



## Light Of The South

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### Xu Xi

The first time Viola saw Shibata, he was in the uniform of what she supposed was the *Kempeitai*. A tall, broad-shouldered man, with a shock of white hair and a serious, unchanging expression.

"This house belongs to Japan now," was all he said before his men entered.

Viola stared at the men who barely gave her a second glance. They began, methodically, setting up camp in the living room. Shibata headed upstairs towards the master bedroom. Viola followed. He stopped at her bedroom next door.

"Where is your father?"

"This is my uncle's house. My father lives in Indonesia."

He narrowed his eyes. "Then you're not from Singapore?"

"No."

"Where is your uncle and his family?"

"I don't know." Viola wondered why she wasn't more afraid. It had been two days since the morning she'd awakened and found the house deserted. She hadn't gone out after that. Today, the Japanese finally arrived to occupy, the way her cousin Joseph had predicted.

Shibata rubbed his nose, thinking, she must be very young. A problem, her presence. Simpler to kill her right away. "Why are you in Singapore?"

"I attend boarding school. The Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus."

Fourteen, fifteen at most. "You stay in your room," he commanded.

"All the time?"

Her manner, defiant and provocative, tested his patience. "You will ask permission when you want to come out."

Viola loitered at the entrance of her room. "Must I shut the door?"

For a moment, he wanted to slap her mouth. But her smile, nervously mischievous. Shibata relented. She was only a girl after all, too daring for her own good. "You may shut it or leave it open, as you wish."

"Then," she declared. "I will shut it."

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At dusk, the house was beautiful. Shibata wandered through its rooms. The fragrance of frangipani from the garden permeated the air, lingering in its sensual promise. There were two floors, with wide, sheltered verandahs on each level. A large, rambling structure, almost a mansion.

He ventured into the garden, where the lawn descended down a slope. Mango trees and hibiscus bushes ranged along its borders.

The house, Number Eleven Toh Crescent, stood at the end of a short cul-de-sac. From the street, the walls surrounding the property and the profusion of growth in the garden kept it out of sight of prying eyes. As a commandant of the *Kempeitai*, the secret police, Shibata had identified it as a useful operating base, because it was near Changi prison where most of the POWs were held. The owners were wealthy Chinese; everything in the house was in good repair. There were keys to the locks of all the doors. With its numerous rooms, it would serve as a holding place for interrogations.

A flickering light in the upstairs window suddenly extinguished itself. He caught sight of the girl's silhouette, frozen in a pose of blowing out a candle. Why was she lighting candles?

But his attention was distracted by one of his men signaling to him from the house.

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Two more days passed. Viola guessed her uncle and his family had either escaped or were dead. Fear, wound in a tight knot inside, slackened. Even the screams from various rooms in the house had become a routine of startling solos, punctuating the silence. Last night, when a man's cry from directly below had awakened her, she sat up, saw that her own door remained closed, and forced herself back to sleep.

A knock on her door. She glanced at the clock on her dresser. Too early for dinner.

Shibata stood in the doorway. He was not in uniform. In his *yukata*, he looked far less severe.

"You will come for a walk," he said.

She had stepped back and stood by her bed. "And if I don't want to?"

"You don't have a choice."

He waited, staring hard at her. Viola looked out the window. Evening breezes caressed her face. Respite after the rains.

"I have to put on my shoes," she said. "The grass is still wet."

He led her towards the front gate. For one wild moment, Viola wanted to run, as far and fast as she could, before they executed her. If she were sudden and swift enough, she might even escape. But the eerie quiet of the street intimidated. You'll be safe at our house, her uncle had told her when she came to stay. She had felt protected, untouched by the invisible war beyond their boundaries, glad to be away from the empty convent.

"I regret to inform you . . ." Shibata's voice pierced her daydream. "Your uncle has been taken as a prisoner of war." He leaned against the gate, watching for her reaction.

She wanted to ask — And will you execute him? And my cousins and aunt as well? But she asked nothing.

"Do you know who I am? Do you know why we're here?"

She nodded.

"Then you understand?"

She stood about three feet away from him, her back to the house. He continued to watch her, wondering just how much she did understand. She was such a quiet girl, never asking for anything. But that flicker of defiance in her eyes. Dangerous. Impossible to trust the emotions of the young.

