

BIXBY'S WORLD ALMANAC

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Creator: Dominic Covey
Writer: Dominic Covey
Editor: Chris Davis
Interior Art: Dominic Covey
Layout: Chris Davis

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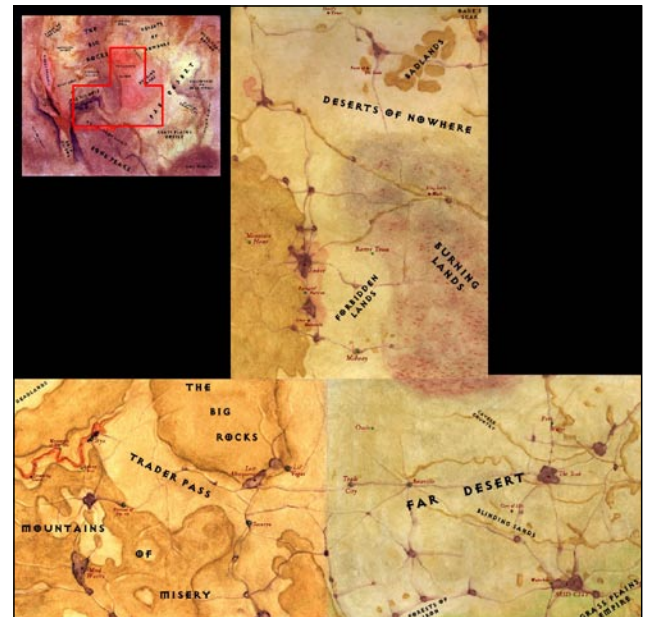
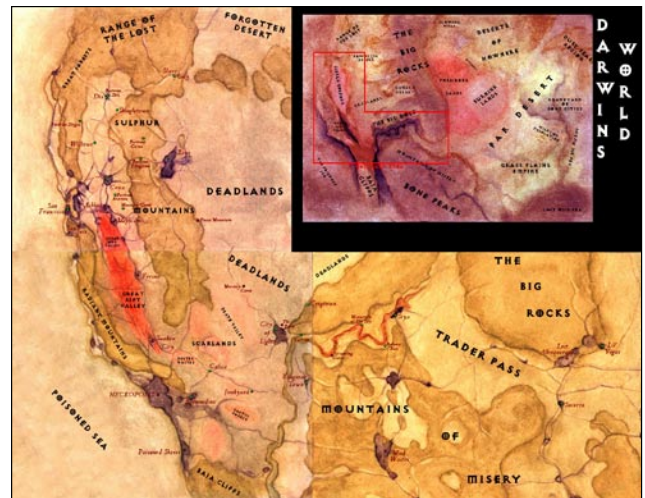
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The name's Bixby and I'm an explorer. Lookabout-man. Sandwalker. Got lots of names for folks like me, but to put it plain I'm just a fella walking the world and seeing all its got to give. I've seen a lot in my wanderings, met a lot of folks – good and bad – in all corners of the Twisted Earth. So let me tell you what I seen.

- From "Bixby's World Almanac", a post-Fall survival guide published in the Free City of Styx

BAJA CLIFFS

I learned from the Far Traders of Lost Albuquerque that south of the Poisoned Shores and well beyond the mountains of the Bone Desert, lies a distant and savage territory known as the Baja Cliffs. The Far Traders know about the tribals there with intimacy, for they alone are the few outsiders permitted to pass through the territory of the cannibalistic headhunting Hill Tribes without invoking their wrath.

The Far Traders tell of a nation of scattered and isolated tribal villages deep in the desert-like Baja Hills, that forage for their food from the desert; iguana, rats, and vipers provide their main sustenance. Some fresh water streams do exist high up in the mountains of the peninsula, and fish and mountain cuttlefish are caught when and if they can be found, and sold as luxuries to the passing traders.

In return, the Far Traders bring the normal fresh water, as well as trinkets and novelty items that the savages find astonishing. Things such as lighters are articles of worship (I can see how a hand-held source of quick and infinite fire would be amazing to such primitive folk), as are car horns, shiny hubcaps, and even bottlecaps.

Obviously the people of the Baja Mountains are frightfully xenophobic, and again only the gypsy-like Far Traders are given sanctuary from their attacks (being the sole bringers of trade, water, and other luxuries, one does not bite the hand that feeds, so

to speak). But anyone not bearing the colors of the Far Traders is fair game.

