stopped humming, irritated. The music was meant to be smooth, and it sounded like Khali was chopping it up into bits.

Khali turned the page and adjusted her hands on the piano. Darya perked up, letting the book drop into her lap. Her mother snored. Her sister began playing, and Darya stood, walked over to the piano, and stared at her sister’s hands. To her the notes sounded *wrong* . . . the intervals were too large, or too small; they did not mesh together in the right way.

“That’s wrong,” she said, wincing.

“No it’s not,” said Khali. “How would *you* know?”

“Because I can hear it,” she said. “It’s supposed to be like *this*.”

be hungry, but her father had warned her that she would need to eat a good breakfast because today would be a long one. She was going to be tested by the Minnesota School for Harkeners later that morning to see if she was qualified to enroll, and the test could last several hours. That was a long time for an eight-year-old.

Her mother shuffled into the kitchen in her old robe, which was threadbare at the cuffs where she pulled it over her hands. She held a mug of coffee, which Darya eyed suspiciously. Her mother had carried it into the bedroom several minutes ago.

A few weeks before, Darya had found a brown bottle under the sink in her parents’ bathroom. She had sniffed it, and its contents burned her nose, and the smell seemed to linger there for several minutes. The bottle and the coffee and her mother’s running-together words were part of a familiar pattern that she had always recognized, even before she had the words to describe it.

Her mother’s eyes wandered across Darya’s face.

“Where’re you going?” she asked.

“I’m taking Darya to get tested,” Darya’s father said, too brightly.

“Tested for what?”

“Dar has perfect pitch.” Her father set his hand

on Darya's head and tousled her hair. "She could be a Harkener someday."

A Harkener, to Darya's mother, meant two things: being employed by the government—a stable job; and carrying an expensive piece of equipment, the implant, in your head—which meant immediate evacuation if the country was quarantined. She snorted a little.

"D'you really think you should be putting that idea into her head?" Her mother's eyes were cold and critical. Darya couldn't look at them. "Almost nobody becomes an Ark . . . 'Arkener."

Darya stared at her bowl. The little bubble of excitement that had risen inside her as soon as she woke up was gone, like it had floated away.

Her father rose and took her mother's arm. "Maybe you should get back to bed, Reggie. You don't look well."

"I just meant," her mother said angrily, "that I don't want her to be *disappointed*—"

"I know," he said.

He ushered her from the room. Darya heard the bedroom door close and muffled voices getting louder every second until something banged shut. No longer hungry, she dumped her cereal bowl into the sink without finishing.

30 mins left in chapter

2%

the tops of the buildings—they seemed so far away, though her father said they were shorter than the buildings in most cities. Most of the windows in the building next to her were blown out completely from the days when destructive bombs had been in fashion. But it was the loss of people, not buildings, that made a war destructive, and the fanatics had figured that out.

They stopped walking and stood next to a blue sign marked with graffiti. Darya itched her leg with her free hand and gazed up at her father. He was not a tall man, nor was he short. His skin was dark brown, like Darya's, and his hair was black and smooth, shiny like her hair, too. He had moved to the States from India before the quarantine. India had been one of the first countries targeted when the attacks began because of its condensed population. Now the infection was so rampant that the borders had to be closed to prevent a worldwide epidemic. Her father's parents had gotten infected, so they hadn't been able to leave with him. She had never met her grandparents. She assumed they were dead by now.

"Will the test be hard, Daddy?"

He smiled. "Most of it will be things you already know how to do. And the rest you will be able to

29 mins left in chapter

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"Your mom's not feeling so good, Dar," her father said as they walked down the sidewalk in front of the apartment building. "She didn't mean it."

Darya nodded without thinking.

They would have lived in the suburbs if they could have—it was safer there, since the attacks came less frequently—but her father's job only paid well enough for a small apartment downtown.

The attacks had always been a part of Darya's life. They could come from anyone, and they were waged against everyone with a pulse. That was why Darya and her sister had to wear face masks on the way to school.

Her father had taught them both to know bio-bombs when they saw them, but their minds had a tendency to wander when they were together, and he didn't trust them to look for bombs yet. Kids at school teased them for the masks, but they couldn't persuade their father to let them go without. "Prove to me that you can pay attention," he always said.

Death was too real a possibility. Most people didn't make it past fifty nowadays, even if they lived in the suburbs.

Her father pulled her tight to his side as they walked, scattering old cans and bits of paper with the toes of their shoes. She craned her neck to see

figure out. Don't worry, Dar. You'll do great."

A bus trundled around the corner as he finished speaking, and creaked to a stop right in front of them. The doors opened, and Darya's father paid the fare. They sat down in the middle, next to an old lady who was shifting her dentures around in her mouth, and across from a middle-aged man with a mask covering his mouth and nose.

Her father leaned in close and whispered, "Okay, so what do we do when we get on a train or a bus?"

"Look for masks," she whispered back. They would have been wearing masks too, if they had not had to leave the two they owned for Darya's mother, who had to walk Khali to school later, and Khali. Masks were expensive. But she was safe with her father, who could spot a bio-bomb anywhere.

