

THE WILD HUNT

A Fantasy Short Story

by M. R. Cook

with Randy Hayes

edited by J.K. Kelley

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PROLOGUE

Of the many stories the elves tell, the one I remember most clearly is that of Orion and the Wild Hunt. Who was Orion, you ask? Well, the tale begins with Tylar, the God of War, and Sylvara, the Goddess of Nature. It is said that when the world was young, Tylar's aspect was not so grim and fearsome, and he seduced Sylvara. She bore a son whom she named Orion. This powerful being combined his mother's love of all living things with the father's passion for battle and violence.

Like a great hunter, Orion stalked through the forests of the world. His prey took two forms: those mortals who were out clearing forests for their own voracious needs, and elf-maids (or matrons, as he did not seem to care). It is characteristic of elven humor that they refer to Orion as "The Father of the Forest."

His many offspring were all too often wild and fey, prone to leave elven society in search of their father in the dark haunts of the shrinking forests. It was from his own children that Orion created the Wild Hunt. Riding swift steeds and wielding long spears with terrifying ferocity, this troop of demigods drove back the depredations of mortals from the remaining virgin forest. But the berserk fury with which they fought meant that many an innocent life was caught up and destroyed by the maelstrom of their anger.

Sylvara quailed at the slaughter inflicted by her progeny. Without consulting Tylar—for the two were estranged and would never again be reconciled—she bound her son and his children to the heart of the one remaining great forest on this mortal earth. At the last moment, thinking of her dear son, she crafted a narrow escape path to the woody prison. She allowed for Orion and his children to be freed for a brief time in moments of dire need, rationalizing her deed on the basis of the forest's need for protectors. Thus was born the legend of the Wild Hunt.

Githwin the Bard

THE WILD HUNT

Charlys de Chargney, Baron of Aquilia, woke slowly, feeling the warm presence of his wife and young son at his side. Trying not to disturb them, he slipped out from under the covers. He could sense the impatient presence of his squire just outside the tent flap, waiting to help him into his armor. Dawn would be here soon, and the camp was starting to stir. The army's marching camp was a shambling city of mounted men, foot soldiers, and a teeming multitude of drovers, cooks, blacksmiths, and even children. It moved at a ponderous pace, each day covering less than ten miles. However, today might see the end of this campaign.

The decision to invade the borders of the ancient forest in search of the northernmost city of the elves had come naturally. The Kingdom of Garaeth judged its nobles based on what they achieved in war and Charlys was an ambitious man. With the end of protracted war between his own kingdom and that of Anivere, his only chance to win honor and wealth was to turn his attention to another neighbor—the elves made the most logical choice. There were always sources of friction where human society rubbed up against elven life. The competition for land, water, and wood sometimes turned violent. The elves of the wood were not the cute little faeries of children's tales. They could be wild and deadly. Rumors also abounded about how the elves had grown rich on the trade with godly men while his folk continued the grinding, backbreaking toil of their short lives. *And those rumors had proven to be true!* The sight that had greeted him last evening in the fading light filled his mind—narrow spires of the elven city lit by the last rays of the sun, the white and green towers glittering as if of pearl and jade.

He smiled.

“What is it, my Lord?” his squire asked as she struggled with one of his greaves.

“It is nothing. A pleasant thought only on what is sure to be a day of trials.” He bent to help her with the contentious bit of leg armor.

Jean de Montefort, Lord of the Marches, had been fighting his whole life. Such was the nature of life on the Marches. He had agreed to join the Baron's campaign to deal with the sneaking forest devils (as his people called the elves, more than a bit unjustly) on his border. He could then turn his attention back to the twice-damned Midlanders.

It was Montefort's charge to lead the three thousand-man strong center of the Army of the Sun. Under his direct command marched a hundred knights afoot and over twenty times that number of well-armed and armored commoners. Nearly all were veterans of many battles.