THE KNOWING

The Baja Cliffs comprise what was once Baja California, a region of California stretching down into Mexico. This is a rough and untamed region, its northern edge littered with ruins but its southern reaches lost to towering mountains and dry, lightly forested ravines, valleys, and peaks.

Among these peaks live isolated tribes of primitive folk, true tribals who live in small villages among caves, forests, and valleys where they can make the best use of easily defended natural features. These small tribes wage war against one another almost yearly, taking captives for wives and slaves or for future ransom (a large part of their "trade" is done, in fact, exchanging captives for needed goods).

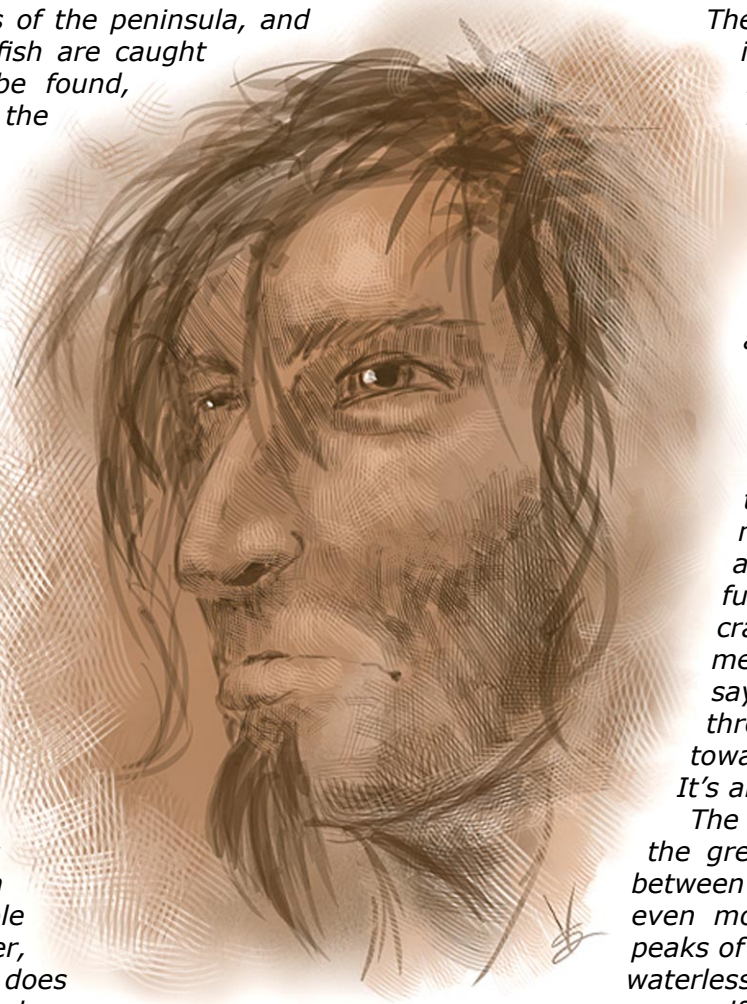
There is little of interest to be found by outsiders in the Baja region, but persistent tales of fresh water sources and even legendary "lost cities" sometimes tempt northerners to the locale – only to be driven off by the tenacious attacks, ambushes, and xenophobia of the mountain people.

BIG HOLE

They say there ain't nothing in the world quite like the Big Hole – and I believe it. I been there on my travels, dear reader, and believe you me it's one of the greatest wonders of this here Earth.

The Big Hole's been around since before the Ancients, and extends for maybe a hundred or so miles through the high mountains of the Big Rocks. It's a mighty canyon, deep as a mile in some parts and full of treacherous cliffs, craglands, and broken mesas, where once they say a river carved its way through the very rock itself towards the earth's bowels. It's an incredible sight!

The Big Hole presents one of the greatest obstacles to travel between the east and the west, even more so than the gigantic peaks of the Big Rocks. It's a dry, waterless region down in the great canyon gulf, and little if anything is



believed to live down there – 'cept of course maybe big ugly beasts like mutagons and certainly a terralops or two hiding in the shadows of the mighty canyon walls.

