

4.12. Highland War Ages

The appointment of Elgyn 2nd Martial (daughter of Edyn) coincided with an age of escalating war and conflict in the southern kingdoms and some large armies invariably ascended the mountain passes during her appointment. On occasion, some armies large enough in number survived the ascent and entered the Highlands. The militia under Edyn excelled in contest with the armies of kings and under Elgyn, that condition recurred. Accustomed to formalities by which two opponents might perform cumbersome organized maneuvers to position ranks and companies into practical and manageable combat formations, the armies of kings found themselves unprepared for the tactics and practices of the Highland militia with increasingly predictable repetition. Edyn and Elgyn never indulged any such formality and though several armies occupied portions of the homeland on occasion and burned, plundered and pillaged or even captured and enslaved what local population they could, with patience, discipline and stealth, the militia engaged every army, only in small numbers when vulnerable, and always by surprise. In time, the militia eventually decimated every intruding force to an extent they were no longer capable of controlling any territory, and at such a point, the militia left them no choice but to abandon their ambitions and take flight for the mountain passes.

During the appointments of Caelvyn 3rd Martial and Elbyrn 4th Martial, a protracted series of catastrophic events in the southern kingdoms concluded the age of the armies of kings and great wars with the disastrous collapse of several city-states. Although the absence of the threat of conquest from professional armies offered relief to Highlanders, the conditions quickly degenerated into an age Highlanders regard as ‘the freakish and demented era of the opportunistic charismatic warlord’. While posing less of a threat than professional armies, the parties of warlords generally consisted of far more ruthless and degenerate fringe elements, and while combat on the borders occurred less frequently and smaller in scale, the level of depravity involved only soared. Ironically, the conditions produced an age of peace and stability within the Highlands that lasted for over two-hundred and fifty years while an unprecedented succession of massacres occurred in the remote wildernesses of the mountains and borders.

During the century leading up to the appointment of Glendwyn 44th Martial, warlords transformed into hybrid kings of mutated previous city-states and occasional pseudo professional armies conducted initially successful though ultimately ill advised invasions of the Highlands, such as the event recounted by Faelryd in the ‘Red Witch and the Warlord of Enet’ tradition. Contemporary scout tactics reflect those established by the first four Martials, favoring stealth and ambush to the near exclusion of all others. For every conceivable situation, the scouts have an ambush strategy, from the simplest geographic advantages of high ground to the most elaborate open terrain bait-and-switch maneuver, all things not obvious ambushes in some way ultimately serve as the devices of ambushes. The scouts in fact observe a motto attributed to Edyn: “Never intentionally engage in a fair fight.” With cunning strategies and geographical advantages, scouts with regular frequency, defeat or repel forces with significant numerical advantages. Scouts suggest the wisest strategy against them consists in standing some ground and never pursuing or retreating, for the impulsive situational maneuver of an opponent is the condition scouts hope for first and masterfully exploit.

Contemporary War Story Vignettes Featuring Faelryd Captain of Scouts:

Faelryd generally disapproved of the practice of reverence for war heroes and in all probability accounted as the greatest contributor to his own relative obscurity. He always insisted heroes of legend should consist of the great mathematicians, artisans and architects, those that introduced indoor plumbing and advanced technologies in agriculture, arts and crafts, and as if to affirm and reinforce his own proposition, he alienated most acquainted with him, presenting an odd and unconventional disposition. Many captains in the militia account as occasional heroes, usually celebrated more in their respective villages of origin while remaining somewhat obscure elsewhere, and among those, Faelryd accounts as more obscure than most. While in his lifetime, most acquainted with him regarded him with some degree of cautious skepticism, during the last years of his life and especially after his death, stories recount his lifetime in growing legendary proportions as something of an anonymous hero. In fact, many that engaged in traditional tales featuring Faelryd during his lifetime may even have had casual acquaintanceship with him while completely oblivious to his identity.

The Friendly Greeting: When on patrol, by common practice among scouts upon the discovery of potential hostiles within or near the borders, they assumed a defensive position with favorable escape routes especially if outnumbered, and as the subjects approached, might call out to them from a distance, try to treat with them and offer friendly warning if possible. Faelryd, as a lieutenant or later captain, exercised the authority most of the time to appoint himself spokesperson. On occasion rather than call from a distance, he might casually step out of some thicket of bushes surprising a group of strangers, wave at them with a smile and step right up to them, shake their hands and introduce himself by name as if greeting a new neighbor on a casual stroll. Curiously enough, most strangers frequently reacted to the ‘friendly greeting’ by running to seek cover. The most common explanation for this among scouts concluded most strangers probably simply could not believe any military man could be so stupid or crazy as to approach men of their kind in such a fashion unless the bait or some clever device of an impending ambush. Faelryd defended the practice as not reckless but very carefully deliberated and based on observation, experience and intuition, intended to prevent unnecessary violence. In argument, he offered as proof the fact he still breathed and by all accounts, he delighted in the knowledge that in that context, none but he would ever have the last word. Most scouts generally agreed he successfully discouraged adventurers and would-be plunderers with more frequency than others in position to extend warning, but by common knowledge he had to fight his way out of a ‘friendly greeting’ at least once and probably more than that. Ultimately, most in the militia regarded his ‘friendly greeting’ as unnecessarily hazardous and ill advised.