After hearing the reports of the woodsmen scouts, Montefort went looking for the Baron to discuss the final plans for deploying the army. Last night, before the sun had disappeared below the black horizon of trees, he and the Baron had seen the nest of the forest devils less than a mile away. The alien city sat across a wide vale bordered on one side by a narrow river that ran parallel to their advance. No walls or fortifications protected the city, and the patchwork of fields and vineyards would give them room to deploy their strength. They had two hundred horse and four thousand foot in the Army of the Sun, and by god, they would put an end to this serpent's nest—if need be, with fire and steel.

On the far side of the vale, from among the towers of Iwenaki da Sho, a small army was marching out to battle. The young and the old cheered them along their way. Amaterasu Yllithell, queen of the city and matriarch of House Ithell, drifted among the army. She wished to encourage them, but they could neither see nor hear her. This projection of a shadow of herself from afar was an extravagant use of power, but that did not matter. These were her people, and many were about to die.

Even after arming everybody who could carry a spear or draw a bowstring, the city could only field two thousand defenders. She had some superb archers, and the militia spearmen and spearmaids were competent, but her people were small in stature and numbers compared to giant invaders clad in thick boiled leather and blackened steel. Worse were the cavalry encased in bright iron, riding monstrous steeds. These knights seemed more like statues chipped from great silver blocks than men and beasts clad for war. Her soldiers wore armor made of small ironwood plates woven together with silk, lacquered in many bright colors. They made a brave spectacle, but they had little steel, and that went into spear tips, arrowheads, and slender curved swords. It all seemed inadequate and she was not the only one who felt so.

Her people's fear suffused her senses as she whisked among them like a breeze. She saw her son and sister-daughter setting a brave example with the banner guard of cavalry, but others' eyes kept straying toward the queen's tower for a reassuring glimpse. They were expecting to see her standing on the small, high balcony as she often did in the morning. Some muttered that she had left them—fled to safety. Their words were like knives in her guts. She wished to reassure them, but her thoughts and prayers were lost to the wind.

The lords Chargney and Montefort stood on a low hill with the mercenary captain of the crossbow company. The entire enemy army was in view. Elves armed with very long spears deployed in the enemy center, laid out in a patchwork of squares like a chessboard. Loose lines of archers formed up on the right flank, and a small troop of cavalry sat in the gap between the spearmen and the river on the left flank. There looked to be another small band of cavalry in reserve, well back near the outskirts of the city.

Their own men were still uncoiling from the camp. Crossbowmen led, followed by columns of men-at-arms, and the heavy cavalry bringing up the rear. The Baron took in the entire scene, then: “Gentlemen, let us deploy as we discussed. Captain, entertain their archers as soon as you are able.” The Marcher Lord and Captain of Crossbows saluted and returned to their men. The Baron of Aquilia stood silently for quite a while, watching the panorama unfold.

Amaterasu walked among the dark trees, a small, slender shape clad in emerald green, long silver hair accenting sharp features hollowed by age. Once before she had been here, but that was a very long time ago. For a moment she was unsure of the precise location; then she saw the slight glimmer of moonlight in the mirror of a dark pool. She walked to it, pausing to dip one bare foot and then the other in the black water. On the far side of the mere spread a grassy meadow surrounding two tall, narrow stones a few arm-spans apart. The stones bore once-intricate carvings eroded by the abrasion of time. She had found the Binding Glade, the gate to Orion's prison.

The rite to release for a time Sylvara's violent son and his Wild Hunt was written in lore books kept under meticulous guard, but she needed no book. All anointed kings and queens knew the method, and it was not done except in the gravest extreme need. She shivered in spite of the warm morning. The key passage was written in an ancient elven language in a style called Anthalas. In the common tongue, it ran:

*Kneeling in lament
The gate through tearful eyes behold
Blood cries out for blood*

Amaterasu Yllithell, queen of the elves, fell to her knees before the ancient spires. Maybe it was just the light, but the carvings on the granite seemed clearer from this angle. She could see horsemen racing around the columns, led by an antlered-helmed giant with a great horn pressed to his lips. The words came jumbled to her mind, but she was able to get out a quick stumbling prayer to the Goddess. Even after three centuries of life, one could still be overawed. She reached up to wipe the tears from her sight, then brushed her damp fingers along the rough stones. Keeping her eyes on the figure with the antlers, she drew a slender knife. The steel blade felt very cold against her skin.