What's most remarkable, though, is the means merchants and the folk of the canyon region use to travel down the canyon. At each end, you see, the canyon tapers and rises abruptly, almost completely preventing descent into the canyon depths. Even if one could get a caravan down into the valley, navigating the rocks and dry river beds would be a nightmare for the several score miles required to come out the other end.

Regardless, the city of Styx (on one end of the canyon) and Kingman Town (on the other, some hundred or so miles distant) still manage to keep not only in contact, but a lively and active trade. How, you ask?

Airships. That's right, airships. Seems some genius in the city of Styx a long time ago came up with the know-how to make lighter-than-air craft. Big bladders of leather and canvas, filled with hot air or helium. The people of Styx use them to fly over the canyon, badlands, and mountains, avoiding the dangers that would otherwise threaten them below.

They load them with trade goods from east and west; water from secret reserves high in the mountains, salt sold by the Salt Merchants in Styx, and corium from as far west as the Necropolis. Hang-gliders escort them in as they approach the city, keeping a sharp eye out for the rare mutated flying beast that might attempt to prey on them in their foolishness.

I had the wonderful privilege of flying on one of these so-called "zeppelins" on my travels to the West. They are gigantic! Huge balloons, with enclosed structures dangling from the bottoms, filled with brimming cargo holds, colorful passengers from each end of the canyon, and brave men dangling off the sides by harnesses and arming giant crossbow mounts that scan the sky for attackers.

It may sound terrific and frightening - and it is! The world is so different from on high – seeing the great canyon far, far below is dizzying, but its somehow so strange and hypnotic. The pilot of one airship told me that the Ancients used to travel by air as easily as we do by land; it's hard to imagine!

If you ever plan on going west, to California or beyond, I suggest you pay the handsome fee and go by air rather than risk the mountain passes, or face the unknown dangers of the deep canyon.

THE KNOWING

The aptly named "Big Hole" is, of course, the Grand Canyon, a natural feature of the American Southwest that has been an awesome site for countless generations, even into the past of the Ancients. Created by the wandering of the Colorado River through soft stone cliffs, it has degenerated into a massive canyon system covering hundreds of

miles.

Following the Fall, and decades of mindless chaos, the Grand Canyon stood as a silent but impenetrable barrier between the radiated wastes of the west, and the wind-swept deserts of the east. The Big Rocks, which became towering obstacles to east-west movement and migrations due to their sheer height (and the habitation of weird mutant creatures fleeing the low lands), likewise turned into near-legendary barriers to the people on either side of their peaks.

This situation would not remain forever. With the birth of new, ruthless societies among the deserts, movement from east to west became a priority to expand trade, open new markets, seek new sources of goods, and force civilization onto those unwilling to buy and sell. Though efforts were made in the early years to secure old passes through the Big Rocks, these ultimately proved impossible or unreliable. Instead, an alternative means had to be devised to bridge the east-west barrier.

The solution was the Big Hole, which could be crossed by the use of airships moving on the winds produced by the trapped gales in the gorges and valleys. Inspired people living in a fledgling "city", soon known as Styx due to its unique flavor and atmosphere, devised these floating zeppelins to offer a service to those who sought to trade on both sides of the Big Rocks. And so the airships were born; the Big Hole is now a kind of "artery" for traveling airships moving east and west, safe from attack (unlike ground convoys) and piloted by the masterful pilots born and bred only in the Free City of Styx. The Cartel, Clean, and Salt Merchants alike pay to have these flying ships loaded with goods to continue trade in the east (or west).

Rumors have it that the canyon floor, long abandoned due to this new form of transportation, has become infested with all manner of bizarre mutant creatures and even savage tribals. Stories are even beginning to circulate that some of these creatures are beginning to develop wings and means of flying, hovering, or gliding to reach their otherwise evasive quarry, the airships of Styx.

Flying Creatures: While the depths of the Big Hole may indeed hide mutant dangers, the skies are also home to flying beasts from the mountains – winged things, giant mutant birds, and even rumored "bird-people".

AREAS OF INTEREST

The Big Hole is one of the most impressive and awe-inspiring sights of the Twisted Earth, a great barrier of insurmountable terrain running more than one hundred miles through the gap between the Big Rocks and the Mountains of Misery.