The Code: For a brief period in their history, the Highland militia escorted to the borders and wished good luck, any party that might abandon their weapons and plea for mercy but some among the militia recognized on more than one occasion, some number of men as some extended such a courtesy once before. Enraged by the sight of familiar faces, the militia suspended all concept of surrender by any party including their own, and most among them never tolerated any hostile party to depart the Highlands alive without contest, and relentlessly hunted down and killed all they could, regardless of how pitiful or defenseless, or what mercy begged.

Most militia regarded the choice to execute or release prisoners both of moral consequence of such magnitude, no policy or instruction should ever compel any individual to participate in either, and therefore only their own conscience subject to no other judgment, should guide each. To preserve the integrity of the principle, the militia practiced a strict code of silence with the thought that the absence of speech precludes the exercise of judgment. Initially considered something of a compromise, the practice of conditional dismissal such as that recounted in the story of Faelryd and the bandits from Enet eventually became most common. An example such as sending unprepared men into the natural elements in their underwear presented an extremely high probability of death yet ultimately placed control of the situation squarely in the hands of those men dispatched in such fashion, arguably relieving the militia of responsibility for outright murder.

Diversity in Oral Tradition and Witch Infiltration:

Highland oral tradition, while spanning an inordinately brief chronology as oral tradition goes, developed an extraordinarily vibrant depth and complexity in its relative youth, and compensates for the lack of an ancient past with spectacular and sometimes preposterous faerie of legendary figures and epic deeds. In the other world below the Highlands, traditions tell of haunted spirit, ghost, angel, monstrous beast, epic quest, combat and treasure, but more than any other characters, most frequently recount the exploits of local heroes in contest with savages such as Highlander or otherwise foreign element, and cruel ruthless witch.

Highland tradition exhibits close parallels with that of its neighbors however, it diverges dramatically in the purposes served by critical characters. While neighboring cultures entertain witch characters, only to validate their own belief in the villainy of Highlanders, Highland tradition tends to cast witches as a convenient collection of enigmatic and suspicious figures upon whom, responsibility inexorably falls for any action potentially subject to criticism or moral judgment. Highland tradition persistently casts witches as a sadistic and bloodthirsty creed, literally drinking the blood and even occasionally eating the flesh of their hapless unfortunate victims, casting spells, curses and ‘hauntings’, and accumulating massive collections of skull souvenirs ornately decorated and artistically displayed throughout their dark realm.

In their fanciful role as bloodthirsty sadist, witches perform the more distasteful and unsavory deeds such as the remorseless massacre of belligerent feudal warlords and their miscreant bands of marauders, while the heroic warriors of the Highland militia frequently account as little more than innocent bystanders, repulsed by the savagery with which the witches abuse their victims. In the other world, they draw little if any distinction between Highlander and witch, and any random malady or misfortune they attribute to the dread Highlanders and their witch magic, obsessively focusing on recurring themes of indecency, malevolent spell, curse, zombie slave, child abduction, plague, ritualistic torture, human sacrifice, blood sport and cannibalism. In the recording of their own history, witch intervention inexorably makes its way into Highland archives, while objective journalism invariably trickles down into the bottoms of boxes and cabinets, and circulates somewhat secretively among the militia and close confidants.

In the early count of Edyn years, Highland tradition focused primarily on stories of great battles and the heroic actions of the militia, and many among them ascended to the status of legendary hero even during their own lifetimes. Popular legend features prominently, such heroes as the daughter of Edyn, Elgyn 2nd Martial, who carried a round war hammer and crushed the skulls of captains and kings in duel, and Elbyrn 4th Martial, who repelled innumerable bands of depraved vagabonds and their charismatic warlords. Any militia with sufficient exposure to the various assortment of belligerent travelers most likely to frequent the frontiers hardly entertain any sympathy for their plight might they encounter unfortunate circumstances at the hands of Highland scouts. Highlanders consider most foreigners dangerous men that carry weapons and kill indiscriminately only when not killing for entertainment but even so, always exercise some reservations about any militia that might conduct themselves in any fashion too similar to those dangerous men, or kill them too enthusiastically and this in all likelihood, accounts for the recurring and thematic predictability of the disposition of witches.

