

## Black Spot

*Black. Black is the symbol of darkness, the absence of colour when light rays are completely absorbed instead of reflecting certain colours of the electromagnetic spectrum. That's it. That's how we see black; it's what sensei told us in Physics class. Sensei and her sharp, black-framed witch-like glasses. She should know what black is; she wears it all the time. She says it makes her look thinner. Not like this car; this car is pretty fat. Fatter than anything. Fatter than a fatso. Oh, look – what an alliteration!*

Gibberish flowed through Nozomi's mind with an unease; a desperation that she tried to cling to with all her might. Just to forget the fact that she was going to go into the ebony car to attend her father's –

*Gone, gone, gone.* The hollow sound of the doctor's voice still echoed through her mind like a broken record, and the more she wanted to stop thinking, the more she thought about it. *Reverse psychology, how I hate thee!*

Chanting mantra after mantra, she was only broken out of her reverie when her four-year-old brother tugged on the hem of her black dress.

“Onee-chan, the driver's calling us. We're gonna be late, and okaa-san won't be happy.” How well she knew that. *But then again, she hasn't been happy for a while.* Sighing and plucking the fabric from his grasp, she climbed in before grabbing her brother's hand to pull his short stature into the enveloping leathery smell of the car's interior.

“Look; you messed up your shirt already.” She adjusted the collar of his white shirt, fussing over him like she'd seen their mother do countless times.

“All set?” The driver had watched them in the rear mirror quietly before turning his head to talk to them.

“Yes. Thank you for driving us, Yamada-san.”

“No problem. It's the least I can do since...well.” Mumbling the last part, he fumbled with the car keys a little. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry for...for what happened.”

*Cue sorry speech and sympathetic look.* She'd been getting that a lot recently, so much so that she couldn't even tell whether everyone had gotten together for conspired sarcasm, or whether they were extremely, sincerely clichéd. *How the heck can you feel sorry when you've only known me for what, a month?!* Feeling a sudden surge of inexplicable anger at her chauffeur, she tried to quench it with cold silence. Like she always seemed to do nowadays. She was getting pretty good at it too.

Yamada-san started the car, and with a reluctant ‘vroom’, they drove off to the cemetery.

At first, Tsubasa tried to play ‘I Spy’ with his sister, but when he noticed the faraway look Nozomi had in her eyes and that she was worrying the ribbon of her dress with anxious fingers, he left her alone and played with the action figure he had brought along with him for times just like this. Unbeknown to him, his sister had heard him, but had just pretended to ignore him. She didn't feel like talking. Eyes wandering, she let her thoughts loose. Now, no one was there to tell her off for daydreaming. No one but the father of her memories...

*“Helloooo? Anyone home?” Jerking out of her thoughts, a six-year-old Nozomi felt a little disorientated before snapping back to reality.*

*“What?” A sigh followed.*

*“You know, you should pay more attention! You’ll never hear anything if your head is always trapped amongst the clouds.”*

*“Well, maybe I would pay more attention if you’d think faster.” A chuckle at her retort answered her, signalling temporary defeat.*

*“Right. As blunt as always eh? Anyway, I said crocodile.” Nozomi gave her father what she hoped was an exasperated look.*

*“What??”*

*“I’m sure it’s a crocodile! Maybe you spotted one back in the river we passed by just now.” Smiling eyes twinkled with mischief, inviting rolling eyes from Xi-Wang.*

*“Otou-san, don’t be so silly! The rules say that the object has to stay in sight, and I’m sure there are no crocodiles around here. And I didn’t see one anyway so either guess something else or just give up.” Nozomi pouted back at her father, a little annoyed that each time it was his turn to guess at ‘I Spy’, he would take much longer than she did. Her mother smiled at their antics, seemingly glad that she didn’t join in the game. She seemed to be having too much fun watching them banter like that.*

*“Dear, you’ve already guessed numerous silly things like ‘crane’ and ‘coconut’. And even though I’m sure it’s helping her improve her English vocabulary, you should still stick to the rules and logic.” Boisterous laugh laughed at his amused wife, quickly throwing her a knowing wink. Nozomi didn’t quite understand that wink until a few years later, but for now, she was happy that she was winning.*

*“So? Do you give up? Do you?” A chuckle came this time, and big, sinewy hands gripped the steering wheel tighter to make a left turn.*

*“Yes, yes, I give up. What is the thing you saw that began with the letter ‘C’?”*

*“Car! Haha, I win again!! Wasn’t it sooooo obvious? Now I’m at 6 wins and you’re at none! You’ve gotta try harder you know. Think of everything, but not the silly things! I thought you said you were good at this game!” Humoured grumbling followed with a mumble of “beginner’s luck”. Nozomi laughed at her father’s lame excuse. “A loss is a loss! Right, okaa-san?”*

*“Yes, yes. You’re too smart for him.” At this reassurance, she stuck a small tongue out at her father, ever so playful and so naïve.*

Blinking her eyes back to the present, she almost chuckled at the memory. *I only realised later that he was just faking his losses. He was always like that...a big softie. He was...is...* She trembled a bit at the use of her past tense, but tried to ignore it. *Always, he...always. Always always always.* She clung on to the word, trying so fervently to immortalise her father. Her silly, softie of a father.