Imbert marched through waist-high wheat dotted with scarecrows, feeling the crossbow weigh heavily in his arms. His breastplate's straps dug into his shoulders. Pushing back his steel cap, he scratched his itching scalp. He had shaved his head after the first week of campaigning, but had lost his hat, and the southern sun had burnt his head so that it looked like a ripe peach. No padding inside his helmet relieved the pain, much less the damnable itching. Soldiering made farming seem like a forgotten pleasure. Worse, all the money he had earned so far had gone to pay the Captain for his armor and weapons. He hoped he could find some valuable loot in the city of the elves. Some of the lads were saying that the towers' walls were made of jade!

He hoped it was true. To woo Margery, he needed enough money for a small cottage. He reached up to feel the green scarf she had given him before they marched. A voice broke his reverie, but nothing like Margie's: a sergeant's bellowed complaints, calling him back into line.

Imbert looked about, then swallowed hard. The captain had said the bowmen on the enemy's right flank were the target of his crossbow company. Imbert estimated that his unit numbered twice the enemy archers, and the captain had informed them that their crossbows should outrange the enemy bows; they would close to one hundred paces and then engage. They were almost there.

What the hell?

Without so much as a single ranging shot, the enemy archers bent their bows and fired an arcing volley. He watched the black tempest against the blue sky and held his breath. *They will be short*, he thought. *Oh shit!* Imbert dove as arrows impacted all around. Someone began screaming. Other groans and cries added to the bedlam. He spat out a mouthful of dirt and lurched back to his feet. The sergeant was yelling for them to advance, which sounded like either a very good idea or a very bad one. As Imbert began to run, another volley fell. One arrow struck his breastplate so hard it staggered him. He took a few more strides. Something lanced into his leg and he sprawled, tasting dirt again. He rolled onto his side and gasped in pain. A yard-long shaft was stuck completely through the thick muscle of his thigh.

Shit, that hurts. They can keep their coin! He started crawling back towards camp.

Chinatsu nocked, drew, raised her bow to a practiced angle, and released. She continued: nock, draw, aim, release, until she had fired all ten arrows stuck into the ground before her. The humans had passed the far scarecrow at about two hundred paces and were moving toward the middle scarecrow at about one-fifty. Bodies littered the field, but enemy soldiers kept coming. Now they were stopping to crank their wicked flat bows. Soon the bolts would start flying in their low arcs. She glanced over at Katsuro while preparing ten more arrows.

Kat was firing again, his legs spread and his lean form straining to pull the tall war bow. He caught her glance and offered back a shy smile. He was young, barely thirty, and had seen little of war. But he was strong, human-tall and thus a minor giant among elvenkind, and could use a war bow as well as any.

A buzz, a thump, and Katsuro toppled back with a bolt protruding from his armpit. *Bad luck.* Horns blew, signaling the right wing to fall back by pairs. She looked down at Kat, whose eyes stared back without sight. Chinatsu grabbed a handful of his arrows, loped back to a count of fifty paces, then began the dance again. Nock, draw, aim, and release.

Charlys, Baron of Aquilia, saw that his crossbowmen on the left had pushed the elven archers back at a heavy cost. That was acceptable. As long as they kept the archers busy long enough for his cavalry and Montefort's infantry to close with the rest of the enemy, they could die to a man. *Hopefully their money-grubbing captain will die with them!* He turned to his squire. "Amelina, pass the word to your father to advance the men-at-arms in the center if he pleases. Then you are to rejoin me here. The cavalry will have business with the enemy's left in a few minutes." The young woman repeated his orders for confirmation. When her lord nodded, she spurred her mount around and galloped off in a spray of mud.