Ancient Teaerhe War Cult Tradition:

In ancient times, the original clans divided into the somewhat geographically isolated regions of the ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ Highlands divided by the Emerald Ridge prominence. In the ancient archaic language, the lower region bore the name, Teaeren (roughly translating to ‘the low places’), and the higher region, Gialaen (roughly translating to ‘the high places’) and the clans in aggregate bore the names Teaerhe and Gialahe respectively (roughly translating to ‘those of the low or high places, as applicable). Soon after the initial division, the Gialahe established permanent settlements and adopted a hybrid lifestyle of domestication supplemented by hunt and forage, while the Teaerhe maintained a nomadic tradition within the lower region. Contact between the two groups varied from frequent to seldom over the ages even though the ancient bond of kinship neither group ever entirely forgot. For ages, the Teaerhe roamed the Lower Highlands, lived humble lives in harmony with the natural world and maintained elaborate camp-villages of sophisticated and decorative tents, guided by the seasons from camp to camp.

Even in the most ancient memories preserved by oral tradition, stories of hostile intruders abound. In the ancient times, such travelers came in small groups seeking to take possession of what objects might occur to them as worthy of examination or they might also take captives as slaves if an opportunity occurred. Both the Gialahe and the Teaerhe, whether settled or nomadic, always established territory and respected the territories of others and so an immediate resentment arose for any that wandered in and conducted themselves in a threatening fashion.

The ancient time accounts as the age of war cults in Teaerhe tradition and the most prominent cult committed themselves exclusively to defense of the territory and the protection of the clans, dedicating their lives exclusively to the art of war. The war cults adopted the name ‘Marzyhe’, after the first great war hero, Marzye (later described as a protective god in human form). The Marzyhe studied combat arts with rigid discipline and mastered lethal skills with every weapon even bare hand. In the event of territorial violations, the Marzyhe engaged opponents and massacred all present intent on the preclusion of the development of grudges, believing no tale to tell prevention of motive for revenge. Over the ages, contact with outsiders always only increased in both number and frequency and as a natural consequence, the Marzyhe accumulated intimate familiarity with all the neighboring identities and cultures of the region.

As patience for continuing intrusions diminished, the Marzyhe formed a strategic response to the repeated violations of three particular neighboring tribes from the south and in secrecy, set out to address all outstanding issues and grievances. They traveled across the boundaries in stealth to the homes of the three tribes, and in the darkness of night crept through their villages and assassinated their warriors and chieftains, leaving their communities weakened and vulnerable. An era of relative solitude followed but lasted no longer than one or two generations for as time passed and the southern tribes recovered from their losses, in their vulnerability, they formed into an aggregation. With newfound strength and power they coerced and absorbed other nearby tribes until they assembled a formidable war party, and as the immediate supply of worthy opponents ran low, they once again looked up to Teaeren. The Teaerhe however, gathered warning from spies and scouts, and even as the war party of the tribal aggregation marched, the Teaerhe packed up all their camps and abandoned Teaeren altogether, taking refuge in Gialaen.

The Marzyhe remained behind and confronted the aggregation war party as if to fight but only to lure them into a chase, and in apparent retreat, they fled up through the dense forests and rugged slopes of the Emerald Ridge. Even though astronomically outnumbered, the Marzyhe fought with the advantage of familiar terrain and high ground, and by stealth, ambush and cover of darkness, inflicted terrible casualties on the aggregation war party but even so, the party so outnumbered the Marzyhe, it nonetheless gained ground and forged ahead. At a point victory appeared at hand for the aggregation, the Marzyhe staged a mock debacle, exposing their ranks and splitting in two then conceding high ground. The aggregation formed ranks to drive the Marzyhe down to the plains and overwhelm them on open terrain, but the entire maneuver served as a ploy and the Marzyhe set fires at predetermined locations, which quickly surrounded and overtook the aggregation, incinerating most of those that yet survived. What remnants lived to ascend the crest of the ridge in retreat from the fire, met only more ambush at the hands of the Gialahe. Many battles occurred over the months that followed and in the end, the Marzyhe obliterated all remnants of the aggregation and according to tradition, not so much as one ever left Teaeren alive. These events occurred generations prior to the lifetime of Edyn and they precipitated the coming of a new age for the Teaerhe, the age of permanent settlement, defensive construction, domestication and eventually, a permanent organized militia coordinated with the Martial of Gialaen. For the Teaerhe, the events establish a pronounced point in time that divides the new age from the ancient past and commemorates the demise of the ancient nomadic traditions. The Marzyhe cult survives in a diminished form as well as the ancient nomadic tradition and even in contemporary times, all Lower Highlanders possess elaborate tents in the traditional materials and styles, observing several holidays each year that involve pilgrimages and extended campouts, and Upper Highlanders practice a version of the tradition as well with the annual harvest festival.

As a product of the assassinations carried out by the Marzyhe and subsequent rise of the aggregation war party, all Highlanders adopted a policy of nonintervention and avoidance of foreign elements and by the lifetime of Edyn, the Gialahe by-and-large preserved virtually no memory of a world beyond the mountainous extents of Gialaen. The city-state of Enet in all likelihood accounts as a descendant of the aggregation war party and with recurrent territorial violations, earned the conspicuous honor among Highlanders as the most reviled of all the southern city-states.