Eyes slightly wild now, she tried to focus on something, *anything* that could somehow make her miss her father less. Eyes settling on her brother, she laughed in her mind – a forced, as cold a laugh she could muster.

*Ha! Yeah, remember when Tsubasa was born? He ignored me for hours on end, even though he took a two-week leave! And he waved me off when I wanted his help with my homework, saying that he believed I could handle it myself because I became an older sister. He started to play less with me and more with Tsubasa, saying that I should concentrate more on my homework.*

Her eyes flitted, landing on the clouds in the sky.

*And he was forever telling me off for daydreaming. I mean, what's wrong with that? I'm just a natural thinker and dreamer! He can't expect me to be focussed all the time. Who did he think I was, anyway? Some sort of machine that hung on every word he said, waiting for him to speak so that I could listen?! Well, I sure can't listen to his complaining voice anymore!*

She flitted again, landing on the neat, organised pile of CDs.

*He always nagged at me and harped on about not tidying my room. All my friends who come over say that it's really tidy already, but he was never, ever satisfied! It was as if I had to sterilise my entire room and organise everything into neat groups and putting them in the right places on labelled shelves and always picking up after myself the second I'm done with something and having nothing except furniture on the floor before he would be happy! He was so picky and fussy about these small things, even though he knows I'm an artist and that I work better with some mess!*

In the world of her mind, she ranted on and on.

*Stupid, idiotic, senile, uncaring, brainless dolt of a father! And then he just had to leave us behind, still grinning like a madman! I bet you're happy now, watching ma-ma cry herself half to death every night, watching Tsubasa grasp at your stupid photograph before he goes to bed, watching me try to put on a brave face and stupidly saying 'it's ok' to every damn person who says 'I'm sorry for your loss'! Well, I'm not! I'm not sorry! Not when it's ALL – YOUR- FAULT!*

She was hunching her shoulders in now, fists grabbing at the already wrinkled dress, head down and wide, wild dilated eyes seeing nothing but the pressure of her teeth waging a war. Unconsciously, she was trembling all over in internal anger. She almost didn't hear her brother when he spoke to her.

“Onee-chan, what's wrong? You look scared.” His worried voice gently intruded on her anger, making it wane a bit.

“What? What are you talking about?” She frowned, not sure whether she should be annoyed or confused. He stared at her face, searching her eyes with his own innocent ones. And with the voice full of the wisdom of a four-year-old, he grasped her hand with his small one, and said,

“Onee-chan, don't be afraid.”

“Don't be afraid.”

Suddenly, so silently sudden, she saw her father's face in his, her father's voice in his.

*"Don't be afraid." Afraid? Of what? What the hell are you talking about, huh?! Death? Ha! You're mistaken if you think that. I can jump out of the car right now and stare death in the eyes! Death was nothing to you, so it's nothing to me!* She spiralled, down, down to the door of the memories she couldn't remember.

*"Let's have our last conversation now." His ghost-voice wafted through her mind, filling her with unease. The dim hospital lights in the terminal ward cast a shadow onto her father's sallow face, creating a face that went with the voice...she shook her head, trying to clear her mind of these thoughts.*

*"What are you talking about, otou-san?" She tried to smile, but she was sure it came out faked and tired. And worried, too. She heard what she thought was supposed to be a chuckle, but it turned into a horrible wheezing and coughing. She waited for it to pass. That's what they always seemed to do then – just wait, wait it out.*

*She never hated waiting as much as she did right then and there.*

*"Sorry." He reached for a glass of water before she stopped him.*

*"Otouto-san, I told you to leave that up to me. You know you shouldn't be adding stress to your body." She picked the glass and lifted it up to his lips, watching, mesmerised and almost in a trance as she observed the water licking his parched lips like a spilt gourd on a parched desert. When he had finished, she put the glass back to the bedside table. She glanced at the clock, wondering when she should leave. It was already 10pm. Suddenly, she felt a wrinkled hand collapse around hers.*

*"Don't. Don't leave yet," her father rasped out, though he sounded slightly better due to the water. She looked at him and smiled the fake smile again.*

*"I'm not leaving. I was just wondering whether you want to rest. The doctor did say that – "*

*"To hell with the doctor!" Her father's sudden outburst made her jerk slightly in surprise before she went into 'chiding mode'.*

*"Shh! Some patients are sleeping, and yelling isn't good for you!" He ignored her, but his face softened and he leaned back into the pillow.*

*"Yes. But don't leave...I don't want to rest yet. And we're having our final conversation." She froze, wondering at the implication of those words.*

*"What? What do you mean? Don't tell me that...that...that's absurd! I – "*

*"No, no – I'm not going, not yet anyway." He squeezed her hand in reassurance, making her relax slightly despite not feeling any less perplexed. "I just want our last conversation to be now, so that I can still use my voice, and that I won't regret not being able to say what I want to in the end. I don't want to rush things like they always do in movies nowadays." He smiled, trying to crack a feeble joke. Nozomi slowly absorbed what he said, though now, she felt slightly more uneasy.*