"Why do we do that?"

"Because only people with masks will set off bio-bombs." Her voice dipped even lower at the word *bio-bombs*, as if saying it any louder would provoke an attack.

"Right," he said, "and after we look for masks, what do we do?"

"We watch."

The enemy could be anyone, anywhere. All that bound them together was a commitment to bringing

about the apocalypse. They believed the world ought to be destroyed. They did not believe in ending their own lives. Darya didn't understand it and didn't want to try.

He nodded. And they watched, both of them, as the bus bumped and thudded around corners and down streets. Darya had not seen much of the city because she spent all her travel time eyeing the people around her. She was usually in a bus, rather than a train, because buses were easier to escape from.

"You know, when I was young, people didn't like Hearkeners much," her father said.

Darya watched the man across from her. His eyes remained steady on the floor. She could hear his breaths through the slats in the mask—not loud, but louder than unfiltered breaths.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because they were seen as an unnecessary expenditure," he said. "Not worth the cost, I mean. But the people over at the Bureau for the Promotion of Arts were very insistent that music would help a troubled world. And then when people started dying . . ." He shrugged. "Everyone started to understand why Hearkeners were so important."

"Why are they so important?"

27 mins left in chapter

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bus, shoving people out of his way with his elbows. Darya fought for air, but the hand prevented her from taking a breath.

Her father shouldered his way out the bus door. Against her will, Darya's body began to struggle against her father's grasp, fighting for air. Her father sprinted down the street and into an alley just as she began to see spots.

He took his hand from her mouth, and she gasped.

He had not had time to cover his own mouth. What if he inhaled some of the gas? What if he was infected? She choked on a sob. What if he died?

"It's okay, Dar." He gathered her close to his chest. "I held my breath. We're all right. We're just fine."

**Technically, the only** distinguishing feature of a Hearkener was the implant. It was placed in the temporal lobe of the brain. It didn't protrude from the skin, but it contained a dye that created a weblike pattern on the right temple. Harkeners were required to pull their hair away from their faces to reveal the pattern. Its purpose was to make them easily identifiable.

The implant made them what they were. They

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"Because what they hear . . . it's like hearing something beyond us. Something bigger than us." He smiled down at her. "It reminds us that there's more going on in this world than we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands."

Darya didn't quite understand what her father meant, but she knew there was something beautiful in it all the same.

Then she heard something—quickenings breaths from the man across from them. She saw a bead of sweat roll down the side of his forehead. He looked so harmless—he was short, with salt-and-pepper hair and a white, collared shirt. His slacks were pressed, creased. He was not a killer. But the peculiar blend of fear and determination in his eyes was enough to make Darya's breaths stop completely.

As the man in the mask moved to get off the bus, he took a canister from his bag and dropped it on the ground. It was an object she had only seen in pictures—dull metal, about six inches long, as thick as her wrist, with an opening at one end to let out the gas.

Someone screamed. Darya's father clapped his hand over her mouth and nose, and lifted her up from the abdomen. He ran toward the front of the

heard music everywhere—as long as there were people, there was music.

The first time she saw a licensed Hearkener was outside the Minnesota School for Harkeners, on the fifth step from the bottom of thirty long, low steps. They had not made it to the testing center the day of the bio-bomb, but they went three days later, this time walking the whole way instead of taking the bus.

Her father stood beside her, clutching her hand. They both paused to watch the Hearkener woman walk past.

She was tall and slender, with hair the color of earth and the same pale skin Darya's mother had. She walked without a bounce in her step, but at the same time, her feet were light on the cement. She wore a knee-length coat that snapped when the wind caught it. The pattern on her temple was iodine black, but it was the last thing Darya noticed.

All Darya could think was that this Hearkener of Death was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen, and she wanted to be just like her.

As the Hearkener passed Darya and her father, she tilted her head, the way a person does when he is trying to hear something. Her footsteps slowed for just a moment, and she closed her eyes.

After the moment passed, she looked Darya's father in the eye and smiled. Despite the curl of her lips, a troubled look remained in her eyes. She kept walking.

Three weeks later, Darya's father died of the infection, and that Harkener was the only person who ever heard his death song.

**Darya passed the test**, and her mother enrolled her in the Minnesota School for Harkeners that fall. Though Darya's mind was still muddled with grief, it was what her father had wanted for her, so she went.

Her first impression of the place was that it was too large for her. Even the front steps were vast, made of wide slabs of a dark, matte stone. The building itself was tall, made of black glass with girders that formed a huge X across the front. A giant clock, fixed to the front of the building, told her she had five minutes to get to her first class.

She looked at the piece of paper the school had sent her, along with half a dozen packets and information sheets, to tell her where to go on her first day. All the new students took classes together until they tested into particular levels of musical study or until they chose their instrument

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The room was oddly silent. Ten other children, her age, sat at long wooden tables inside. She found an empty seat near the back, next to a densely freckled boy tapping out a rhythm on the table with his pencil.