Botany Bay (population 200): At one point, a treacherous gorge leads up and up into the Big Rocks where a fortress of broken stone exists nestled among the stark naked cliffs. Known as

"Botany Bay", this is the secret citadel of a group of *pirates* who employ captured airships to raid other zeppelins in the Big Hole for transporting rare and precious goods. Armed with muskets and other weapons, these pirate zeppelins (emblazoned with the traditional skull and crossbones on the sides of their dilapidated gas-bags) race up to and overcome heavily-laden trade ships, with lightly-armed men swinging from ropes at almost a thousand feet above the canyon floor in daring boarding actions. Once captured, the crew and passengers of the surrendering ship are mercilessly thrown overboard to fall to their deaths.

The pirates of Botany Bay, said to be a collection of murderers, thieves, and outcasts expelled from Styx, have grown rich as a result of their continued activities, forcing the trade ships to begin arming themselves and keep vigil against unknown zeppelins in the gorges.

Kingman Town (Cartel; formerly Kingman, Arizona; population 5,000): Kingman Town is the ancestral home of the Cartel traders, a group of post-ruin profiteers and die-hard merchants who have risen from squalor to become one of the most successful trading associations in the wastes – east and west of the Big Rocks.

Kingman Town lies at the far end of the Big Hole, and gleams like a light at the end of the tunnel for those making the awesome voyage from Styx down the great canyon. A rolling ruin laid waste by time and the elements; it was built up from virtually nothing by the hard work and sweat of the Cartel and their slaves. Junkyards in the surrounding desert were scavenged to make walls and fortifications, and old oil fields in the city's vicinity were quickly brought online to begin production. It was this oil, ultimately, that would bring power and influence to the Cartel worldwide.

Kingman Town is now a great paradox – though a strong and powerful bastion of civilized trade and ideals, it is physically a gray and grotesque sight, a blemish upon the earth. Towering derricks and oil wells dot the landscape here, obscured only by the dust kicked up by motorized patrols crisscrossing the region to ward off invaders and scavengers wandering into their lands. Huge encampments sit in the shadow of these oilfields, where virtual hordes of starving and destitute survivors are drawn by the promise of food and purpose to join the Cartel armies. The town itself gleams with a thousand pinpoints of light fueled by a central oil power plant at the city's heart, but its streets and buildings are choked with soot and oily smoke, day and night. Every now and again the forest of derricks and oil towers surrounding the town erupt with short-lived gushers of flame that ascend into the air, lighting the gnarled city and its sky filled with hovering airships momentarily like flashes of hellish lightning.

Kingman Town is home to the largest Cartel presence on the Twisted Earth, of course, but also

has a "foreign quarter" where outside merchants may purchase charters to open business there. The Clean currently have the largest "guest" presence here; the Foundation has also purchased the rights to build a small way station in the city as a forward exploration base to scout out the Mountains of Misery. This place, named "Fortress Minauros", is little more than a fortified keep with two or three off-road vehicles and a garrison of ten paladins and a single master scribe (and assistants).

Monastery Of The Sky (Brotherhood Of Radiation; population 500): Jutting from the side of a mountain, overlooking the Big Hole from a tremendous height, is the remarkable Monastery of The Sky, carved completely from solid rock like a towering "lighthouse". Nearly eight stories tall, the monastery's walls fall straight down to the floor of the canyon almost one thousand feet below.

The monastery was originally built by a group of zealots from the Brotherhood of Radiation who were attempting to take an airship east to the lands of the Far Desert, to spread the message of their movement in that godless region. Unexpected problems with the ship forced the pilgrims to beach on this mountainside, where they languished for weeks – freezing and starving - before another ship arrived.

Strangely, the monks ultimately decided to instead remain at this isolated mountain spot, and build a monastery to mark the spot they had made a safe but perilous landing. Over time, the monastery was carved from the mountain rock by loving hands and hard work, and populated by growing numbers of contemplatives seeking to live in isolation from the world.

The monastery has its own zeppelin docks, where airships from Kingman Town or Styx can let off passengers and make contact with the Monastery inhabitants. Regular supply drops of food and building materials are performed monthly, paid for by the Brotherhood in Styx. A small settlement of outsiders has begun to grow on the gravel slopes around the monastery rock, mostly comprised of prospectors and adventurous people using the monastery as a base for exploring the Big Rocks on this side of the Big Hole. Those in the know quietly say that they are in fact outcasts and criminals exiled from Styx, left in the care of the monks here who feed them and keep them isolated from civilization.