*"So...like your last words to me, only that you won't...you know, die right after?" She swallowed, trying to be brave.*

*“Yes. And you, too – if you want to say anything to me, like confessions or last-minute boy problems.” He chuckled lowly, and though he didn’t break out into a cough this time, she knew he was holding it in. She fidgeted in the chair the nurse had kindly provided for her.*

*“So...what do we talk about?” He frowned in thought, absent-mindedly running his thumb over her softer, smoother hand. Like he always did to her when she was younger and when he was searching for something smart to say.*

*“Anything, I guess. Like, what’s on your mind right now?” She scratched her head with her free hand, pondering about her answer. Truth, or pants-on-fire lie?*

*“Well...my English test. It’s supposedly the biggest one of the year, and the teacher keeps hounding us to study like crazy.” Her father smiled.*

*“Study hard then! I know how good you are at that; you always used to beat me in ‘I Spy’ when you were young.”*

*Every smile of hers seemed like a betrayal now.*

*“Don’t be silly, otou-san – I know you were just being nice to me because I was only six. You do it to Tsubasa all the time now!” Sheepish grin this time, knowing that he had been found out a long time ago.*

*“Is that so? Ah, well. And you used to be so happy at winning too.” She was reminded of all the times they used to play during every car ride, making her feel a little foolish about her younger self. “Anyway. What did you do in school today?” She frowned at the extremely normal question, suddenly feeling annoyed.*

*“Hey, this is our last conversation and you want to waste it talking about school?! Otou-san! Don’t you have anything else to say?” He blinked, suddenly filling the atmosphere with awkwardness.*

*“Well...I was hoping for something normal. That’s all.” He smiled again, though all the weariness and tiredness seemed to pour out of every single pore of his body this time, as if unleashing a dam. She was taken aback at this, suddenly understanding what he felt. Feeling immense regret, she was about to apologise when he spoke again. “What do you want to talk about then?”*

*Closing her mouth again, she furrowed her eyebrows.*

*“I don’t know...give me some advice? Don’t people usually give their most profound speeches during...situations like this?”*

*“Profound”? I’m sure that’s hardly a word you can use to describe me by,” he rasped out. “But, I guess...try not to miss me too much?” Tired smile, and his hand wandered up to the hair that framed her face. “And...keep hoping. You’re not called ‘Nozomi’ for no reason, you know.” Reaching out to touch her hair, she jerked back at the last moment.*

*“Wait – ‘keep hoping’? What do you mean, ‘keep hoping’?” She stared at him, wondering if he was truly serious.*

*“Yes. I want you to keep hoping, long, long after I’m gone – ”*

*“What the hell are you talking about?!” She hissed out, clenching her fists in anger. “Hope?! After all this? After listening to fake, consoling words of the doctor talking about a ‘new treatment they haven’t tested out yet’? After watching you slowly get worse day after day, week after week? After listening to bad news after bad news over the phone? After watching helplessly at every single damn time you cough up blood or hack and wheeze until my ears*

*burn? And you're telling me to hope?!" She almost yelled the last part, forgetting about other patients or her father's agonised look. "Screw it with the whole name thing and identity! I don't care that it's my name! You can call me 'Nanashi' for all I care! In fact, maybe it's better because I'm sure as hell that no one, especially not you, can tell me to hope or not! This isn't some stupid, clichéd soap opera or movie!" She sat back now, a little worn out at her own outburst. Fuming to herself in silence, she almost missed hearing the slightly shaken, but firm voice of her father.*

*"Fine then." He spoke quietly, wearily. "Fine, don't hope. But you must promise me one thing." Slowly but surely, he leaned forwards until he could reach out to her. And, lifting one of his big, sinewy hands, he reached out and tilted her face towards him, so that he could look into her angry, tired one, and said,*

*"Nozomi, don't be afraid." Blinking back fierce tears, she tried to tear away from his grasp, but found her body unwilling to do so.*

*"What? To hope?" She sneered at her father for the first, and perhaps the last time too.*

*"No. Promise me that you'll always be brave enough to love."*

She pulled out of her memory, her mind gasping for air. Calmer now, she could think more clearly about what he had said to her that night. She had regretted afterwards, thinking that she had completely and utterly ruined their last conversation. But now that she actually remembered the entire event, she was even more puzzled at this riddle her father left her.

*"Brave enough to love"? What on earth does that mean? The warmth of someone's hand grasping her own made her almost jump in fright, since for a split second, she thought it was her father's. But no – it was Tsubasa's hand again. She looked in wonder at this boy who was so much like their father but really, was nothing like him, and for the first time, she saw the pure innocence and child-like love he had for her as he patted her hand, as if he were trying to look older than he really was.*

*"He loved us all the time, so you shouldn't be afraid, once-chan."*

The car slowly pulled to a stop at their destination, but all Nozomi could do was to stare at Tsubasa and wonder what he saw in her.