

SUZERAIN

CALADON FALLS

The Noble Houses Of Caladon



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Thank You

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Contents

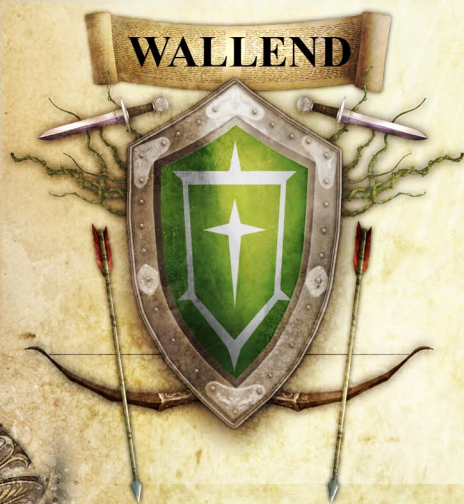
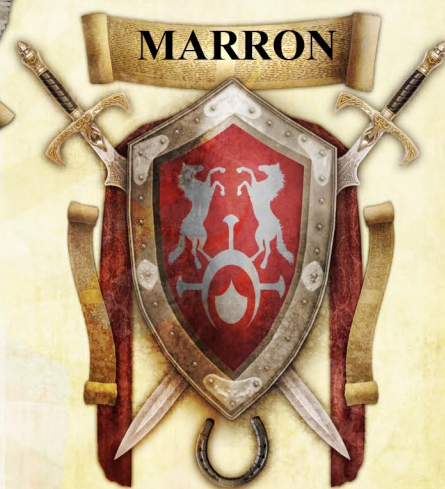
The Noble Houses.....	03
Four Rings.....	03
House Killian.....	03
House Laneer.....	05
House Marron.....	06
House Sumner.....	08
House Thrace.....	10
House Vesper.....	12
House Wallend.....	13



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Version 1.savage101104



The Noble Houses

Drawn from the bounties and toils of the land, rooted in centuries of trade and tradition, the Seven Noble Houses of Caladon reflect – and guide – the temperaments of their people. Although each person of the kingdom is an individual unto him or herself, the personality of each House colors, and sometimes shadows, the people under its sway.

As ride the high, goes an old saying, so go the low.

In this age, people look to the nobility for examples of how to live. Even the lowliest peasants watch the noble families and imitate the behaviors they see. Nobles set fashions, guide etiquette, and determine what is and is not considered proper within their realms. Conversely, they're inspired by their people in return. The interplay between the nobles, their people, their lands, and their trades remains subtle yet influential. Each one follows where the other ones go, and all four are inescapably intertwined.

Even in times of peace, the seven houses host intrigues, rivalries, alliances, and grudges between them. If House Sumner and House Laneer are at cross-purposes, their family members, agents, and underlings will go out of their way to knock each other off-center; if the houses are allied, their people may be counted upon to assist each other, if only out of courtesy and a desire for future gain.

Four Rings

Each noble house includes hundreds of members: the immediate family, united by ties of blood and marriage; the intimate agents, servants and advisors to that family; elite courtiers who maintain a close orbit to the family; and servants who exist in proximity to the other groups but wield little true power. Members of each ring – even the lowliest house servants – are people of distinction in the kingdom as a whole.

Within the four rings, competition is fierce. Everyone in each circle strives toward greater influence, wealth, power, freedom, or a combination of the above. Depending on the people involved, and the goals each person pursues, these relationships can range from bitter rivalries to grudging obedience to self-imposed exile from the family's affairs. For the most part, though, members of each house try to better their personal lot in life. Rare is the person in any ring of a noble house who simply drifts from day to day.

House Killian: Feral Hearts

Seat of Power: Penryth.

Trade: Farming, husbandry, and animal-training.

A rough-and-tumble noble house, Killian prides itself on an almost primal connection to the land. Nestled in Caladon's most fertile wilderness, House Killian's kingdom favors a hardy approach to life and politics. Even its women are hard and strong; weaklings and cowards have no place in Killian!

From childhood onward, members of Killian's Inner Court are trained and tested. Sickly infants are abandoned, given away with one ear nicked as proof of their inferior stock. Many such children are taken in by farmers – the more hands the better, even if the child proved 'unworthy of his birth' Despite their noble – sometimes even royal – lineage, these children are raised as laborers and often shunned even by their common peers.

Yet despite their barbaric reputation, Killians are not stupid. Rival House members often mistake the brawny Killian folk for blockheads. This is rarely the case; House Killian training includes puzzles as well as brawls, strategy as well as drinking contests. Each Killian noble is expected to understand matters of state and commerce, to handle himself in wilderness or court chambers with equal faculty. Killian is a restless, challenging house. Excuses are rarely an option in its halls.

People at any level of House Killian are expected to earn respect, not get it by default; nobles visiting from other kingdoms are often appalled by the rudeness and informality of Killian peasantry and servants. Although the local nobles demand deference from their people (through brute force if necessary), they often turn a blind eye to 'uppity rabble' who refuse to respect weak or lazy nobles from other kingdoms. Commoners or servants who humiliate an irritating visitor through some especially clever means are sometimes (though not often, and never officially) rewarded by covert gifts of food, cash, or property. Few things delight a Killian noble more than seeing a foreign irritant taken down a few pegs!

For visitors who can be flexible with propriety, House Killian provides firm and steady friendship. Across Caladon, Killians are renowned for vigorous honesty. The current royal family maintains a steady truce with every kingdom in Caladon (although they're wary of Vesper's growing influence) and close ties with Laneer, Marron, and – oddly enough – Sumner. The strange friendship between trustworthy Queen Leora "Soaring Hawk" Killian and the cruelly beautiful Queen of Sumner is the subject of curious speculation throughout the eight kingdoms. Perhaps it's a predatory bond; hawks, after all, are birds of prey...

Killian's elite guard embodies the kingdom's feral heart. Known as Greenwardens, these foresters combine amazing skill at arms with almost bestial survival skills. Rumors portray them as shapechangers, heart-bound to wild beasts and assuming their forms for battle and stealth. The truth behind those rumors is slippery; House Killian certainly encourages them, but neither confirms nor denies such assertions.

Delicate sensibilities find Killian a challenging place indeed. The court buildings of Killian favor primal motifs: bare wood, rough stone, living plants, and flowing waters. Their solid structures blend into the surroundings, apparently growing from the land itself and reaching toward the sun. Even their most formal clothing seems rustic and casual, made for use, not prettiness. Manners are equally casual, bordering on rude by other House standards. Fires are stoked only on the coldest days and nights – a true Killian or worthy friend must be able to endure discomfort! Many Killians, even the nobility, go barefoot and nearly naked, even in harsh weather. This House and its people prize their connection to the elements, and can be as implacable as the wilderness itself.

Inner Court: Currently, Queen Leora 'Soaring Hawk' Killian presides over both the House and its realm. Despite four children and over forty years of life, Queen Leora remains a vital and able ruler. Her long friendship with Queen Sorcha Sumner has forged a strong bond between their kingdoms, and although the pairing of a bluff honest queen and a hot-tempered seductress seems like an odd match, both realms have prospered as a result.