Screaming Caves: Pilots of the Big Hole tell tales of a gorge branching off the main artery of the Big Hole, leading to mountainous ravines riddled with caves among the Mountains of Misery. These caves, it is said, moan and cry in response to the buffering winds, making audible echoes heard for miles among the bleak and barren peaks. The slopes leading to these caves are said to be littered with the ruins of airships lured by some "mysterious force", to be wrecked upon the cliff sides - killing crew and passengers alike. Some believe the destruction

of so many ships in this area is a result of some strange magic, while others believe it is simply due to the sudden strong winds that frequently rush down the great gorge.

Styx (formerly Marble Canyon Nuclear Power Station; population 10,000): "Styx" is a legend among the wastelands both east and west, a kind of great sprawling city where man and mutantkind melt together under the shadow of the city's trademark twin "Holy Towers" (cooling towers from the power plant the city was built around). It is here, under the majesty of the Big Rocks and at the mouth of the Big Hole, that this growing post-Fall metropolis has bloomed from the cracked desert into a flower jealously envied by people across the Twisted Earth.

Styx was forged with the blood, sweat, and tears of slaves, laborers, and merchants alike. Survivors of the nuclear holocaust came here long ago to shelter, and soon learned that the old power plant could be revived to minimal levels of operation to provide electricity. Merchants, seeking a way across the Big Hole, aided in founding the city's walls and providing muskets to fight off years of raider attacks.

Styx is a true "city", with nearly ten thousand people living among its crowded, squalid, and yet magnificent streets. Styx is filled with colorful bazaars, meandering slums, religious quarters dedicated to strange and bizarre post-holocaust sects, walled stockades maintained by the various trading clans for the storage of their goods, and the huge "palace" of Styx's kings.

Styx is a stubbornly independent city, whose people have refused all offers to join the various clans and pseudo-societies that now wage war over the surrounding lands. It is a self-proclaimed "free city" where peace is violently maintained, where freedom and sanctuary is given to all who can survive for a year and a day in the city. Traders of all clans, and even rival groups, have come to settle here and set up outposts and quarters, putting aside their feuds to trade in the City.

Among the major groups represented in Styx are the Cartel, Far Traders, CrystalTime and Clean Water Clans, Salt Merchants, Foundation, Rangers, and Brotherhood of Radiation. The mercantile associations occupy the largest quarter of the city, while the Foundation and Rangers have both been granted permission to build fortified stockades as supply points for their movements east and west, using the Big Hole for travel (the Foundation have "Fortress Nessus", the Rangers "Fort Vax"). The Brotherhood of Radiation was attracted long ago by stories of the city's two Holy Towers, which they purchased at great cost to serve as a second "Mecca" (second only to the City of Lights itself); as part of the deal, they continue to operate the plant and supply flickering electricity to the entire city.

Towering, skyscraping, rising into the sky like sentinels of some prehistoric time, the Big Rocks are the world's greatest barrier and largest mountain range. From the beyond the Deserts of Nowhere in the north, to the high-altitude narrows of Trader Pass in the south, the Big Rocks cover many, many dozens of miles with impassable peaks and cliff-ringed countryside that almost seems to whisper a haunting "allure" to those folks who see them, even from a great distance away.

Legends abound about the Big Rocks in almost every culture, community, and tribal camp in their shadow; legends that speak of lost cities, magical mountain springs, hidden valleys, and mountaintop aeries that permit views unimaginable to the ground-born eye of our kind.

THE KNOWING

The title, "Big Rocks", is obviously a barbarized name for the mighty Rocky Mountains, a sprawling chain of high peaks that have long been the backbone of the American continent. On the Twisted Earth, the Big Rocks region specifically covers large parts of what were once the states of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Idaho. These include the Deserts of Nowhere, Forbidden Lands, Far Desert, Big Hole country, Cursed Desert, and Forgotten Desert regions.

This region is so huge that to detail every lost city, forgotten valley, and mountain pass would be virtually impossible. Needless to say, the Big Rocks' old passes and trails have long been abandoned due to vast deterioration by unchecked elemental forces over the decades, and any ruins that may have once sparkled like jewels in its crown of peaks have long been forgotten. Now, the peaks only stand as a great "wall" separating the vast deserts of the east with the dusty deadlands of the west. Stories tell of forays by adventurous merchants into the border highlands of the Big Rocks that uncovered pure mountain streams viable as unending water sources, and the discovery of tribals and other primitive survivors among the towering mountains – none of which, sadly, appeared to have advanced beyond a shattered, primitive level.

