



The Great and Terrible Winter Battle of Sakura Hill

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Hayate shook the sleep from his mind as he stood up and stretched. The yurt was a poor substitute for the stables that he and his sister Sumire had left two months ago to journey to these strange new lands across the ocean. Still, it was better than the ship he had to stay in during their journey. He couldn't complain much as the Utaku Legion, as was standard, contained a full complement of Stable Masters and hands to care for his brothers and sisters during their 'extended' stay here in this foreign land.

He leaned down and nudged Sumire, still buried in her makeshift shikifuton and kakebuton. *<Wake up.>* he grumbled softly, careful not to disturb the other six members of her squad that shared the large tent. Sumire's response was what he expected as she lingered in the Dream of Golden Fields: she burrowed deeper into her kakebuton. He sighed before he reached down and gently pulled the covers from his sister. She hung onto the covers long enough for him to pull her to her feet. She stared at him with a frown on her face. *<Do you want the Taisa to wait for the report she assigned you yesterday?>* he asked. For an answer, her frown deepened, but she gathered herself and her belongings and quietly slipped out of the tent to dress and prepare herself to present to Taisa Umeko her thoughts on arranging the legion into four main and two reserve companies. She had worked late into the night carefully organizing the legion on paper agonizing over every detail. That the legion commander had tasked her, a lowly Nikutai with a squad of four and four, to submit such a report was not to be taken lightly. What the task meant was anyone's guess, but he suspected it was a lesson wrapped in a test. Hayate could feel her nervousness. *<You look fine,>* he whuffed to her.

She looked back at him. "Just fine?!" She settled some rebellious hairs. "I am going to end up digging the trench surrounding the fortress, and you are going to be hauling the dirt up to build the rampart. Those Engineers just love to get Shiotome to help them with 'real work'. Help me with this," she said as she worked her armor over clothing. *<I enjoy helping my brothers and sisters,>* Hayate said as he stepped up, *<and so do you. Everyone has to do double duty here. You don't hear the Yabusame complaining about clearing the fields surround this place so stop grumbling you little goblin...>* With practiced motions, he helped Sumire on with her heavy armor.

"I know, I know. It's just... I don't know... it's just this is going to be our home someday and we'll never see our farm again. I miss them already." Sumire sighed. She talked while donning her dō-maru, fastening her suneate, standing and stomping the ground to settle the shin guards. *<I do as well and I think we all have left someone behind, but we have each other; brothers and sisters. Our home had always been here,>* Hayate said as he poked Sumire's chest with his muzzle. She leaned forward and kissed his forehead. "Thank you. Sometimes I don't know what I would do without your advice." She looked around for a moment at the camp; dark and still in the predawn. She sighed again then searched her immediate surrounding at first calmly then with more urgency. "Where's my kabuto, where! Shinjo's Breath! Where did I put it!" Sumire frantically looked around in the dim light trying to find her erstwhile headgear. *<It's on your back,>* Hayate said flatly, holding back a laugh. Sumire reached back and felt the heavy metal cap between her shoulders. She took a deep breath and forcefully blew it out her nose. "And you, are your shoes good? I'll give you a quick brushing..." Sumire said, making to return to the tent and retrieve her cleaning kit. *<I'm fine. Your attention still stands from last night. I was careful not to make a mess of your work, goblin,>* he said, again using the nickname for her. She fidgeted, unable to fix her mind on anything else except her meeting with her commander. *<Saddle,>* Hayate reminded his sister. She snapped out of her fixation to retrieve his saddle.

"Why do you think she gave me this task?" she asked him. She placed the blanket on his back, then the saddle and skirt, carefully double-checking everything. Hayate shrugged. *<It probably has something to do with that game you invented during our trip over: apple basket. You know the Hakobu are still playing it over in their area.>*

Sumire stopped her fidgeting. "Really?" she said, surprised. Hayate nodded. *<The Golden Arrows are leading the score for the moment but the Purple Clovers are only three points behind. What have you been doing for the last three weeks? Living under a rock?>*

Sumire held up a scroll in his face. "Stuff like this! Writing reports, overseeing this and scouting that, checking on supplies and counting boxes: boring stuff and now this morning, I have to do this!"