Jean de Montefort had positioned himself at the right of the line of massed infantry, four hundred paces in frontage and eight ranks deep. The enemy spearmen were arrayed in a checkered pattern with a saw-toothed frontage of only three hundred paces. Based upon long experience, Montefort believed that his right would envelop their left while his own left would hold firm. Now he stood awaiting the order to advance, trying to project a patience he did not feel.

Montefort turned back around to look at his men, all standing at rest. Hearing hooves approaching at a gallop, he looked up as a tall, slender rider pulled her gray mount to a halt. He smiled up into his middle daughter's flushed face.

"Father, Charlys de Chargney, Baron of Aquilia, sends his regards and asks if you would advance the men-at-arms on the enemy center," she said. There was just the touch of excitement in her voice.

"Thank you, Amelina," he replied, feigning calm. Montefort considered the formal patina of courtesy an essential aspect of command. One might despise one's enemy, but the well of hatred was best kept in the background until it was time to give orders to kill and die. He nodded and added, "Please give my regards to the Baron and tell him we shall close with the enemy in a quarter-glass, and if Arathan wills, have the victory this day. May the light of Arathan guard you both."

She smiled back, slapped down her visor, and galloped back to the Baron.

The Baron watched in satisfaction as Montefort saluted him from his position in front of the long line of armored infantry. Charlys waited for his squire to return, then signaled the charge. Drums beat. The double line of horsemen began to move all around him, like the first undulating motions of a sidewise desert serpent.

Charlys felt his mount's steel-shod hooves slip a bit on the gentle side-slope as they trotted forward. His belly tightened. The woodsmen scouts had reported firm ground almost down to the river edge, but they were not horsemen by training. *Had the scouts been mistaken? Had he launched the heavy cavalry too soon? The men-at-arms had yet to close with the enemy center; should they have started forward sooner?*

He shook his head. *Nothing for it now.* A thin line of the strange-looking enemy cavalry awaited barely two hundred paces distant. Raising his sword, he spurred into a canter. Brave cheers sounded around him as he flipped down his visor. With the faceplate down, his own heavy breathing drowned out the battlefield din like bellows. The enemy horsemen appeared to his straining eyes in flashes as the narrow vision slot bobbed with the rhythm of his mount. The massive battle charger slipped again, staggered, then regained its stride.

One hundred paces now. He could see the elven cavalry clearly. What he had taken for lances tipped with colorful banners were actually dorsal pennants (*drapeaux à dos* in his native language). The elf-horsemen were not lancers. They were horse archers.

Rokuro sat astride his nervous mount, his short recurved bow across his thighs. Banners snapped in the breeze all around him. The sun glinted off painted ironwood plates. He watched the enemy cavalry start into motion like a mass of silver armadillos emerging from innumerable burrows. For a moment, he held his breath to see which way they would go. They made a slight wheel right and headed for the cavalry and its flaunted banners. The Prince had put them all here nearest the river in the hope the wetter ground would slow the monstrous steeds. He pulled the cover off one quiver and laid a long, heavy arrow to his bowstring.

He smiled as a few of the human horsemen's mounts slipped and tumbled on the damp, sloping earth, but the others flowed smoothly around them. *These are skilled men and beasts.* He waited with the patience and discipline born of ninety-two turnings of the leaves. Hearing the heavy thrum of the Prince's bow, Rokuro raised, drew, aimed, and released in one fluid motion. With the enemy less than hundred strides distant, he fired ten rapid shots. His comrades did likewise, sending sheet after sheet of arrows at the charging mounts like rain driven sideways in a storm. The line of enemy seemed to boil and crumble as horses went down, dumping riders and causing those behind to crash into the bodies.

Maybe there is hope for my friends and family after all.

To the Baron, the first volley of elf-arrows looked like a swarm of angry wasps. His mount's stumbles had caused him to fall behind. A rider in the corner of his view slot went down in a metallic crash. The lord pressed his downhill knee lightly into his horse's flank and the animal churned upslope of the fallen knight.