Queen Leora and her consort Lord Ean 'Staring Wolf' Killian (consorts in Killian take the name of their liege, regardless of marriage or blood) share three princes and a princess between them. Princess Bronwyn 'Eager Bear' ten years old, is the youngest, and counts Staring Wolf as her natural father. The youngest prince, Alewyn 'Charging Colt', is also blood-related to Lord Ean; at fourteen, he was sired shortly after the death of King Borem 'Boar Tusk' Killian, killed by poachers who later endured hideous fates at the hands of their queen. The two older princes are his descendants; Prince Torlyn 'Badgerclaw' is now a 25-year-old lord in his own right, while charismatic 18-year-old Edric 'Blackstag' has recently gone off as a touring emissary to Wallend, Marron, and the High King's Court. Around them, the royal family counts dozens of cousins, uncles, aunts and, in the case of Prince Torlyn, two young daughters. All share the strong wills and defiant temperaments of their sharp-witted Queen.

Outer Court: Among the dozens of servants and retainers surrounding the Inner Court, four stand out: the Beastmaster, who determines heart-beasts, maintains the royal animals, and trains noble children in the ways of the wilderness; the Armsmaster, who supervises the kingdom's military forces and trains the royal family; the High Earthtender, who supervises the health of the land and its farmers; and the Grand Steward, who rules the household of Killian Court.

Currently, those titles are held by Lady Janese 'Springing Mare' Sherod, Lord Tywnn 'Weaselpaw' Chance, Lord Obell 'Owlchaser' Tenn, and Lady Maer 'Swift Falcon' Grace. Each one has spent years in his or her position, with Lord Obell and Lady Maer dating back to King Killian's lifetime. Each Outer Court servant has his or her own heart-beast, and spends at least one day each month hunting in the wilderness.

Courtiers: There is a dizzying array of courtiers filtering between Killian Court and their own estates. Each one of these notables has a personal fiefdom, a shared vassal state or a guild, or is visiting from another kingdom.

The elite Greenwardens protect both the royal family and the borders of its lands. Each Greenwarden has a powerful heart-beast, a hearty constitution, and formidable ability with weapons, tracking and wilderness skills. Normally, this force numbers about 100 Greenwardens; recent events, though, have brought that number to 73 – a grave shortage in royal guards! The current leader, Lady Beryn 'Winterclaw', has just recently assumed the post; her predecessor died beneath the teeth of some creature no one has yet identified, and Lady Beryn has sworn to find and kill that beast. Despite her youth, 'Lady Greenclaw' (an affectionate nickname) inspires deep devotion in her people. The fact that she can out-wrestle her largest comrade has helped win that respect.

A similar elite staff – the Earthtenders – minds the forests, fields, and gardens of the realm. Unlike the farmers and gardeners of other kingdoms, these folk are full-fledged courtiers, given as much respect as any warrior. By and large, Killian recognizes the value of the land and those who work it. Each Earthtender is said to "*speak the language of soil, sea, and skies*"; it is said that their work is magic. Their current leader, Abely 'Owleyes', has an instinct for the weather that impresses even the most seasoned farmmen.

Underlings: Pity the poor servants who must keep the royal courts tidy! Between the feeding, tending, and inevitable cleanup involved when hundreds of near-wild animals run loose, the servants of Killian are busy folk! Even so, they are proud and stubborn people, given enough freedom and dignity to surprise visitors from other realms. For a royal court, Killian hosts a small number of underlings; the realm's dedication to self-reliance inspires its nobility to do most things themselves.

House Laneer: Steel Truth

Seat of Power: Byjorna.

Trade: Metalwork, stone, craftsmanship, and technology.

"A true heart", goes a saying drawn from the courts of Laneer, "*holds promises of steel*". That's no idle boast. Like their Killian neighbors, Laneerians pride themselves on honesty, courage and tenacity. Like the ores and stone mined from their mountainous homeland, the royal family of Laneer builds things to last.

Tucked between the Jorna River, Lake Eryn, Lake Rillian and the Jorna Peaks, Laneer's kingdom is misty and often cold. For the majority of each day, high peaks shroud the land it from sunlight. Warm air rises from the distant reaches of both lakes, turning to fog where it meets the chilly mountain breeze. Although this constant humidity – mixed with rich soil washed down from the Jorna Peaks – provides fertile ground, the rocky dirt and filtered sunlight produce very poor crops. Laneerians subsist mostly on fish, marsh-beasts, birds, and imported grains from Killian and Marron. Fortunately for the people and their nobility, Laneer possesses a near-endless supply of strong ores and thick stone; this bounty, combined with the ancestral skill of Laneer's craftsmen, gives the kingdom a powerful bargaining edge.

The second-smallest kingdom in Caladon, Laneer provides steel, iron, gold, silver, copper, granite, marble, and other precious materials for the High Kingdom as a whole. And because so little else can prosper here, the people of Laneer have cultivated the finest craftsmanship in the land. Sigard Laneer, the first king of this House, supposedly fashioned the axe wielded by High King Gavin Marron, "*the Great Father of Caladon*." Sigard's clever stonework and metalcraft also helped King Marron secure the borderlands between his realm and the Trader Imperium, the steppeward barbarians, and the creatures dwelling at the far ends of his new empire. Even now, Laneer designs and materials equip the Knights of Caladon. If Sigard had been as clever at the bargaining table as he was at the forge, Laneer's kingdom would be far larger than it is.

What Laneer lacks in croplands and size, it makes up through influence. Only Sumner boasts more material wealth, and no Caladonian kingdom produces more formidable warriors. Set on the land bridge between the Trader Imperium and Caladon, Laneer guards against barbarian raiders from the Jorna peaks. Trade from each nation has made this family rich; constant raids have made it wary. Laneerian knights bear the finest gear and most tenacious temperaments in Caladon, and the High Defense Guild produces the most advanced tactics, fortifications, and weapons technology anywhere. House Laneer can field a formidable fighting force – the Gilded Axe Brotherhood – within days, and send it from one end of the kingdom to the other in less than a week. When the lords and ladies of Laneer speak, everyone else listens.

The royal family itself boasts a stubborn mix of ingenuity (especially in the form of Prince Stefan Laneer of the Smiling Forge); ruthlessness (King Wolstan Laneer of the Black Axe Storm); integrity (Princess Eanwyn Laneer); and cleverness (Prince Kaeldan Laneer). For a royal family, the Laneers are surprisingly united, forgoing many of the petty grudges and grand betrayals found among nobles.

Unlike the pampered children of most royal households, each Laneerian noble – blood relation, ward, bastard, or marry-in – must learn to work stone and steel. This 'forge-gift' goes beyond simple craftsmanship, and extends to observation, judgment, fitness, and self-discipline. As a Laneerian proverb goes, "*statecraft, steelcraft, and stonecraft mold the same materials toward different ends*." To put it another way, the crafting refines the person. The rulers of this land must prove adept at each. As a result, Laneerian nobility lack the aimless decadence and laziness that characterize rival courtiers.