<Not if you are late you won't be.> he said. He gestured towards the east. The sun was starting to turn the low clouds on the horizon the color of fire. Sumire turned and looked at the sunrise. "Shinjo's Breath!" She snatched up her uma-yari and leaped on Hayate. They made their way down the road that ran straight through the rectangular shaped outline of what was quickly forming into a permanent fort and home of the Utaku. At the intersection in the middle of the encampment on a small hill was the main donjon of the fort, or would be. Right now, it was little more than a raised floor of green cedar with a large yurt sitting above it. Outside was displayed the banner of the Utaku, the empty mon, all that identified them as the Utaku Expeditionary Legion.

Sumire dismounted or rather leaped off of Hayate to jog up to the entrance. Light already spilled out of the tent. Taisa Umeko's aide-de-camp joined her as she made her way towards the tent. "Good morning, Chui Izumi-san," Sumire said with a low bow.

"Nikutai Sumire-san," Izumi said with a nod. "You slept well?"

"Yes. You?" Sumire said.

"I enjoyed the ride through the Golden Fields," Izumi said.

Sumire set her uma-yari in a rack of other lances as she followed Chui Izumi into the Taisa's tent.

Hayate watched his sister enter the commander's tent. He glanced over at Masaru, Taisa Umeko's brother and nodded. <Morning, Masaru.>

<Morning, Hayate. This will take some time. You should stand over here,> Masaru advised, moving a bit to make room on the north side of the yurt. Hayate moved to stand next to Masaru just as another group of Utaku moved up the path. Hayate and Masaru bowed to Hyuga Shinsuki, the Stable Master, and the Grand Mare: Namaku Sabina. <Good Morning, Sons of Vata.> Sabina acknowledged their respect while Shinsuki nodded as he wolfed down a cold roll. <Is there a time when you are not eating Suki-chan?> Sabina said, shaking her head at the appetite in the man. "I missed dinner yesterday..." Shinsuki mumbled around his breakfast as they slipped in the tent. A minute passed before the remainder of Umeko's staff arrived: Quartermasters, Commanders of the Shika, the Yabusame and the Hakobu's Kurosai and finally the Chief Engineers were the last to arrive to Taisa Umeko's morning briefing.

Hayate stared at the tent flap as it closed, trapping Sumire within. He could feel her tension; she sat like a bowstring pulled back till it cut into the wielder's thumb. This close to her, there being only a few feet separating them with only the thickness of the yurt's felt between them, he could lend her his strength, letting her know she wasn't alone. He exuded confidence in her ability.

<She'll do fine.> Masaru said quietly. <What do you think of those clouds?> He gestured towards the line of dark clouds on the horizon. <I smell snow.>

While they waited for the storm, they watched the camp come alive as the light of Lady Sun raced across the landscape only for the dark clouds and cold air to steal the promise of a pleasant day.

Hayate watched the fat lazy flakes drift down from the leaden sky. His breath made its appearance as the temperature dropped considerably. *Is it still winter in the lands of my birth?* he thought. Sumire's words let his mind cast back to last year before everything changed. He wondered who would keep the old sakura company now?

If he had a favorite spot and time, this would be it. It had taken him some effort to climb the narrow trail covered in snow that climbed the eastern ridge of the saddle to the summit overlooking the small farmstead. Pushing his way through the drifts that had formed overnight during the snowstorm. Even a mild snowfall would layer the shallow mountain valley in thick layers of snow due to its formation that let the wind push the drifts to the sides of the valley more than its center, isolating the farmstead, shutting out the world of Others till spring.

Until recently, this place had been overseen by the Namaku mare Fire of Morning Sky. He remembered meeting the grey mare during his first visit to his sister's home seven years ago after their gempukku. He had been impressed by her keen perception; she had been able to sense the strength of spirit of the Daughters of Utaku, predicting correctly those girls who would later become Shiotome. Sky and her second, Utaku Namiko, Sumire's dame, surprisingly had been able to groom seven Shiotome from the farmer's small family in just one generation. Such was the accomplishment that there was serious talk between the Daimyo and the Grand Mare to move a small herd of Vata to the small hamlet and even place a Stable Master within the homestead with the hope of strengthening the line. Sumire and her sisters' successes only encouraged these ideas.

While all equine members of the Utaku could smell the Blessing of Vata within the Utaku, that distinctive smell of dew covered spring meadows, the Golden Fields, that all Utaku had and that intoxicating smell of a clear cool breeze over a crystal clear lake that only Daughters of Utaku had, passed down from daughter to daughter from the Maiden of Mist herself, the Namaku took it to another level.