More arrows came, one caroming off his shoulder plate and another hitting his mount's nose guard, then skittering along the neck armor and away. The Baron was nearly upon the elven horsemen when they suddenly wheeled as one and fled. Bellowing triumph, he spurred on in pursuit.

It was a close thing, but the smaller enemy horses with their lighter riders scurried out of his reach. He watched them accelerate away. When they had opened up a significant gap, they suddenly slowed, turned and fired. The arrows came in flat and low. More of his horses and riders went down.

The Baron's own mount was tiring now, great sides expanding and contracting in rapid rhythm. Its pace slowed from a canter to a trot, perhaps sensing his own dismay, as the enemy raced off again. He pulled his mount to a halt and looked about. They had charged most of the way across the vale. Half his knights and many of their squires were down, the bodies strewn across the fields like dolls in the wake of a child's tantrum. He saw with relief Amelina was still with him. She was looking back toward the battle now raging in the center.

Jean de Montefort had begun the advance of his infantry almost before his salute to the Baron had fallen.

As they approached the forest demons through a field of strawberries, the elves' leftmost spear block tucked itself behind its neighbor and turned its facing to form an L, spears bristling outward from two fronts. Montefort could admire a well-executed movement even if it would not save them. His line now extended more than fifty paces beyond the elves' bent-back front, and he was leading them even further to the right.

He heard and felt his line meet the row of spear tips. A sudden chorus of yells and the high-pitched screech of steel on steel, followed by cries of pain, fear, and anger. The line of men to his left shuddered and slowed. Montefort changed his direction and began cutting in, though still angling to end well past the last demon. It seemed to take forever, his legs and back burning with the effort of carrying the heavy armor, but they had wrapped around the end of the refused line. From here he could see the back of the elven formation. There

was no reserve. All the spear-blocks had moved into line. Baring his teeth, he started forward at the fastest lumbering run he could muster.

The demons in the last file had turned to face the flanking infantry. The enemy line was now bent completely back on itself like a fishhook. Montefort slowed and sidled in among the wavering spear-tips, using his shield and sword to force a path. A spear jabbed his knee, but the armor turned it. Something slammed into his cheek plate and he tasted blood.

He was close now to the first rank. A small pinched-face demon in bright green armor tried to shorten up and thrust at Montefort's face. The Baron bashed the spear aside, then ran the little demon through. As the creature went down vomiting blood, Montefort looked for another target. He spotting an antlered helm. His swing was slightly off, but still caught an antler and broke the little shit's neck with an audible snap. As his fighters moved in behind him, the enemy began to break and run.

Rokuro rode just behind the Prince. They were still moving fast, leaving the exhausted enemy cavalry behind. He had to duck as the long green banner trailing from the Prince's dorsal standard snapped and coiled like an angry serpent. When they reached the remounts, Rokuro leapt from his horse and handed the reins to his groom. He mounted a fresh horse, as did the rest of the elven cavalry, and they coalesced back into line. He assumed they would now finish the human knights at leisure with short-range missile fire, but as Rokuro gained his seat, the Prince signaled them to circle right and into the disaster that had occurred in the center. He slung his bow, drew his sword, and followed the Prince at a gallop.

Chinatsu watched in helpless frustration and mounting horror as the oncoming men-at-arms engulfed the elven spearmen, then washed them away like a mud dam hit by flood. She and the archers around her had driven off the remaining crossbowmen, but not in time to take the mass of infantry under fire before they had closed with the spearmen. The battle and her city were lost. She hoped the Queen and the children were well away. The forest was tantalizingly close, safety among its shadows a few minutes' run away if she wished.

Turning from the woods, Chinatsu drew a deep breath and picked out a target: a man with a broad-brimmed hat. Nock, draw, aim, and release. Then the fellow with a feather in his helm: nock, draw, aim, and release. Her shots could not halt the mass of humans streaming toward the graceful towers, but they could assure that a few never reached the city. She noticed a small troop of horsemen charging in among the enemy, only to be swallowed like a stone thrown in a river.