The mighty courts of Laneer reflect this sold craftsmanship. Each building – from the palaces and feast-halls to the forges, sheds and stables – is an engineering marvel. These impressive structures combine graceful architecture, strong materials, practicality and, sturdiness. As invading forces have discovered, it takes considerable force to even damage, much less destroy, a Laneerian royal or military structure! Most buildings reach far underground as well, skirting the water table and turning the underground streams throughout the region into deep reserves of drinking water. Laneerian homes and halls often feature running water, indoor plumbing, and hot baths – all rare luxuries in the realm of Caladon! As a rule, these structures are chilly, thick and dark as well – lit by fires, not by sunlight. Still, there are reasons why Laneer is called "*the Forge of Caladon*." Hard and powerful, both the land and its nobility can make or break almost anything.

Inner Court: Despite over 60 years of life, King Wolstan has the vitality and strength of a man one-third his age. Although ruthless, as he demonstrated in a purge of treacherous guild leaders in the past, and often cold in manner, he is deeply principled and honorable. The same can't truly be said of Prince Kaeldan, whose slippery words and deeds dismay his regal father. His younger brother Stefan is more favored by their father, and may well get the throne someday... assuming the popular young man never meets with an 'accident.' (Succession in Laneer, as is true with several other kingdoms, is based on merit, not on seniority.) Then again, the true jewel in their father's crown might be "*the Sun-Hearted Fox*", their sister, whose beauty and brilliance have won the love of her people. In the absence of their dead mother, Queen Cynehild the Dark (a Vesperian fire-witch), Princess Eanwyn may be the next queen – and next monarch – of this important realm. So far, none of the royal children have had children of their own... which may present problems in the not-so-distant future.

Outer Court: Beyond the royal family and a dozen important government posts (of which the High Artisan, High Weaponsmith, High Stonemason, Lord Chamberlain, Lord Protector, and High Oremaster are the most vital), the kingdom of Laneer is managed by the guilds. A High Guild Council brings the concerns of 15 craft-guilds to their polished stone table, and from there to the royal family. Thankfully, the High Guild Council understands the importance of cooperation in such a precarious location and its members recall how their king achieved his name. Still, power is power, and men and women never cease struggling to advance it for themselves.

Courtiers: In addition to the usual high servants and guards, the royal courts host the mighty Gilded Axe Brotherhood – the second-most elite heavy fighting force in Caladon, and normally composed of five companies numbering 100 men each. (No women fight in the brotherhood's ranks, although many work as support staff, armorers, healers, and so forth.) Armored in elaborate plate-and-leather arrays, and armed with the best blades Laneer smiths can produce, each Gilded Axe carries a wrapped sword, a short bow, and a powerful war-axe into battle. Unusually tall and incredibly strong, a single unarmed Gilded Axe can fight a dozen normal men and easily win. Combined with the realm's impressive fortifications and secret counter-siege weapons, these warriors are Caladon's first line of defense. Each man among them is rewarded and respected well for that service.

Underlings: Although House Laneer has the usual servants to make things run smoothly, their number is actually far smaller than one might expect. The self-sufficient ethic respected within House Laneer – combined with the kingdom's diminutive size – keeps the royal family and other nobles from acquiring a large servant population. That self-reliant pride filters down to the guilds and noble-blooded cousins as well. A Laneerian who expects to be waited on hand-and-foot is, to the royal view, an embarrassment to the line.

That said, the house employs hundreds of hardy miners, artisans, smiths, carpenters, fishers, and architects, both to tend the royal grounds and to maintain the kingdom as a whole. No other realm, not even the High King's seat, is as robust and sturdy as Laneer. Beyond the regional pride, there's a pragmatic side to this obsessive state of repair: if outsiders – especially visitors from the Imperium – were to note weakness, they would seize upon it and tear Caladon apart.

Although it's not obvious, Laneer also maintains one of this world's best and most extensive networks of spies. King Wolstan is no fool, and he keeps this network – the Velvet Blade – a busy but deeply hidden secret.

House Marron: Quiet Thunder

Seat of Power: Waterford.

Trade: Horses, farming and fishing, metalworking, and carriage-making.

Like a proud horse gone gray, House Marron has settled into a comfortable rut. Once the unifying power behind Caladon's kingdom, the realm now seems like a prosperous, yet stagnant backwater, fed by lush farms and trotting along on the power of its legacy, yet unable to gallop again.

Centuries ago, Gavin Marron led a titanic series of wars to unite the seven families and drive out the invaders, monsters, and empires who threatened to engulf their lands. The Great Father of Caladon was a ruthless, charismatic man whose huge war-axe became the first sigil of House Marron. Later, his clever descendants – the twin brother and sister, Braecen and Galyn Marron – adopted their matched blades as the new symbol of the House's power. Although each sibling had a royal consort, the twins ruled together from the High King's chambers, commissioning double thrones and killing anyone who protested. Their reign ushered in an age of tumult across Caladon, with some factions defending the wise strategies and economic prosperity of the Twins' leadership and others protesting the power-sharing and bloody policies of the Marron rulers. When the Twins

perished – Braecen from disease, Galyn soon afterward from grief – rival factions turned Marron into a scorched wasteland. Although these Twin-Heir Wars ended over two centuries ago, no Marron has ascended the High Throne since.

The reconstruction efforts brought stillness to the realm. Anxious to avoid fresh conflict, the heirs of House Marron nurtured diplomacy over force. The rich fishing in Lake Rillan, and the hunting in the grasslands around it, allowed Marron to eventually regain equilibrium. About 20 years ago, the ambitious current ruler, King Lachlan the Wise, moved the seat of House Marron from its original spot in Kinholt to the fertile soil of Waterford, on the high edge of Lake Rillan; since then, the older city has declined as the new one prospers. Although Waterford is young, and small by city standards, the fresher cropland and proximity to Laneer has brought wealth and surplus to the new Marron court.

One legacy from the Twins has preserved their good name within the realm: horses. Both Braecen and Galyn were expert riders, and they demanded the same from their consorts and courtiers. The level lands of Marron, combined with careful breeding and an especially fertile strain of oats, have nurtured the finest horses in Caladon. Patrons from all over this world come to Marron to race, trade, purchase and occasionally steal these horses; for obvious reasons, then, horse-theft is punished by public death-by-torture – a sentence concluded by tearing the thief apart between six horses tied to various extremities! Notable for their grace, endurance and intellect, full-blood Marron horses are immortalized on the sigil of the kingdom. The best of them carry twin white birthmarks on their foreheads – signs that Trinity favors the Twins' gift to their realm.

The popularity of horse-travel, combined with the level landscape, and the civic-minded (and military) traditions of House Marron, have given this kingdom some of the best roads, carriages, and wagons in Caladon. Marronian coaches boast the finest workmanship and smoothest rides in the High Kingdom, while an extensive network of smooth-stone passages criss-crosses the kingdom's lands. Bridged in places by amazing bridges designed by Laneer architects, Marron roads facilitate quick travel between settlements. One of these bridges, the Redmare Arc, dates back to the Twins, and remains one of the finest – and the single largest – example of Caladonian architecture outside the coliseum in Bandydown. Spanning the shore near Kinholt with the far side of Lake Rillan, the Arc facilitates quick travel between the seaward and steppward sides of Marron. Parts of the bridge were destroyed during the Twin-Heirs Wars, but have since been reconstructed, and most recently, expanded upon by King Lachlan the Wise.