The bell rang. An older woman with gray, curly hair and a chunk missing from her eyebrow strode in. She wore the Harkener uniform: a black trench coat, buttoned up to her throat, and gray pants. Darya leaned to the side to see what color the woman's implant was. Red. That meant she heard life songs rather than death songs.

The woman cleared her throat, though there was no reason to—no one was talking.

"Hello," she said. "Let's not bother with introductions. Oh, except me. We go by surnames here, and mine is Hornby. I'll be giving you the rundown of Harkener history."

Darya knew the basics—that the Harkener implant had something to do with string theory, and what it did was channel the vibrations of the human body somehow and make them into music. But she felt strangely exposed, without knowing more.

"String theory became widely accepted in the early part of the century," Hornby said. "Can anyone tell me what string theory is, basically? Yes

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specialties.

The schedule said: *Hour 1, Introduction to Harkener History, Room A104.*

Darya looked up when she passed through the doors. She couldn't see much past the security barrier. A stern-looking man in a black uniform told her to put her bag on a black conveyor belt that would take it through a scanner. She then had to stand in what looked like a globe with a tunnel cut through it so that it could scan her body. She had gone through both when she took her tests here, but her father had been with her then. This time she was afraid. What if they didn't let her through?

But another man, on the other side, handed her the bag and let her pass him. The hallway here was completely different from the dingy, green-tiled hall that had been in her old school. Here, the floors were white marble—or at least something that looked like marble—and the walls were navy blue. Even the lockers were elegant—made of dark wood, they lined the walls as far as she could see.

She looked at the first room she passed—room A101. She was close. She walked past another section of lockers and glanced at the rooms to her left and right. A104 was on the left. Taking a deep breath, she walked in.

—how about you—what's your name?"

The boy next to Darya had raised his hand. "Christopher Marshall, ma'am."

"Hornby will do, Marshall. Go ahead."

"String theory is the theory that subatomic particles like electrons and quarks are one-dimensional strings instead of three-dimensional, and that the one-dimensional strings form the fabric of the universe."

"Good," said Hornby. "Also, the strings are constantly vibrating. That's important to remember because when Dr. Rogers created the first implant, all it did was channel the vibrations and their various frequencies and translate them into music. It was her successor, Dr. Johnson, who refined the implant to filter out all frequencies but those of human cells, so it was only people who made music. Anyone want to tell me why he would do a thing like that? You, there—your name . . . ?"

"Samanth—uh, I mean Brock," a girl in the front row said. "He said he just wanted to see if it was possible."

"In fact, that is what he said, but we have since determined it was so he could hear the music his dying wife made." Hornby added, "He had a friend try out the implant so that she could transpose the

music. She was the first Hearer. But the implants didn't stop there."

Here she paused and tapped the red dye on her temple with her index finger.

"The last developer of the implant discovered that he could filter out either the vibrations of decaying cells or the vibrations of regenerating cells. In other words, he could make the implant play the sound of a person's life or the sound of their death. For a long time, hardly any Hearers chose death. Now that death is so common, those Hearers are in high demand."

Darya remembered the look the Hearer who had heard her father's death song had given him. She had seemed almost bewitched by it. Darya didn't think that woman had chosen the death songs because they were in higher demand.

Hornby clapped her hands. "Now that that's out of the way, I would like to call each of you up so that I can listen to your life song and tell you what instruments it seems to include. Not, by the way, that a life song actually incorporates instruments. It's just that certain sounds remind us of them. Anyway—this is important because you will be selecting two of the three instruments you are required to master in your first year here. Much of

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than she had stared at anyone else . . . and then Hornby rocked onto her heels, as if something had blown her backward.

"My goodness," she said quietly. Then she seemed to come to her senses and said, more briskly, "I hear . . . violin, cello, piano, some voice, trombone, trumpet, drum . . . there are more, but those are the dominant instruments."

She leaned a little closer to Darya's face, so that Darya could see a dart of blue in her otherwise green eyes.

"I've never heard so much dissonance in a life song before," she said quietly, so that only Darya could hear.

And that was the beginning of Darya's education as a Hearer.

**"When do you get the implant?"**

Darya stabbed a piece of lettuce with her fork. After seven years at Hearer school, she had passed the final test, an achievement half of her class hadn't managed. And all Khali wanted to know was when she would get to work. But that was Khali—all work and no play.

"A week from tomorrow," she said.

"Oh."

20 mins left in chapter

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your time will be spent trying out each of them to see which ones you gravitate toward. Hopefully my evaluation will steer you in the right direction."

It had been a very brief history lesson. Darya sat in her seat with her hands clutched around the edge of the chair as each of the eleven children in the class walked up to the front of the room so Hornby could listen to them. She didn't want to go. She didn't want to let that woman analyze her. She didn't know why, but it felt far too personal, far too intimate for a setting like this.

It wasn't long before Hornby pointed to her and bent her finger, beckoning Darya forward. Darya got up—too fast; she knocked the chair over and had to set it right again—and walked to the front of the room, her hands fidgeting at her sides. When she stood right in front of Hornby, the woman asked her, "Your name?"

"Darya Singh," she said.