"You may go back to the house now."

She turned and slowly climbed the slope.

\*

The next morning, her door was open for the first time. Shibata saw that she was wearing a red dress. Previously, she had worn pale colors or white which faded against her fair skin. The bright red illuminated her. And she seemed happy, as if it were her birthday, or some special occasion.

"Will you walk with me again this evening?" She had sought him out deliberately.

"Why?"

"Because I want you to tell me about Japan."

"You don't have to wait till evening. Ask me now."

"I don't wish to."

Defiance flickered, then faded. She seemed suddenly older, like a woman who no longer accepts flattery, who is beyond courtship. "As you wish."

Viola went round to the back of the house, watched by a guard. There was a hiding hole there, one that was difficult to see. It was past the clean kitchen, outside the dirty one that only the servants used. This deep hole could be reached by crawling under a landing. Joseph said a nest of poisonous snakes lived in it.

She stood on the landing and gazed at the sanctuary.

\*

When he came to get her for their walk, she made him wait while she slung a light cardigan over her shoulders the way her aunt used to. It was a semi-conscious gesture, a way of not forgetting. School life, her family in Indonesia, everything was fading as if life before now never existed. Every night, she put a pillow over her head to shut out the screams of people she didn't see.

"You look like a young lady, for a change."

She gave him a half smile. "How do I usually look?"

"Like a girl."

They walked in silence to the front gate. He opened it. She inhaled a frangipani-scented breeze.

"Teach me Japanese."

An unexpected request, it made him smile. He pointed to the frangipani tree at the entrance. "*Kore-wa kirei-de su*. This is pretty."

She solemnly repeated what he said, and then asked, "How do you count numbers?"

He was back in Paris as a music student remembering On-Lan, the Chinese girl who had studied with him under the same master that year. They would speak in French or broken English. She had also asked to learn Japanese. But that was over forty years ago when he had been only slightly older than this girl. "Itchy knee," he said, and pretended to scratch his knee.

"Did a mosquito bite you?"

Her serious expression, her look of such concern overcame him. He roared with laughter, his first real laughter since the start of this bloody war. "No, no," he said, wiping the tears from his eyes. "That's the way we count. One, *ichi*. Two, *ni*." His laughter subsided.

She seemed unimpressed and lapsed into a thoughtful silence. Then. "You call Singapore *Syonan-To*."

It sounded like an accusation. "That's the Japanese name."

"What does it mean?"

"Light of the south."

"How beautiful."

For once, she did not look like a hunted animal. He led her along the path towards the cul-de-sac. She fell in beside him. He talked about his year in Paris. She listened quietly, her face radiant. Time disappeared. Long unheard melodies of youth embraced his senses.

As they circled back to the gate, he asked, "There's a piano in this house. Do you play?"

"Yes."

"You will play for me?"

"Are you ordering me?"

Her voice resonated pain. He wanted to protect her. "No. I am requesting you to do me this honor."

Viola went silent. He tried to read her feelings, but her face betrayed nothing. And then, unexpectedly, a plea flickered in her eyes. "I can't," she said abruptly, and ran back up the path into the house.

\*

As soon as her room door was shut, she wept.

At school, they had heard stories of Chinese men taken away and tortured, while women were forced into slavery, or worse. Survival meant surrender. Several girls stashed rat poison under their mattresses, in case Japanese soldiers forced their way inside the convent-school gates. The girls cried every night, praying to be sent for, to be released into the safety of their families. Viola would not cry; she refused to believe in this destructive force unleashed on her world.

Surely God had made a mistake.

Every night at the convent, she had lit a candle in a private novena to the Infant Jesus. She resolved to repeat the cycle until He intervened to fix His Father's mistake, and put aside the prayers for her own release. Her schoolmates departed rapidly during those days, sometimes several within an hour. For a while, it seemed her pleas were heard.

She dried her eyes. Why need she cry now?

Viola lit a candle, beginning the second cycle.

If she were truly brave, like her uncle, she would have fought the Japanese. But dreaming of victories did not stifle fear.

Shibata awoke to a scream from her room that night. He sat up, startled. His prisoners' cries never disturbed the way hers did.