In the wake of their fiery ancestors, the rulers of Marron have embraced a threefold Code: Prudence, Temperance and Restraint. Referred to as the Code of Cuthhelm the Restorer (for the king who established it after winning the Twin-Heir Wars), this ethic guides the hands of every Marron monarch. That said, it's not always popular. Some critics assert that Marron's current lassitude comes from too much "*prudence, temperance and restraint*". After two centuries, the Twins look mighty and the ruins in their wake seem like a temporary inconvenience. Beneath the sleepy appearance of the realm and the quiet court of King Lachlan the Wise, conspiracies gather to push the kingdom back towards greatness, and inevitably, toward war.

Inner Court: King Lachlan has earned the honorific 'the Wise'. A thoughtful man of 56, he has guided Marron through a quiet period of constant prosperity. His economic policies, and firm alliances with Laneer, Killian, Vesper, and Thrace have made his realm wealthy and maintained a period of stability. At the same time, he's kept a wary eye on Marron's territories out in The Open, taxing them fairly while giving their people enough freedom to feel satisfied. He keeps a ready force of elite cavalry – the Red Horse Companions (lead by his fifth son Erland) – garrisoned with the High King's soldiers in Dunhoun in case of trouble.

The trouble in question buzzes under the skin of this peaceful land. Factions argue for independence from Marron, and the talk grows louder with each passing year. Several members of House Wallend have spies in Lachlan's court, working to carve out a piece of Marron Lands in The Open after the king's inevitable death. Certain circles believe Prince Edric 'Blackstag' Killian is part of this conspiracy, and that he believes (rightly or otherwise) a pending marriage to Lachlan's eldest sister Elyse might give him a claim to the throne itself.

Marron's royal family is large; King Lachlan has four wives, eight sons and ten daughters of various ages, not to mention several dozen cousins, two sisters, and a bastard half-brother. Most of these relations enjoy their quiet and often-lazy lives, believing that Marron is best served by maintaining its peaceful pace. Not everyone, though, agrees. King Lachlan is not blind to these intrigues, his spymistress, Lady Adney, keeps her agents busy watching them all. Under its placid surface, Marron is held together by a complex weave of bargains, bribes, alliances, and safeguards. Almost everyone knows, however, that King Lachlan is the tie that binds it all together. Someday, the Wise One will die. What happens then is a many-sided bet.

Outer Court: King Lachlan's closest advisors are his children: his eldest son Earl Garrin of Waterford; his second son Lord Balrin of Milltown; his eldest daughter Lady Adney of the King's Confidence; his third son Lord Ingeld of the Royal Treasury; and his second daughter Lady Marisyde, Steward of the Royal Fields. The first supervises the King's Watch, The Red Horse Companions, the Royal Stables, and by extension Marron's horse trade as a whole. Lord Balrin keeps an eye on Marron concerns in The Open. Lady Adney keeps a steady gaze on the kingdom's intrigues, and has dozens of skillful agents, informants, and assassins to assist her. In addition to his other duties, Lord Ingeld maintains a surplus treasury that only he and the king can access. This wealth is to be used in the event of emergencies, famines, or civil war. Meanwhile, Lady Marisyde keeps detailed records of harvests and trade, likewise maintaining a surplus food store in case of catastrophe. These advisors, among others, favor King Lachlan's long-term approach. He trusts them implicitly; in the event of civil war, any one of them has the authority to seize and hold his throne. If this should happen, though, Lady Adney (or the brother she supports) is most likely to keep it.

Courtiers: As one might expect, Marron's courts are filled with various functionaries, emissaries, stewards, and servants. The most notable figures among the lower court, however, are the King's Watch, the Red Horse Companions, and the devious agents of Lady Adney.

Like most royal bodyguards, the King's Watch is composed of loyal warriors, well-paid, and expensively equipped. One of King Lachlan's wiser moves has been to reward his guards handsomely and they are as loyal as any guard could be. The Red Horse Companions are suppler in their devotions, but nevertheless remain dedicated to their king. This corps – made up of almost equal numbers of men and women – are among the finest riders in the kingdom, an amazing distinction in itself! Unlike the King's Watch, the Red Horse Companions are lightly armed and armored. They're equipped and trained as fast-moving skirmishers with significant freedom to act. Both corps are exceedingly proud, skillful, and above all, loyal.

The 'serpent court' (so-named by critics of Lady Adney) remains more mysterious. A secret nest of spies and killers, these agents act in the shadows of Marron's placidity. For now, the network remains loyal to the king as well; in the long game, however, they provide potent wild cards in Marron's political deck.

Underlings: One of the pillars of King Lachlan's popularity is his fairness to the lower classes. Servants in House Marron, though still servants, are treated well by the standards of other courts. For obvious reasons,

the highest-ranking underlings are those who deal with horses and farms. The Wise One rightly regards them as the health of his realm, and they enjoy (and occasionally abuse) their king's respect. The dignity given to these lesser servants is one of the pillars of Marron stability. Anyone who threatens the status quo here will invoke the ire of the realm's most powerful servants – a potentially disastrous mistake!

House Sumner: Kingdom Of Desire

Seat of Power: Erynbank.

Trade: Gems, gold, ship-building, art and pleasure.

Known often as 'the kingdom of desire', Sumner, and its royal family, present both jewels and serpents to the High King's lands. Bordered by Laneer, Killian, Marron, and two lakes, this realm provides one of the major gateways to Trader Imperium trade. Well-favored with precious stones, woods, and metals, this tiny kingdom makes up for its size with wealth, art, and sometimes treachery.

When King Abborlyn the Clever claimed the high edge of land between the lakes and Jorna River, most people thought him mad. At that time, Sumner was a thick-wooded perch of stone, set between waters and dangerously close to the Trader Imperium. By the time he made his claim to the first High King, though, Abborlyn had noted rich deposits of gold, silver and gems in the region, and he'd realized the possibilities of trade with their contentious neighbors. Setting up a half-dozen mines, Abborlyn set his foresters to cutting; unlike many monarchs, however, the Clever One told his woodsmen to replace, with seeds and saplings, every tree that they cut down. While other kingdoms soon deforested their realms, King Sumner maintained a healthy crop of greyoak wood. The stony soil beyond the forests made poor farmland, but protected deep mines from the waters of both lakes. By the time he died, King Abborlyn had the richest realm in Caladon. The cruel joke – "*That so tall a king should have so small a land*" – died quickly on the lips of rival courtiers.

False alliances and jealous lords soon put Sumner under siege. Within a decade of Abborlyn's death, three of his heirs had been slain and the fourth, Princess Cynewise, was struggling to hold the throne. Constant warfare ripped the tiny realm apart, and the woods smoldered with fires. Reaching into her father's vast bag of tricks, Cynewise commissioned five devastating weapons: an elite band of forest archers, a loyal order of courtesans, a cadre of traveling players, a fellowship of elemental wizards, and a spy network between them

all. Through seduction, assassination, blackmail, sudden arrows, and the occasional tempest, Princess Cynewise soon became Queen Cynewise, the Gold Dragoness, monarch of Sumner, and the most feared woman on the continent.

In the centuries since Cynewise's reign, Sumner has retained that ominous reputation. Sumner's firm alliance with the Twins of House Marron solidified its fierce impression. Although its halls still boil with intrigue, no sensible lord, monarch, or trader dares undermine House Sumner's rulership. Queen Cynewise established a tradition of horrific public executions, and the skill of her torturers is legendary.