"Singh." Hornby laughed a little. "Well, that's convenient. Let me listen to you for a bit."

Hornby focused her attention on Darya's face, though she wasn't exactly looking into Darya's eyes. She stared for a few seconds, and then a few more seconds . . . and then Darya became aware that Hornby had been staring at her for much longer

"It's soon, I know."

Khali frowned. "What?"

"A week. It's hardly enough time to determine my entire future."

Khali's expression was still blank. Darya felt like she had started speaking another language without meaning to. She raised her eyebrows at her older sister.

It was midday, but the windows were boarded up, so it felt like night in the kitchen. Wood wouldn't keep the infection at bay if someone set off a bio-bomb nearby, but it was better than nothing. The battery-operated lantern on the table glowed orange, with fake flickers so that it imitated fire.

Khali lived with their mother now, in their childhood home. Darya had stopped coming back during the holidays three years before, and now only saw Khali when they went out to eat, or when she was sure her mother would be asleep.

"I don't understand," Khali said. "What decision needs to be made?"

"The decision." Darya scowled. "You know—life songs or death songs? It's a huge choice. It changes everything."

"But you're going to choose death songs," Khali replied tersely. "Right? Because you want to record

Mom's song before it's too late. Right?"

Darya pushed the piece of lettuce around her plate.

"She's only got a few weeks left if she doesn't get the transplant. At most, Darya."

Darya did know.

"She won't get another Harkener! We don't have enough money as it is!" Khali was shaking her head. "I can't believe you wouldn't do this for her. I can't believe you."

Darya looked up, her lips pursed.

"I can't believe *you*," she said. "She's already controlled my life enough; I'm not going to let her control the rest of it too!"

"What do you mean? She hasn't controlled you."

"What little childhood we had she took from us," said Darya. "Kids aren't supposed to think, 'Oh, Mommy's drunk again, so I'd better stay away from her.' Kids aren't supposed to take care of their parents. We've done enough for her. I'm not doing *this* for her."

Khali's mouth was open, but she wasn't saying anything. She just looked stunned.

Then she said, "You've only met the real her a few times, Darya. The woman you know is just the alcohol, stifling her."

18 mins left in chapter

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delight in the prospect of the world ending—they tried to stay alive in the aftermath of their attacks only so that they could attack again.

Obligation was dangerous because it muddled the mind. Did she want to choose red to defy her mother or because she really wanted it? Did she want to choose black for her sister's sake? How could she know what she really wanted with so many competing obligations—to herself, to her mother, to her sister, to her late father?

Darya remembered the Harkener's face as she listened to Darya's father's death song, distress and warmth competing for dominance, like she protected a secret, and Darya longed to understand it. It was that whisper of longing that made the decision for her.

"Black," she said.

The nurse put the red cylinder aside and set the black cylinder on a tray next to the hospital bed. She wrapped rubber tubing around Darya's arm to make the veins stand out. Darya felt her pulse in each one of her fingertips, and a harsh sting as the needle went in. The nurse removed the rubber tubing and, with a small smile, flipped the switch that would start the IV drip.

Darya was supposed to be awake for the

17 mins left in chapter

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"The implant isn't something you can undo, Khali. You choose death, you choose it forever. You can't tell me it's my duty to choose something just because our shitty mom is finally getting what was always coming to her."

Darya clutched the edge of the table, waiting for Khali to scream at her, or call her names, or something. But Khali's eyes just filled with tears, and her lower lip started to wobble.

"Then . . ." She gulped. "Don't do it for her. Do it for me, so I can hear. . . . She's the only parent I . . . Please, Darya."

Darya carried her plate to the sink and scraped the remnants of her salad into the garbage disposal. She took a long time to clean her plate, scraping slowly, rinsing slowly. She didn't want Khali to see the tears in her own eyes.

"I don't know if I can," she finally said.

"**Black or red?**" the nurse asked again.

All her life Darya had been developing a resistance to obligation of any kind. No one had taught her to; maybe the world had taught her to. People who set off bio-bombs did so out of a religious obligation to hasten the apocalypse. The pictures she had seen of them did not reveal any

procedure, so the doctors would know they hadn't damaged her brain while inserting the implant. But she wouldn't remember any of it, thanks to whatever was in the IV bag, and she was grateful. She didn't want to remember them peeling back her scalp and drilling into her skull and inserting things into her temporal lobe, the part of the brain that processed sound.

A haze of passing images was all she retained to remind her that time had passed. Gradually she became aware of someone sitting in front of her, but it looked like she was hidden behind a white film. Then a face surfaced, and it was Khali's. Her mouth was moving, but Darya couldn't hear her. There was something over her ears.

Khali covered her eyes momentarily, as if chastising herself, and then took out a pad of paper and a pen. On it, she wrote, *They don't want you to hear anyone yet. Said it would be too overwhelming. Keep the ear covers on. How do you feel?*

Darya's head throbbed, especially over the right side, where the implant was. Other than that, she just felt heavy, like she could drop right through the mattress.