He shouldn't have been surprised at the adeptness of the mare for, as he had been told as a colt, the Rokugan pony of the Two Lakes region, the Namaku as the Utaku knew them, had shared their lives with them for over a thousand years. None knew the Utaku as well as the Children of Namaku. They were first among the vassal families, equine or otherwise. They had left Rokugan to follow Shinjo, shared their travels for almost four hundred years before they encountered the Sirocco in the Burning Sands and five hundred years before The Bargain had been forged between Vata and Kunamiko in the burning ruins of Laramun, had witnessed the birth of the Naoko and Hyuga. Without the Namaku, the Utaku would be very much different than it is today, he suspected.

Since the time when the two families had become one on the shores of Shiroi Kishi Mizu-umi, before the Kami had fallen, the Namaku mares had guarded the children of the Utaku by approving suitable mates for the family keeping the Utaku's connection to the Heavenly Fire vibrant and immutable — a reflection of the Blessing of Heaven that they carried.

There, standing under the ancient sakura devoid of leaves; the sakura's fire slumbering, waiting for spring to awaken it, Hayate reflected on the lost children of Vata bearing those who, lacking that Heavenly Fire, were blind to it in the lost. Extinguishing the fire in their arrogance. Who, seeing the tree, would chop it down to use for their own purposes and never learn of its life.

Those of the true bloodlines would never consent to such earth-bound, blind, weak partners. It was a testament to how far the lost had fallen.

To their resignation...

Another reason for the Utaku to stay to themselves...

The sounds of gleeful yells reached his ears as many members of the Utaku household flung themselves off the ledge below him to slide down the slope beneath him. The shouts of joy broke him out of his meandering contemplation to remember the first time he had stood here. He chuckled. Sky had shown him this spot after he had earned her trust; this had been her favorite spot as well. From here he could see all of the little valley, the small collection of buildings and the creek that flowed gently past the farm, the orchard of apple trees, the western mountains and the small strip of forest that stood between them.

Perhaps the best thing about the spot was the bent and twisted ancient Sakura that, despite every reason not to be where it was, refused to acknowledge those reasons and continued to grow. Every spring it pushed its roots deeper into the rocky soil as it sent forth its blossoms. There was something to admire about that stubbornness and in a way Hayate figured it was a perfect analogy for the Utaku. He figured a poet could express those ideas better than anything he could come up with. The best he could do was keep the spirit of the tree company and join it in its quiet witness in Sky's place. He sighed at her memory. She had returned to Earth and Heaven only two years ago, passing leadership to the next worthy mare: Utaku Namiko, her second. Sky's eldest daughter Song of Water now assisted in overseeing the farmstead.

It was the same as the last seven years worth of winters: a quiet peaceful time when they, he and his sister, could drop the masks they had to wear in the Lands of Others.

He could sense her amusement. Her unbound glee during these times was bliss to him. He sensed a spike in her mood. She had always been a mischievous little goblin as a child, always intruding on his thoughts. He could sense her anticipation tinged with unmitigated joy. She was close which only meant one thing...

The impact of the snowball on his flank heralded the 'ambush'. He glanced over his shoulder at Sumire as she quickly threw another snowball hoping to hit the same quadrant again. He quickly hopped, twisting his body to let the frozen missile sail harmlessly past him to splat against the sakura.

<You dare attack this sacred place and dishonor the sanctity of the grand Sakura you little snow goblin! You will pay for your insolence!> he said menacingly.

Sumire laughed. "Pay? Oh great guardian, I only have one currency!" she said. She scurried back a few steps and scooped up another handful of snow. She stood and 'growled'. "Yarg! I pay in snowy death! I have One and One!" she said as she threw another snowball.

<Have you forgotten?!> Hayate said as he leaped forward intending to run his sister down. She hastily threw the snowball at the tree as she threw herself out of his path. He flicked his tail at the snowball knocking it away from the tree. *<It is before noon!>*

"So?! It is First Snow after a new moon!" she said. "That first hit counts!" She gathered another snowball as she moved towards the tree only to be caught in a large double hoof-full of snow thrown by his back hooves, throwing her forward face-first into the snow.