The sturdy greyoak trees that grow in Sumner's rough soil provide fine ship-building timber. Although their ships are small by necessity (both because of the time it takes to grow the wood and the gnarled contours of its trunks), Sumnerian shipwrights are among the best in Caladon. Bribes, trade, professional courtesies, and occasional thefts provide a constant flow of Laneerian technology; these innovations aid the shipwrights, miners, and artisans of Sumner, while the courtesans and players keep Laneer's craftsmen entertained. Meanwhile, the Greyoak Shadows keep a wary watch on the kingdom's forests. Trespassers are shot down – sometimes with warnings, often without.

Beyond the mines, the forests, and the towns that nurture both, Sumner is quite cosmopolitan. Erynbank, its core city, is a center of commerce and the arts, as luxurious as any place in Caladon, and more sumptuous than most. Bright bazaars line the streets of the market district, while ships from every port crowd the city's docks. Despite its small size, Erynbank is prosperous, with a vital art scene, and sensuous underworld. The latter provides one of Sumner's distinctions; from Queen Cynewise's reign onward, the city's brothels, and 'crimson chambers' have provided key sources of fame, revenue, and information. Many a trader, or emissary, has found his (or her) lips loosened by the pleasures of the Red Guild, whose members serve all preferences with equal diligence.

Sumner also hosts this world's finest selection of performing artists. fire-spinners, jugglers, acrobats, and players stroll and entertain the crowds. The best of them work at one of three playhouses – the Diamond, the Osprey (both in Erynbank), and the Gilded Rose (in nearby Moreigh). Under royal commission, these companies provide tempting lures, creative inspiration, covert information, and sheer entertainment throughout the realm.

House Sumner actually makes its home further inland, in Foxwood Forest. Surrounded by thick wilderness and protected by the Greyoak Shadows, the fortress of Moreigh retains tiny, but fervently loyal populace. Known to outsiders as 'the badger's den', Moreigh is two parts fortress, one part city, and all parts maze. Visitors often get lost in the city's labyrinthine design (another strategy of Cynewise and her father); whether they find their way to safety, entertainment or unfortunate occurrences depends on House Sumner's goodwill.

The region's current royal family is as ruthlessly creative as any of their ancestors. King Tatwine Sumner, is a handsome man of indeterminate but youthful middle-age; his many dalliances do not apparently disturb his Queen, Sorcha, who's also known for her generous affections. Both monarchs combine beauty, sweetness, and cruelty in roughly equal measure; their friends enjoy rich gifts and powerful allies, their playmates receive wild and sometimes tragic complications, and their enemies suffer heart-freezing torments. The fact that a person can slide from one state of grace to another with very little warning makes 'the kingdom of desire' a fascinating trap-or-treat.

Inner Court: King Tatwine guides his court with a steady and dangerous hand. Smooth of voice, dark of anger, he makes a hearty friend and an unspeakable enemy. The same is true of Queen Sorcha, still one of the most beautiful women alive despite the five children she has borne. The oldest of them, Princess Calyse, is married – to all appearances, happily – to the heir to Vesper's throne. This suggests a lasting alliance between those houses, as well as potential trouble (Calyse and her mother do not always get along). The next in line, Prince Chacaelyn, is a buff and handsome lad whose adventurous spirit has won many friends, enemies, and conquests across Caladon. The other three siblings – Prince Rhyen, Princess Sabina, and Princess Develon – range from mid-teens to childhood; the wily youngest princess has just turned five, but her potential for complications is already obvious.

At the edges of the royal family, four sets of paramours – the king's, the queen's, Prince Chacaelyn's, and Princess Sabina's – conduct intimate partnerships with their respective monarchs. Comprised of beautiful men and women (in all but Sabina's case, both), these lovers hold "*perfect love and perfect trust*" within the court. Between them, they have nearly a dozen children – heirs to luxury if not to power. To date, not one of these paramours has proved unfaithful; the torments that would greet such betrayals are staggering to contemplate.

Outer Court: In addition to 15 High Advisors to the king and queen (a group still called the Gold Dragon's Council, in honor of Queen Cynewise), House Sumner has four special confidantes: Grand Forester Aelyn Cross, Lord Master of the Greyoak Shadows; Lady Sabella Osric, High Raven of the Red Guild; Sigeric the Trickster, Grand Playmaster of the Gilded Rose; and Stormmistress Bertrade Thurstan, Grand Elder Witch of the Diamond Tower. The impressive titles are intentional – mystique plays a vital role in Sumner's power-game. As the Gold Dragoness understood, intimidation provides the first step toward victory. Fortunately, for house Sumner, each of these courtiers has the charisma and power to back up those impressions.

Courtiers: Despite its tiny size, Sumner has the largest number of courtiers and servants outside the High King's court.

The most famous of the House's servitors include their four elite companies: the Greyoak Shadows (a group of forest-archers so skilled they seem to come and go from nowhere); the Red Guild (devastating courtesan-spies); the Gilded Rose and its traveling troupes (performance artists who also employ their skills toward espionage and assassination); and the Diamond Tower (elemental mage-spies whose symbol is an unbreakable iridescent tower). In addition to the kingdom's small but well-trained knights and rivermen, these forces keep Caladon's richest kingdom safe and powerful.

Underlings: Visitors to Sumner speak in awe of the realm's well-groomed, courteous, friendly, and beautiful servants. From guards to chambermaids, these underlings seem so very eager to please! It's easy to let down one's guard among such company. The secrets that flow, then, like water in the night, feed House Sumner's influence, security and wealth.

House Thrace: The Steady Axe

Seat of Power: Portaugusta.

Trade: Timber, hunting, ship-building, and fishing.

Strong, solid, and more than a little bit dense, House Thrace stands like the trees for which it's known. Once the most extensive woodland in Caladon, this realm has since been largely deforested by its claim to fame: the timber trade. 'The Steady Axe', as this house is known, has hewn down woodlands until the problem has become obvious. For centuries, it seemed, there were always more trees to cut down, more beasts to hunt, more forests to turn into gold. Recent surveys suggest otherwise, however, and protests have begun to rise toward the court. Sadly, at the moment, the monarchs don't seem to care.

House founder Hugo 'Bloodaxe' Thrace fought closely beside High King Gavin Marron. When the two axe-brothers achieved victory, King Marron granted Thrace the richest forests in the High Kingdom. Ambitious and hard-working, King Hugo established the Green Axe Brotherhood, a hearty fellowship of timber men, rangers, and merchants. Within less than a decade, Thrace's coasts bristled with busy ports and Thrace's borders maintained a steady flow of wood and gold between the other kingdoms. The seemingly endless forests around Lake Froom reached up into the steppes and supplied House Thrace and its subjects with centuries of wealth.

That period may be coming to an end. Although the realm's forests remain extensive, the deep-wood wilderness is disappearing fast. Recent innovations in wood-harvesting technology, combined with steady increases in the population throughout Caladon and the Imperium, have carved brutal swaths through the realm's forests. Now the forests and their inhabitants are fighting back; the timber trade has become a battle between the Green Axe Brotherhood, the forest-folk, wild beasts, and occasional upheavals of the trees themselves. Meanwhile, voices are rising in courts and towns, even in the marketplaces, against Thrace's timber trade. A series of harsh reprisals have silenced the obvious dissidents, but unhappy murmurs have formed a steady drone against the Steady Axe.