She didn't want to try to explain all that to Khali,

so she just put her thumb up and tried to smile, though she was sure it looked more like a grimace. Even her cheeks were heavy.

Khali's eyes were wet. She scribbled another note on the pad:

*Thank you.*

Darya knew what Khali was thanking her for. If she hadn't been so tired, she might have tried to say that she had not made her choice for Khali, had not made it for their mother—that she wasn't even sure she wanted to hear her mother's song, despite what she had chosen. But soon the weight collected behind her eyes, dragging her back to sleep.

**She woke up** later to dark skies showing between the blinds and a nurse peering at the incision in her scalp. They had buzzed some of her hair—eight square inches of it, in fact. She had demanded to know the exact amount. Another thing her mother had told her: a woman's hair is the most beautiful part of her.

Darya's mother had had beautiful hair when she was younger, a reddish brown that shone like a penny in sunlight. It had come down to the middle of her back, incorrigibly wavy—no matter how hard she tried to straighten it, it refused to stay that way.

15 mins left in chapter

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her fingers in tension for so long. She chose it not because she liked it, but because it was challenging, because she knew bearing through the pain would result in greater joy.

The nurse checking the incision site noticed that Darya was awake, and she smiled. She said something Darya couldn't hear, thanks to the glorified earmuffs she still wore. The nurse removed her rubber gloves and tossed them into a nearby trash can. Darya was finally awake enough to look around—she was in a large room full of beds, with curtains separating each one. She could only see the toes of the man next to her.

A stack of books stood on the bedside table—some of Khali's favorites and some of her own. Darya slid one of Khali's from the stack and started to read, propping herself up on the pillows.

About an hour later, Khali walked into the room, dabbing at one of her eyes with a handkerchief. Her face was discolored—she had obviously been crying. *My face looks like raw hamburger when I cry, Khali used to say. It's so embarrassing. I can never hide it.*

Khali clutched a phone in her right hand, the one without the handkerchief. Her grip was so tight it looked like she was about to crack the battery in half

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Darya had often thought that it was a shame that neither she nor Khali had inherited her mother's hair.

It was a strange thing, but in the moments right before she fully woke, a memory of her mother had come to mind. It had been during one of her mother's sober streaks. Darya had come home from school for spring break, and her mother had been restored—one month sober, rosy-cheeked, smart, pleasant. She and Khali had been making cake batter in the kitchen as Darya's neighbor nailed boards on all the windows, and her mother had been singing in a thin soprano.

"Sing with me!" her mother had said. "You have a beautiful voice, Darya."

She had started on a song that Darya knew, and though Darya had felt that this woman was a stranger, she could not help but join in. She had made up a harmony on the spot, slipping her lower voice beneath her mother's, and tears—happy ones—had come into her mother's eyes.

"Beautiful," she had said.

That was the week Darya chose violin as her third instrument—every Hearer needed to be proficient in three—even though her fingertips were too soft for the strings, and she had trouble holding

with her fingernails.

"What?" Darya said. She could feel the word vibrating in her throat, but she had no idea how loudly she had spoken. Khali didn't shush her, so she assumed it hadn't been that loud.

Khali picked up the notebook and pencil resting next to the stack of books, and started to write.

*Mom's request for a liver transplant was denied.*

Darya nodded. Obviously. They didn't give new livers to alcoholics.

*So I had her transferred here, so she'll be close to us. She's in room 3128.*

Darya wanted her mother to be as far away as possible.

*She looks awful.*

Khali stared at her, wide-eyed, waiting. *Waiting for what?* Darya wondered, but it was a silly question. She knew what Khali was waiting for: an offer, *I'll go record her death song for you.*

But Darya didn't offer. She took the pad of paper from her sister's hands and scribbled, *Okay. Thanks for telling me.*

**It was midnight.** Khali had left hours ago, right after Darya wrote back to her, but not in a huff—that was not Khali's way. She always made sure to

smile when she said good-bye.

Darya put her feet over one side of the bed and let them dangle for a moment before touching them to the tile. It was cold, or her feet were warm from being buried under blankets for so long. She stretched her arms over her head and felt her back crack and pop, though she didn't hear it. The noise blockers were still over her ears.

She walked into the bathroom and looked at her reflection. What she saw shocked her. She had not expected the implant to transform her the way it had. The black veins sprawled across her temple, arching over her eyebrow and down to her cheekbone. She turned her head to see how far back the dye had traveled—it stretched over her scalp as far as the bandage that covered the incision site. Soon her hair would grow over it.

She touched the layer of fuzz that was already growing in. It would grow back faster than normal hair, she knew—the nurse had told her, with a wink, that she had put some hair-regrowing salve on it, the kind they used for vain men and cancer patients. Looking at her reflection, Darya didn't think she would have minded keeping the shaved portion for a while. It made her look tough, just like the implant dye.

12 mins left in chapter

7%

which implant he had chosen. The red dye on his temple disappointed her. She had hoped that their paths would intersect in the future, but if he had chosen life songs, he would be in different classes for the next two years and work in different places thereafter.