She heard horns blowing.

The first was Valonylla. She whispered to the dark, "Is that you, brother?"

"Yes, sister, it is me," Threlaros answered.

"I am here also," said another.

"And me," others chorused.

"We are called," said the first.

"I can feel the quickening!" commented another.

"Where are we to go?" asked a voice still struggling to wake.

Silence.

"We ride to our father's horn," said the first.

Jean de Montefort trudged up the slope toward the city, here and there passing an outlying cottage or farmhouse. He carried a long green banner on a pole; a prize ripped from the back of one of the horsemen who had charged his men at the end. Montefort's squire carried his shield and walked beside him to offer

protection from the demon archers who still harassed them on the left. He could see the Baron approaching, the knights moving again now that the horses had recovered some of their wind. His eye sought for his daughter. *There, the slender shape on the gray charger!* He breathed an unconscious sigh of relief.

A horn blew, lower in pitch than the others, deep and resonating. A chill went through Montefort. He paused to look around.

Nothing.

He took a few more strides and the horn sounded again; deep, clear and close. This time it filled him with a dread.

Montefort turned to look at his squire, meaning to order the drums to beat 'form on me,' but the words would not come. He had to labor to breathe. He felt himself urinating, the warm, pungent liquid seeping down his legs. A gigantic figure appeared at the tree line. It was a quarter mile away, but seemed much nearer.

The figure put a pale horn to his lips and blew another echoing blast. Around him streamed horsemen in gold and green, carrying long lances. They galloped at unbelievable speed, eating up the distance between them in what seemed like a few dozen pounding heartbeats. Then they were among his stunned men, stabbing, cutting, killing.

Charlys de Chargney, Baron of Aquilia, lay on his side, left leg crushed under his dead mount. The spear-wound at his side made a bubbling, sucking sound. His victory—Montefort's, really—had been snatched away by some ancient devilry. Those wild horsemen and giant had been some type of avenging wood spirits he had awakened in ignorance. It was no pleasant thing to feel the fool at the end of your life. Trying to ease his breathing, the Baron took off his helm. Bodies lay everywhere; men, women, horses. They bled, they screamed, they thrashed, they moaned, they wept, and many lay still. He saw young Amelina face down in the grass, her beautiful gray in a bloody heap nearby.

His last thought was for his wife and young son, and all the other wives, children, and camp followers left behind on the far side of the valley. He hoped they would be spared.

As the world went dark, he knew they wouldn't.

IMPORTANT PERSONS

The Army of the Sun

Charlys de Chargney, Baron of Aquilia
Amelina de Montefort, his female squire
Jean de Montefort, Lord of the Marches
Imbert, mercenary crossbowman

Defenders of Iwenaki da Sho (City of a Thousand Towers)

Amaterasu Yllaywnn, Queen of the Elves
Chinatsu, female archer
Katsuro, "Kat" for short; fellow archer of Chinatsu's
Rokuro, one of the Banner Riders

Protectors of the Forest

Valonylla (Sleepless), eldest daughter of Orion
Threlaros, (Bright Spear) her brother

NOTES ON THE TIMELINE AND SETTING

This story takes place in a fantasy world created by Randy Hayes. It occurs during the decade that followed the Flower Wars (4824-4902) between Anivere and Garaeth. The Barony of Aquilia is on the southern border of Garaeth and the Baron Charlys de Chargney is an ambitious man who seeks the title of Duke. He has no chance to win the needed honors fighting against Anivere, with the end of that protracted war, so his eye turns to the south. With the help of the Marcher Lord de Montefort (the Marches are a vaguely defined area of southern Garaeth, the Middle Kingdoms and unclaimed lands north of the Sylvanian Confederacy), he sets out to win honor and wealth by sacking the northernmost city of the elves—Iwenaki. This is a small city (though not by elven standards) of approximately 5,000 souls. It is also the ancestral home of House Ithell, one of the great houses of the Confederacy.