Despite the challenges to this kingdom's key trade, Thrace appears to be a peaceful prosperous realm. King Roland is a powerfully-built man enjoying a healthy middle age. In his youth, he spent several years as a member of the Green Axe Fellowship, and he retains the strong shoulders he'd earned among their company. Fond of the strangely bland Vendol beer, he throws enormous parties almost every week. His Grand Royal Hall, located near Lake Froom, is a massive lumber-built lodge, filled with hunting trophies, and hosting dozens of huntsmen, woodsmen, dignitaries, entertainers, beast-tenders, brew-keepers, and 'ladies of good company.' The Green Bull asserts his command amidst this savage splendor; the kingdom itself, meanwhile, is run largely from the royal palace in Portaugusta, in the capable hands of Queen Morgandy, the true ruler of Thrace.

Although the monarchs maintain a civil truce (perhaps, some say, because they rarely see one another), the split between Roland's high living and Morgandy's practicality mirrors divisions within the kingdom as a whole. While King Roland hosts revels and glories in the proud traditions and wealth of his kingdom, Queen Morgandy – born into House Wallend and married off to seal an alliance – has been taking a hard look at the future. Although the treasury is robust, the timber

troubles are beginning to seem ominous. The queen has begun to shift Thrace's fortunes from timber into farming – a less glamorous but more sustainable economy. This, in turn, has sparked rumors – uttered, at times, by the King himself – that his Wallendian bride is humbling his ancestral traditions to favor her own deeply-wooded House and homeland. Is the queen dismantling Thrace's proud lumber trade so that Wallend may prosper in its place? Or is she right in assuming that Thrace cannot continue to cut down trees like there's no tomorrow?

Beyond these intrigues, Thrace remains a sedate, if stout-hearted, kingdom. Rolling hills rise from the beaches off Lake Torrent, settle near Lake Froom, and then swell upward at the steppeward region of the realm. Across this expanse, towns, farms, lodges, villages, timber-roads and the occasional fortress dot the landscape. Considering its prosperity, Thrace holds few cities; its rural character is a point of pride within this kingdom, and large settlements are discouraged beyond the coastline. Despite great quantities of local building stone (not to mention the risk of fire), most Thracian structures are made of wood. Their rustic airiness stands in contrast with the heavy stone buildings throughout much of Caladon.

Inner Court: These days, Thrace's rulership is split between two courts: the royal hunting lodge and the capital in Portaugusta. Officially, Thrace is ruled from the king's location; everyone who matters, though, understands where the true government is run. Both courts have loyal partisans, outside allies, favored heirs, and elite troops dedicated to their sovereign. If (or when) the royal couple decides to split, Thrace could swiftly follow. Given Queen Morgandy's family ties to House Wallend, not to mention her practical governance, it could be a quick but bloody turn of events.

Outer Court: Although the prosperity of Thrace suggests a large contingent of servants and courtiers, the royal family's intimate circle is rather small and divided. The usual ministers of trade, food, finance, and military matters (the Lord Quill, Lord Harvester, Lady of Coins, and Lord Champion posts) are all old friends and relatives of King Roland – Torgold Grimm, Jaelyn Parran, Lady Rowena Thrace (King Roland's sister), and Sir Kanhelm Bell, respectively. Unbeknownst to the king, however, Lord Grimm, Lord Parran, and Lady Thrace have all decided that the queen is the better monarch. Should the court split, the powers of commerce, food, and treasury will all side with their queen. As a contingency against Sir Bell, Queen Morgandy has appointed a second head of military matters: Lady Trevah Stern, a champion jousting and keen strategist who has chafed against House Thrace's innate chauvinism since childhood. While Sir Bell and his Green Axe High Guard revel with their king in the

rapidly diminishing forests, a new elite force composed of men, and women (some of them likely from Wallend), gathers and trains near the seat of government.

Two unpredictable forces hide in the periphery of this potential war: Lord High Captain Kennald Leodren, master of Thrace's river powers; and Lord Browd Getterfeld, King Roland's personal treasurer and the keeper of a rumored shadow treasury. Both of them are old hunt-companions of their king – and neither man is stupid. If civil war erupts, their potential loyalties are unknown and could tip the scales either way.

Courtiers: Despite their obvious skill, the Green Axe Brotherhood has been declining for decades. Once a wise and formidable contingent of foresters, it has grown swollen, decadent, and sometimes brutal with power. This problem dates to King Roland's grandfather, King Oswald, who relaxed the rigid standards of the Brotherhood and tripled the size of its ranks. By the time young Roland joined the Green Axes, wood wisdom had given way to rank commerce, hearty carousing, and heady pride. These men are the single largest reason for the recent deforestation of Thrace's lands – a fact the king, who's still a Green Axe himself, refuses to see. Despite their decline, however, these men retain considerable skill and political power. Now counting over 1,500 Axes in their company, they're the strongest battle force in Thrace. Sir Bell's High Guard – 100 heavily-armored loyal champions of the king – provides the cutting edge of the Axe. Anyone who wants to take power from their King must kill them all first.

'Dulling the Axe' may be the fond, if secret, desire of Lady Stern. Quietly assembling an elite force called the Green Blades (unofficially known as the Queen's Wolves) she has raised more than 1,000 skilled warriors in defense of the realm. Like the Axes, these fighters are masters of forestry; unlike the Axes, the Blades enjoy the favor of the common folk, and have trained in quick-skirmish fighting. In battle, the Blades use wolf pack tactics, wearing opponents down and then cutting them to bits. Although the Axes and their king know that the Blades exist, no one but Queen Morgandy, Lady Stern, and a handful of trusted advisors recognizes just how large and formidable that force has become.

Underlings: As befits a rural kingdom, the twin courts of House Thrace have small, hard-working staffs. As a rule, these servants are well-versed in agriculture, herbal medicines, hunting, and weather-watching. Even the chambermaids could show the average Caladonian wise-woman a few new tricks! In general, these underlings are quiet, humble, soft-spoken, and polite. Whatever intrigues may boil beneath its surface, a visitor to House Thrace beholds a land of peace and plenty.

House Vesper: The Open Scroll

Seat of Power: Setfold, Caladon Falls (while House Vesper holds the High King's Throne).

Trade: Farming, knowledge, magic, and the arts.

Steel alone cannot rule a land. When the clash of arms fades, or drowns out common sense, a knowledgeable mind must guide the throne. While other Houses boast of beauty or strength, House Vesper trades in knowledge. That power, in turn, has granted Caladon's throne to Vesper monarchs more often than it has to any other house.

Brogan Vesper was a fisherman with grand dreams. Born in a remote village along the coast near what would later be called Montismare, the future King Vesper grasped and chewed on any bit of knowledge he could find. When Thunderspeak Marron raised his war-axe, Vesper stood close at hand. The young man's sharp wits complemented Thunderspeak's steel; when the Seven Houses won their thrones, King Marron granted the coastal plains of Caladon to his most trusted advisor, Lord Brogan Vesper I.