He wrote something on the pad of paper:

*What made you choose it?*

She sighed and took the pen from him. She paused with the tip of the pen over the paper for a few seconds before she began to write, then scribbled out what she had written and began again. It took her several tries to find a response she liked: *Life's something we already understand. Death is a mystery.*

He nodded, looking impressed, and wrote, *I've heard dying people are ornery toward Hearkeners. Hornby got that scar above her eyebrow because one of her clients chucked an alarm clock at her head.*

Darya laughed and reached across him to write back. *So is that why you picked life? You can just wear a helmet, you know.*

He shook his head. *No. I guess I just wanted to . . . People don't celebrate life as much as they used to. I think they should.*

11 mins left in chapter

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She made sure the back of her gown was tied tightly, slipped her shoes on, and walked down the hallway. At the end of it was a large waiting room that looked out over the city. The hospital was one of the taller buildings in this part of Minneapolis, so she would be able to see more than usual.

She shuffled down the hallway, her head aching, but not enough to stop her. In one corner of the waiting room, by the television screen, were what looked like a brother and sister. The sister was rocking back and forth, her hands pressed between her knees. Both stared at the television but were not really watching it.

Standing near the window on the other end of the room was a young man with the same ear covers she wore, but his whole head was buzzed instead of just eight inches of it. When he looked to the side, she recognized him as Christopher Marshall.

He smiled at her and beckoned for her to come closer. She did, scanning the tables for something she could write on. But then she saw that he was already holding a notebook, balancing it against the railing near the windows, and there was a pen behind his ear.

She stood next to him and touched her fingertips to his chin to turn his head. She wanted to see

She nodded and leaned her elbows on the railing. He did the same thing next to her. Their arms, side by side, were as different as the paths they had chosen—his were pale, dotted with freckles, and long; hers were brown and short.

The city lights were beautiful at night, glowing from distant offices and blinking atop buildings, like the Christmas lights her father had put up because he liked the way they looked, though he only turned them on for an hour a day to save on the electric bill. But there was no limit on these lights—they would be on all night, as long as it was dark enough to see them.

Christopher was writing in the notebook again.

*Have you listened to anyone yet?*

She shook her head.

He bit his lip and wrote, *Do you mind if I listen to you?*

Darya hesitated. Hearkeners had listened to her life song before, but this was different. This was his first one, and he wanted it to be her? She doubted he was thinking of it that way, but it seemed that way to her.

*You can say no. I just want it to be someone I know, not whoever runs into me first when I walk out of the hospital,* he wrote.

He made a good point. She would be the first, but she would also be the first of many. She took the pen from him and wrote, *Go ahead*.

He took off his ear covers, slowly, so they didn't slip and hit the incision site. She turned to face him, though she knew it wouldn't be any easier for him to hear her song if he was looking at her. He stood with the headphones clutched in front of him for a few seconds, frowning and squinting as he made sense of the new sounds in his mind.

Then, after a few seconds, he stopped squinting or frowning. His face relaxed, and his mouth drifted open, forming a loose O. Darya shifted, holding the railing with one hand, uncomfortable as he stared at her. And he *stared*. His eyes, normally so courteous, were wide and *on her*, pressing against her until she was forced to look back at him.

When she did, she saw a tear in his eyelashes. He wiped it with the back of his hand and shoved the ear covers back on.

Did he not want to hear her anymore? Had it hurt him?

Far from staring now, he was looking at his shoes, at the railing, at anything but her. After she had let him listen to her, after she had exposed that part of herself to him, he had nothing to say, not

9 mins left in chapter

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the world had weighed on their mother always, more than it weighed on other people. And she had cracked under that weight.

A sad story, maybe, but Darya did not feel particularly sympathetic. The world was terrible for everyone these days, and they still got up, got dressed, went to work, kept their families together.

It didn't really matter, though, did it? It didn't matter whether she felt sympathy or not. Khali had asked her for something. Khali had always been there for her. And Darya would give it to her.

She opened the door. The sound roused Khali from sleep, but not their mother. Khali stared at her sister like she was an apparition, and Darya supposed she did look like one, in a pale hospital gown, her hair half shaved, wandering in uncertainly. The door closed behind her.

She walked to the violin case and crouched over it to open it. Khali had probably brought the violin because it was so portable; she could not have known how perfect it was for this occasion. Darya had chosen it as her third instrument because it was so difficult for her. It seemed only fitting that she should play it on an occasion that would also be difficult for her.

Usually Hearkeners listened to death songs with

8 mins left in chapter

8%

even a glance to give?

She handed him the notebook and the pen, and walked away without another written word.

**Darya walked the** hallways of the hospital for a long time after that, not sure where she was half the time. She walked through a cafeteria, and an atrium full of plants in large clay pots, and a hectic corridor with gurneys lining the walls. At 2:00 a.m., she realized that she was in a hallway in which all the rooms started with a 31. Sighing, she walked until she found room 3128 and peered through the window next to the door.

Her mother, with her now-scraggly red hair and yellow-tinged skin, lay in the bed, hooked up to an IV and a few monitors. Khali sat beside her mother with her head on the edge of the mattress, fast asleep. Resting against the wall was a violin case. For if Darya changed her mind, probably.