<Only if I'm facing east and you know it! That's two for me!> Hayate countered as he twisted about. She rolled forward, coming up and raising her arm back for another throw at the tree.

"Ha! One and two for meeee-aaaah! Plahg!" Sumire said first in triumph and then in surprise which turned into hysterical glee as Hayate caught with his teeth her coat and spun around several times until he released her and tossed her into the far snowdrift making a Sumire-shaped hole in the pristine surface.

<That's three for me!> he brayed.

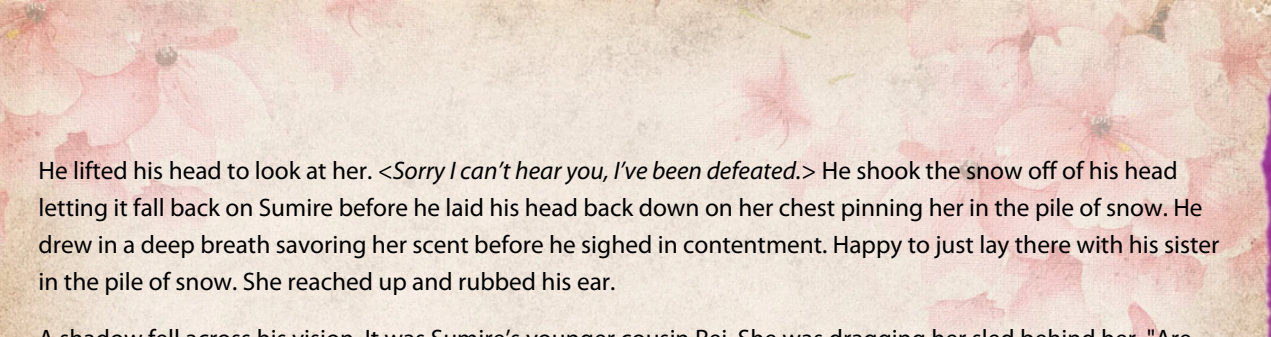
"Throwing me at the snow doesn't cou-paah!" Sumire shouted in faux anger as she, covered in the snow, extricated herself from the snowdrift only to get a scoop of lightly packed snow in her face from Hayate's flick of his front hoof. *<There, three!>* he laughed.

In response, Sumire launched a series of snowballs, running and tossing the missiles with abandon. After several minutes, she managed to land another three strikes on Hayate's left flank and only make one more Sumire shaped hole in the drift.

"Ha! Snow Goblin win! I win! You lose! Naaaa!" She pranced about Hayate in her victory dance, waving her hands above her head like she was ten again just for that moment.

<Yes, oh mighty Snow Goblin, you have defeated me, but you have forgotten one thing...> She stopped and looked questionable at the great guardian. *<Always pay attention to the terrain of the battlefield...>* he said as he pushed her off the shoulder of the ridge. He laughed as he watched her tumble down the snow covered slope to slide to a stop on the ledge where several of her sisters watched a moment before they jumped on their sleds to race down the gentler slope. He chuckled again then knelt on the shoulder, rolled over onto his back and pushed himself down the upper slope, sliding towards Sumire. He heard her sudden scream of outrage as he and the wave of snow that preceded him crashed into her to propel them both down the lower slope to come to a rest at the bottom.

"This is cheating. I won!" she said. She dumped an armful of snow on his head.



He lifted his head to look at her. *<Sorry I can't hear you, I've been defeated.>* He shook the snow off of his head letting it fall back on Sumire before he laid his head back down on her chest pinning her in the pile of snow. He drew in a deep breath savoring her scent before he sighed in contentment. Happy to just lay there with his sister in the pile of snow. She reached up and rubbed his ear.

A shadow fell across his vision. It was Sumire's younger cousin Rei. She was dragging her sled behind her. "Are you two gonna lay there all day blocking the slope?" she complained.

"Rowl!" Sumire growled. "Snow Goblin does what she wants..."

"Oh, grow up! Play somewhere else!" said the six-year-old.

Hayate felt a cold smack against his hind quarter, taking him from his memories. He glanced back to see a snowball's remains sliding from his hide. He looked to his sister. Somehow she had scraped enough of the light snow from the surface of the yurt to fashion a snowball. "That's one!" she said with a large smile on her face.

He felt his pleasure reflected in her smile.

He didn't have the heart to tell her it was before noon.