At first, the large land grant seemed like a poor gift for such service. Unlike the romantic peaks of Laneer or the lush forests of Wallend, the endless flatlands and coasts of Vesper appeared fallow. For King Vesper, though, they embodied opportunity. Within ten years, the seacoasts bustled with fishing towns and trade ports, while the fertile lowlands rippled with crops. A canny head for business gave king Vesper a vast fortune; he, in turn, spent much of it acquiring archives and founding universities. His patronage attracted eager minds from all over Caladon and from the Imperium as well. In the years since then, House Vesper has borne the torch of knowledge and enlightenment.

Not all scholarship is mundane. These universities and their surrounding towns soon blossomed into Caldon's largest population of wizards, witches, and occult sages. In return for this rich environment, these mystics lent service to the crown. From scrying to fertility arts, weathercraft to war-magic, House Vesper has reaped the favor of its mystic practitioners. Bountiful crops and coastal harvests keep Vesper's people prosperous; shadow spells and battlefield infernos have defended the kingdom. True, the occasional mad wizard, or occult 'accident', balances the scales somewhat. Vesper has a dark reputation, and although most Vesperian rulers keep their more, extreme, subjects in line, the stigma is sometimes earned.

Despite various scandals, scares, and rampaging monstrosities (not to mention a handful of horrific battles over the years), the Kings' Council has appointed four Vesper monarchs to the High Throne. Among the other six houses, only Marron and Killian come close to matching them. Vesper monarchs tend to live longer than other High Kings too; whether this trend comes from magic, wisdom, or judicious applications of both remains a point of debate. Whatever the reason, Caladon prospers under Vesperian rulership. Mandatory schooling has made even the peasantry literate and conversant with basic math and politics. Overall, the people of Vesper are the most educated in Caladon. The land itself might not seem glamorous, but it's hard to argue with history!

As the current King, High King Hulson's father, King Traegaren Vesper, nears the end of his life and reign, politicking rumbles through the courts of Caladon. Although his early years seemed prosperous, the King's luster has tarnished with age. Doubters murmur that the King has lost his touch... and perhaps his power as well. Though King Vesper still retains his crown, potential replacements have been discussed...

Beyond the deceptively rural farms and fishing villages across Vesper, the cities and universities reveal the splendor of Vesper's monarchy. Grand towers, arched vaults, stunning temples, and gargoyle-studded walls reflect the kingdom's mystic tenor. No other realm, save the High King's lands, match Vesper's veneration of Trinity, and only Sumner and the High Court can best it in beauty. Even the most humble villages seem luxurious by peasant standards, boasting sturdy stone cottages with several rooms and at least one bookcase. The kingdom's near-universal literacy – a novelty in the lands beyond Vesper – gives its subjects a clever, inquisitive air; this curiosity, in turn, has granted the people an unusually high degree of practical knowledge. Vesperian medicine, carpentry, agriculture, and architecture are among the finest in this world. The average commoner may converse knowledgeably about history, politics, literature, or more esoteric matters. The kingdom's truly educated citizens can debate almost any subject with some degree of understanding.

Sometimes, though, too much knowledge can be... unfortunate. Vesper's cities teem with tricksters, seducers, fortune-tellers and treasure-seekers. Some are genuine, most are not, and the moment of truth might involve a blast of fire ripping from a madman's fingertips. In Sethold, where the majority of Vesper's common-trade books are produced, the marketplace contains more bookshops and vagabond scroll-traders than the rest of Caladon put together. Shadowy networks of would-be mages web across Vesper's flatlands; often, such groups do

nothing more sinister than discuss herbalogy and scheme to wither one another's crops. Every so often, though, a man or woman with terminal boredom, a blood-cult, or a grudge uncovers a truly dangerous secret. At such times, the fields may burn with eldritch fires and children go missing in the night.

To counter such extremes, House Vesper fields three elite societies: the Shield (a potent cadre of paladins), the Ember (a renegade-hunting sect of the wizards guild) and the Eye (a loyal sect of spies, specializing in stealth, disguise, and misdirection). Generally, the Eye watches over the kingdom and its people; if trouble appears, an Eye scout calls for the Ember, the Shield, or – in many cases – both. Like wolves, these agents harry their prey, stalking, biting, and chasing the target until he stumbles and they pounce. Usually, a single member of each guild coordinates efforts with the other two; dangerous threats merit 6, 9, or 15 agents, dispatched in equal numbers from each guild. And, while a typical offender gets off with a warning, a beating, and perhaps a brand, serious disruptions the common good are slaughtered, tortured, or burned alive in public as examples of knowledge gone too far.

Inner Court: The king is old, the queen's long dead, and a regent, Lord Vayland Callion Vesper, the King's half-brother, sits upon this kingdom's throne. As King Traegaren Vesper fades toward dotage, a cache of lords maneuver for prominence. Like Laneer and Marron, Vesper's throne is granted by merit, not birth. And with one exception, the royal family is exceedingly bright, educated, and astute. The favored would-be monarch, Princess Shaelyn Vesper the Just, has surrounded herself with a ring of bright minds and sharp swords. As long as her father lives, Princess Shaelyn trains for governance at the side of Lord Vayland; until then, though, she might fall from favor and be replaced by any of six siblings, except, of course, for Prince Cayleb, called 'the Dullard' when he's far out of hearing range, who is far too selfish, lazy, and ignorant to hold Vesper's crown by merit, though sadly, not too dull to try to take it by force.

Outer Court: Vesper's courts, universities and archives swell with servants, nobles and courtiers, sorted through a truly dizzying amount of titles and bureaucracy. When one takes into account the various ranks, titles, lodges, fellowships, networks, offices and functionaries, it's a wonder anything gets done at all. To a point, this is intentional; only a trained Vesperian courtier even half-understands the workings of her kingdom. This bureaucratic safeguard has worked remarkably well against outside spying and intrusion.

Courtiers: In this maze of functionaries, three fellowships stand out: the Shield, the Ember, and the Eye. Each composed, ideally, of 100 highly-trained and deeply-loyal agents, these groups safeguard the kingdom from renegade wizards, conspiratorial magicians, and mundane threats. Recent events have whittled the Shield down to 82 members, the Ember to 90, and the Eye to 63. Lord Vayland and Princess Shaelyn are working to restore these ranks, but the training is long and times grow hard. Although this state of affairs remains relatively hidden, Prince Cayleb knows far too much about it, and may, in fact, be part of the problem.

Underlings: As befits a large realm that nurtures high kings, Vesper boasts a vast array of servants, guards, courtly allies, and hangers-on. Almost to a man these underlings are smart, educated, and perceptive. Wise visitors to the realm don't underestimate these servants. The amounts of trivia one might produce, information one might convey, and trouble one might cause can be truly impressive.

House Wallend: Deep And Hungry Roots

Seat of Power: Baerwald.

Trade: Hunting, fishing, jewelry, and precious stones.

As a tall oak both shelters its surroundings and draws sustenance from them, so too does the Emerald Realm rise above the other kingdoms of Caladon, and run its roots beneath them. In the beginning, when Laeyn Wallend and her brother Rayne Wallend plied their bows and wiles in the service of Gavin Marron, their skills in the forest undid the enemy's forests. Laeyn died in the final battle for Caladonian independence, but her younger brother claimed the realm's thickest forest in her name. When he ascended the wildoak throne as King Rayne I, he laid down the Vastgreen Edict: in the names of Trinity, his sister, and the throne, the forests would stand virtually untouched. The people in their shadow must learn to live within the wood, not cut down the wilderness to suit their needs.