Not for the first time, Darya wondered what it was that made Khali so attached to their mother. Their father had told her once that their mother hadn't started drinking until two years after Darya was born, when Khali was seven. There wasn't an inciting incident as far as Khali knew—no great losses, or deaths, or arguments—but the strain of

a computer in hand instead of an instrument, to transpose the music so that it could be preserved and played later. Khali didn't have a computer to bring, and neither did Darya, so the instrument would have to do.

She sat down in a chair opposite Khali, with their mother between them. Khali opened her mouth to speak, her eyes full of tears, and Darya pressed her finger to her lips. She didn't want to hear Khali's gratitude—it might make her too stubborn, might make her want to take back what she had already done.

Darya reached up and removed her ear covers. She put them on the floor and set the violin in her lap. She understood, then, why Christopher's face had screwed up when he took his ear covers off. At first all she heard were sounds—clapping and clamping and stomping and banging, like a crazy person in a kitchen full of pots. She scowled for a few seconds as the sounds transformed into notes . . . into instruments.

And then the song of her mother's dying came to life in her mind.

The notes were low and consistent, at first, like a cello solo—but not like a solo, more like a bass line. And then, arching above it was something high and

sweet—painfully sweet—faster than the cellos—but not too fast, not frantic. Then the low notes and the high notes melded together into one melody, twisting around each other, straightening out in harmonies. She thought of the song she and her mother had sung in the kitchen. Her mother had had cake batter on her fingers.

Darya stared at her mother the way Christopher had stared at her, *staring*, trying to extract from her mother's face the genius of this song. It took a few seconds before she realized her mother was awake—awake and staring back.

The melody changed, turning darker. If it had had a flavor, it would have been unsweetened chocolate, bitter, smooth. Her mother's eyes were on hers, clearer than they had been for the years that Darya lived with her, but bloodshot, ugly. She remembered the night she had awoken to her mother breaking plates in the kitchen, raging at their father for one reason or another. She felt a surge of anger.

But still the music went on, lifting again, swelling, louder. It was so loud Darya moved to plug her ears, but she couldn't plug her ears against this song, she couldn't block out the sound of her mother's death. The sound of her ending.

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had heard first, the low, persistent notes. They moved into the high, sweet notes, the notes that hit each other so hard she thought they might crack each other in half. They were weak like her mother was weak, sprawled on the couch in her nightgown—but beautiful like her mother, too. They were the smiles that surfaced in the afternoon, when her mother was more lucid, and the happy tears she cried over her daughter's voice, and the light fingers that went through Darya's hair as she brushed it on her better mornings.

And then the notes were low again, low and slow and barely changing, barely moving, a vague utterance in near solitude. They were the weight, the weight her mother bore, the world that crippled her.

The song, moving in Darya's brain—melodic—dissonant—fast—slow—low—beautiful.

Then she felt tears on her face, and she threw the violin onto the bed and ran.

**She ran back** to her room. As she ran, she heard pieces of songs all around her and clapped her hands over her ears, but it did her no good. The world was *loud*, too loud to bear. Still, no matter how far she ran, she could hear her mother's death

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Loud and pounding, a heartbeat contained in a song, low and high, vibrating in Darya's head. Even if there had been a thousand symphonies playing alongside it, Darya still would have picked it out from the rest—it was insistent—she had to hear it—she picked up the violin and wedged it between her chin and her shoulder.

Darya didn't know what to play first. There were too many competing melodies at work in this complex death song, hard to pick just one. Finally she isolated what seemed to be the dominant notes and began to play them. She had not been in school long enough to be good at this, but she remembered what she had learned: Listen first, and trust your fingers to play what you've just heard. Don't listen to yourself; listen to the song.

Darya trusted her fingers. She played furiously, her eyes squeezed shut and her jaw clenched, as the song swelled again, the notes turning over and over each other. Her arms ached and her head throbbed but still she played, not for her mother and not for herself and not for Khali anymore, but because the song required her to play, to find its strongest moments and bring them to the surface so that someone else could hear them.

Her fingers slowed, then, finding the melody she

song in her memory, the most powerful of all the music she encountered in her sprint back to the room.

The nurse saw her on her way back in and grabbed her by the arm. "Where are your ear covers? Where have you been?"

Darya just shook her head. The nurse ran down the hall and returned a few seconds later, new ear covers in her hands. She shoved them over Darya's ears, and all the music stopped. Relief flooded Darya's body like cold water. The nurse steered her to her bed.

Darya crawled under the sheets, gathered her knees to her chest, and stared at the opposite wall.

**She slept past noon.** Khali came in to speak to her, even touched her hand lightly, but she pretended that she couldn't feel it. She had done what her sister wanted, but she had not done it with a good heart; she had done it out of obligation, something she had always avoided. And she felt angry—angry with herself, for doing it, and angry with Khali, for making her feel like she had to, and angry at the death song itself, for refusing to leave her alone from the second she awoke.