\*

"How long will you hold me here?"

She had presented herself, without warning, at his desk. Shibata saw it was just past noon.

"It's almost time for lunch. Why don't you eat with me?" He smiled.

She was wearing the red dress again. A thin girl, with barely formed breasts. He wanted to ask if she had had a nightmare. But she had drawn back into herself.

"You must be hungry. You didn't come to breakfast."

"I wasn't hungry this morning." She stared at the floor. Without looking up, she repeated, "how long will you hold me here?"

"As long as necessary." His tone of voice dismissed her.

She walked away towards the kitchen. A song from school echoed. "There is a convent school far, far away /Where they eat rotten eggs ten times a day. / Oh, how the children yell / When they hear the dinner bell. / Oh, how the eggs stink miles, miles away."

Kitchen smells teased Viola's nostrils. Fish again. She grimaced. She hated fish, despised it. She would rather eat rotten eggs.

\*

If only her mother hadn't been too ill to send for her! But Mother was often unwell.

She had been the last boarder. Mother Superior had been kind and promised she could stay inside the convent with the nuns as long as necessary. Viola was afraid, alone in Singapore, and wanted to go back to Indonesia.

But she kept her resolve and continued offering her novena, hoping God would see the error of His ways.

Finally, Mother Superior called her uncle, her mother's brother, because the nuns did not dare keep her any longer in the convent in the city's center. Her uncle told her it was already too dangerous to travel home, and that it would be safer to stay at his house.

A knock on her bedroom door.

"Miss Viola to come downstairs." The guard stared unblinkingly at her.

He led her to the west wing, which had been cordoned off since the Japanese occupation.

Shibata was seated in one of the guest bedrooms at a makeshift desk. The bed and dresser that used to be in the room were no longer there. There was a bamboo mat on the floor in front of the desk.

"You're Catholic?" he asked without his usual preamble.

"Yes."

"Then kneel."

She did not flinch even a split second. "No."

"I am ordering you."

"This is not a church." She remained standing, hands by her side. Her pale blue dress hung to her knees. "I only kneel for God."

A difficult girl. Stubborn and proud. Unafraid.

He had to dispense with her.

Why had she been left in the house, in Singapore? It seemed even she didn't know. She would be a problem later when she remembered what she'd seen and heard. The power of youth.

Yet On-Lan's face, On-Lan's thin body. An apparition wavering around this girl.

"Go back to your room," he commanded.

As she left, she pulled her arm away from the guard.

\*

Memory could not be more absurd!

All evening, Shibata paced the garden. Frangipanis were in full bloom. Wild fragrances assaulted him. When his second-in-command stopped by, to advise that the one in the back room had finally expired, he barely heard him. He had to do something about that girl. Soon.

The first time he kissed On-Lan, she told him it would only lead to unnecessary complications. He protested, but she wouldn't relent. She infuriated and excited him.

From her window, Viola watched the rays of the setting sun light the garden and house. The grass and bushes badly needed trimming.

She had to pray.

Kneeling by the window, she tried to remember Indonesia. It wasn't true when her cousin said that she got sent to boarding school because her mother didn't want her. Her family hadn't abandoned her because they didn't love her. It had to be the Japanese. Surely they were to blame. Mother Superior had promised: keep the faith and God will love you and always be your protector. But try as she would, her prayers and memories disappeared, unreachable.

She did not light a candle that evening.

Night fell over the garden, shrouding its unruly growth.

\*

He slept fitfully all night, awakening at the slightest sound. This was Paris again. A year of freedom before surrendering to duty.

That girl. An irritant, an unnecessary presence. Even his second-in-command was beginning to wonder.

In the morning, Shibata sent for her. He stood up when she entered and dismissed the guard. "You know what I have to do."

Viola glared at him. She was wearing her red dress.

He couldn't look at her. "You are a prisoner of war," he declared.

Fear, a tightened vise that could turn no further, snapped. "I hate you," she said evenly.

It was as if she'd slapped his face. "Prisoner of war," he repeated.

"I hate all of you."

On-Lan's lips, close to his, resistant yet pliant.

He faced her.

Their eyes locked in embrace.

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