As the rest of Caladon – most notably their wood-hungry neighbor Thrace – consumes the realm's resources, Wallend remains stubbornly primal. Its buildings are fashioned from stone, mud, deadfall, and living trees, rising from the ground like parts of the forest or sinking into natural caves and hollows. Wood-witchery allows the kingdom's craft-folk to shape the landscape into habitable dwellings without killing the trees or bushes. This art gives Wallend an uncanny wild feel. With few

exceptions, the roads are dirt or smoothed stone; houses literally grow from trees, molded from their trunks or set between their branches; farms are few – the realm's people are hunters, fishers and gatherers, not tamers of the land or its creatures.

In every kingdom save Killian, Wallendians are considered barbaric. Their long hair, simple dress, plain speech, and rugged habits clash with the refined behavior of Sumner, Vesper, or Laneer. Of course, this often makes them unspeakably attractive, too; compared to the practiced manners of a Sumnerian page, a gruff Wallendian mercenary provides pleasingly vulgar contrast. The seeds of Wallend, it's said, grow deepest far from home – a polite way of saying that Wallendian bastards spread from one end of Caladon to the other! Both men and women of this realm tend to be hardy, rambunctious spirits, brash in their manner and free with their affections.

Visitors to this realm often find it a challenging place. Grass and moss grow freely indoors; breezes blow inside as well as out; many dwellings spread out between sturdy tree limbs, high in the air and reachable only through ladders, pulleys, ropes, or tree-climbing skills. Animals are just barely domesticated, and insects have free run of all but the sturdiest constructions. (Certain buildings, like food storage vaults, are sealed to keep out vermin, but such precautions are otherwise unusual.) The people share an earthy scent, rough clothes, and simple manners. The royal family holds respect through courage, toughness, and skill, not through high-blood privilege. House Wallend's courtiers and nobility can out-drink, out-dance, out-swear, and often out-fight most Caladonians without drawing a heavy breath. Killians usually enjoy Wallendian hospitality but other foreigners, when possible, avoid the place.

In return, most Wallendians regard the rest of Caladon, except Killian, with amused and curious contempt. This goes triple for their neighbors to the south; the tree-felling habits of Thrace strike Wallendians as stupid, lazy, and blasphemous. The rustic veneer of House Thrace annoys the folk of Wallend on sheer principle. Travelers from Wallend who visit that realm refer to its elite guard as 'the Tiny Axe Brotherhood' – an unsubtle jab at Thrace's overt masculinity. Even so, the queen of Thrace is Wallendian, so obvious hostilities have ceased, for now. If, and when, the queen and her king go to war, though, it's not difficult to see where the warriors of Wallend will march. Hundreds of them are already there.

Most Wallendians can fight, if only because they must survive a vaguely settled wilderness. Weaklings don't last long in this kingdom. The realm's pride and safety, however, rest on three elite orders: the Grimmwatch (heavily armored stag knights, named for their distinctive horned helms, who tend the borders, hunt monsters, and protect the royal court), the Nightfox (stealthy hunters, scouts, spies, and occasional assassins, who mind the forests and act, when need be, as a police force) and the Bright Thorn (archers, scouts, and wood-witches who watch Wallend from high in the trees). All three orders are masters of hunting, tracking, and stealth, trained in natural medicines and possessed of incredible endurance. Trespassers, like the Thracian woodsmen who occasionally cross the borders into Wallend, are warned simply and then, if necessary, dispatched.

This kingdom's current monarch is Queen Damiana Wallend, sister to Queen Morgandy Thrace, and one of the most capable rulers in Caladon. Not quite 50, Queen Damiana has a gentle strength and rich, quiet passions. Her court numbers two daughters, two consorts, a council, and a handful of cousins, but no sons. Barring an unlikely revolt, Wallend's next monarch will be a queen as well. And if Queen Damiana's plans hold true, that kingdom will be far larger by that time, too!

Like a tree, House Wallend sends its seeds and roots across the land. Wallendian ambassadors watch the other courts; Wallendian children people Caladon; Wallendian warriors act as scouts, archers, mercenaries, and thieves. If and when Queen Damiana or her descendants decide to draw upon these forces, Caladon itself may shake or, more likely, bloom.

Inner Court: Named for a healing herb that nurtures passion, Queen Damiana is a vital soul whose beauty has deepened with maturity. Her adult daughters – Princess Vicenya and Princess Jeslyn – remain unmarried but unconcerned about that status. Prince Edric 'Blackstag' Killian has become an unofficial consort to Jeslyn, but there has been no talk of formal marriage. Queen Damiana herself has two consorts as well – Lord Sorengard Bane of the Nightfox and Lady Stephalyn Finnighan of the Bright Thorn. These partners head the Wildoak Council, the advisory fellowship that comprises Wallend's Outer Court. Together, this royal family holds casual and somewhat aloof governance over Wallend and its various foreign 'interests' like the Queen's Wolves inside Thrace, loyal to Queen Morgandy.

Outer Court: The Wildoak Council includes 13 advisors, covering trade, treasury, fishing, hunting, harvests, defense, magic, health, diplomacy (and spying), revels, justice, scholarship, and (such as it exists in Wallend) industry. They meet in the Vastoak Palace, a gargantuan oak tree shaped into the center of Wallend's government in Baerwald Forest. This marvel reaches half-a-mile into the sky; its branches extend over a mile wide, and its chambers run deep into the earth, winding between roots to dark and humid depths. Despite this grand size, however, the Council keeps things simple. A small but skillful staff maintains the Palace, tending it more like gardeners than like courtiers.

Courtiers: Beyond the usual tenders, servants, visitors, and spies, the court of Wallend features a contingent of the kingdom's three elite warrior orders. Over 100 Grimmwatch (so named for the founder of their order, Lord Arik Grimm) patrol Vastoak and its grounds, resplendent in their horned and gnarled armor. A similar number of Brightwatch live amidst the branches; these agile foresters go barefoot for traction across the limbs,

and can leap, swing, and balance between trees far above the ground. Meanwhile, the Nightfox haunts the woods, striking down intruders with traps, arrows, and the occasional blade in the back. All three orders protect the kingdom as a whole, and accompany dignitaries to other kingdoms as well. Lady Stern, leader of the Thracian Queen's Wolves, is secretly a Grimmwatch Knight, and the Queen's Wolves under her command hail from these three orders, though they've sworn loyalty to Queen Morgandy of Thrace instead. If and when war breaks out, the forests of both kingdoms will run with blood. As things are, the peace between the Green Axe Brotherhood and those Wallendian orders is tenuous indeed.

Underlings: Humble and self-sufficient, Wallendian courtiers demand few servants, and treat those they have like companions, not slaves. Much like their nobility, these underlings can fight, gamble, dance, hunt, brawl, revel, and face ruin with a calm smile. Raised as they are in precarious circumstances, Wallend's people share a stoic reserve lit by brief flashes of fierce temperament.



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