Darya sat in bed for the rest of the day, eating

small spoonfuls of flavored gelatin and watching the news report on an attack that had happened in Kansas City earlier that morning. She stared at the death tolls, numb. Sometimes it was weeks before a person showed signs of infection, and sometimes it was minutes—it depended on the potency of the bio-bomb. How long would it be before the world ran out of people?

Darya winced as part of her mother's death song played in her mind again. It ached inside her, feeble but intricate, and every few seconds she felt tears pinching behind her eyes like tweezers. She tried to suppress them, but they came anyway, blurring the news. She didn't know what to do, so she just sat there.

That evening she left her food uneaten on her tray and walked down the hallway again to the waiting room. There were more people in it now, most of them reading magazines or staring at the clock. And Christopher was there, too, sitting in one of the chairs with a stack of paper in his lap. His eyes moved straight to her when she walked in.

He beckoned to her again. His ear covers were off now, and he looked slightly agitated, twitching at sounds she couldn't hear. But the songs didn't seem to pain him. Maybe he had learned to tune them

out.

She sat down next to him and removed her own ear covers. This time she didn't hear a series of random sounds when they were off—she heard music right away, everywhere, but not as loud here as it had been in the rest of the hospital. These people weren't sick.

Everyone had a death song, no matter how young or healthy they were, and everyone had a life song, even when they were dying. Everyone was both dying and living at the same time, but the death song grew louder as death approached, just as the life song was loudest at a person's birth. She could hear Christopher's death song, so faint it was barely over a whisper, but she thought she could hear an organ in it, and a clear voice.

"I stayed here all day, hoping you would come back," he said. "I wanted to tell you I was sorry for last night, how I acted."

"You could have asked them for my room number," she said.

He frowned, like this hadn't occurred to him.

"Well," he said, "it felt more like paying penance, this way."

Darya couldn't help it—she smiled a little. Then she remembered how hastily he had shoved the ear

covers back on, and her smile faded.

"It was overwhelming," he said. "Your song. I couldn't get it out of my mind. Even while I was listening, it was too much . . . it was too much to bear, so I had to stop." He showed her the first sheet on the stack of paper he was holding. Written at the top was *Daria*. She ignored the misspelling and stared at what was beneath it—crudely rendered musical notes, line after line of them.

"I wrote some of it down," he said. "Do you want to hear it?"

Did she want to hear her life song? Of course she did.

Slowly, Darya nodded.

"Come on, then," he said. He reached for her hand, and led her out of the waiting room. Darya stared at their joined hands as they walked through the hospital corridors. Then she stared at the side of his face, which was also covered in freckles, but these weren't as dark as the ones on his arms, except on his long, narrow nose.

He led her to a set of double doors. The one on the left was marked "Chapel." Christopher pushed it open, and they walked down the aisle between the pews. No one was inside, which was good, because he was heading straight for the piano.

He sat down on the bench and put the first few sheets of music on the stand. He looked at her furtively from beneath his eyebrows, set his hands on the keys, and began to play.

At first the song was unfamiliar—a few chords, some isolated notes, slow and methodical. After a few seconds she felt like she recognized it from somewhere, though she could not have said where. Was it simply that a person always recognized their own life song, whether they had heard it or not? Because it belonged to them, maybe?

His fingers moved faster, pressing harder into the keys. The notes swelled, became *loud*, fierce, as if giving a voice to her own anger. And then, when they began to clash, she knew where she recognized them from.

She put her hands on the piano, an octave above Christopher's, and played, as best she could, the section of her mother's death song that had been going through her mind since the night before. It fit in perfectly with a section of her life song. It was not quite harmony but not quite repetition—sections of notes matched up perfectly, and other sections layered above her life song, bringing out by contrast its richness, and still other sections were similar but came just a second too late, like her mother's song

was chasing her own across the piano.

And she realized that her mother was like her—angry, weak, complex, sensitive—everything, good and bad, moving together in this song that made Darya's song more beautiful. Darya had never seen the similarities before, but they were there—buried, but emerging in her mother's occasional lucidity, emerging in Khali's memories of a woman Darya had barely known, and now, emerging in Darya herself.

She felt herself smile, and then laugh, and then cry, and then all at once.

"It's not exactly beautiful," Christopher said, as he played the last note on the last page. He glanced at her. "I don't mean that as an insult. I'm very attached to it. It keeps following me around."

When she didn't respond, he looked slightly alarmed. "I'm sorry, was that rude?"

Darya shook her head and set her left hand on top of his right, guiding it to the right keys. His fingers warmed hers. He glanced at her, smiling a little.

"Play that again," she said quietly, pointing at the place in the music where the section began. She took her hands from the piano, and listened as Christopher played the section again. She closed her

eyes and swayed without knowing it to the rhythm of the notes.

She had been wrong to say that death was the mystery, not life.

Her mother's death song had revealed a secret beauty inside of her, something Khali had known, but Darya's anger had prevented her from seeing.

The anger had not left her, might never leave her, but it now had to share the space with something else, and that was the certain knowledge of her mother's worth.