Creatures: The Big Rocks are one of the last remaining havens of life on the Twisted Earth, from mountain birds to natural animals (such as deer, bear, cougar, and others) among the many valleys and slopes. Tribal peoples do live along the edges of the Big Rocks, but the higher elevations are largely desolate and cold. The Big Peaks are also home to numerous aerial creatures, mutant and otherwise, that can pose deadly threats to climbers and those unaccustomed to the dizzying heights.

AREAS OF INTEREST

The Big Rocks certainly contain an unknown number of lost cities, valleys carpeted in ashen ruins, and tribal settlements scattered across the peaks and valleys like pearls scattered from a broken chain. Only a handful are hinted at here.

Lost Albuquerque (Far Traders; formerly Albuquerque, New Mexico; population unknown): Just as Needle Rock was a landmark for pioneers of the Old West in their trek westwards, so too Lost Albuquerque is a welcome sight to desert caravans navigating Trader Pass. By night or by day, the distant subtle glow is like a lighthouse beacon reassuring that one is on the trade route west (or east) from Styx to Trade City.

Believed "lost" ("destroyed") due to some cataclysm even before the Fall, Lost Albuquerque lies like some mythical "El Dorado" at the southernmost tip of the Big Rocks near Trader Pass – within sight but unattainable. The presence of raiders in these hills have kept corium miners and prospectors from spending too much time in the hills searching this legendary ruin, though rumor has it the Far Traders may know ways into the city where even raiders never go.

In truth, the ruins of the city (or, to be accurate, the hill-caves nearby) are the ancestral *home* of the Far Traders, who maintain a sizable population of their women and children within sight of the glowing, fused wreckage of the ancient city. From here their nomadic camps and moving "cities" of tent and wagon originate, spreading out across the deserts to do trade far and wide.

Mountain Home (People Of Ultraviolet; formerly Kremmling, Colorado; population 3,000): The rather strange name of the mountain people who live here comes from the land's near-legendary founder, a fair and just mutant leader named King Felix "Ultraviolet". A survivor and hero of long-forgotten "mutant wars" in the east, Ultraviolet came to lead a band of followers and pilgrims across the Far Desert to a series of natural mountain valleys just fifty miles or so from the lost city of Ember (see the Forbidden Lands). With him he brought many talented men and women, and children as well, to populate his new "kingdom among the peaks". Modeling this new society after the legendary knights of the Round Table and the kingdom of Avalon (with himself as King Arthur), Ultraviolet set about creating a peaceful paradise where man and mutant could live in harmony, maintaining a peace far from the raiders and savages of the outside world.

King Ultraviolet's efforts have culminated in a small but stable community high in the Big Rocks, colored by dreamy ideals of the rule of law, peaceful intentions, and universal brotherhood. Served by a cadre of elite "knights" (who must each vow to

adhere to chivalric ideals and the judgment of his peers), and ruled by a benevolent king rumored to possess the ability to read minds, the self-styled "empire" is certainly unique to this isolated corner of the world.

"Mountain Home" is the much spoken-of capital of this kingdom, a colorful city allegedly built on a rocky promontory and covered by a segmented dome to protect from the elements and the odd airborne attack by aerial creatures. According to stories, Mountain Home was planned and built by a reactivated thinker robot brought along by King Ultraviolet in his people's exodus to the Big Rocks.

Salt Merchant Passes: The southern spur of the Big Rocks is often traveled by the Salt Merchants of Salt City, who know of obscure mountain roads and old passes that have escaped the devastation of time. They use these to transport their salt commodity from the Cursed Desert to distant places such as Styx (in the Big Hole region) and outposts in the Far Desert. These lost trails are marked by the Salt Merchants to warn of terrain dangers (sudden drops, unstable roads, rockslides, etc) as well as the locations of known or suspected predatory creatures and tribal raiders among the mountains.

BURNING LANDS

The Burning Desert is a stretch of terrible land skirting the central plains of our Dead Earth like a scorching belt of unforgiving Gehenna. I myself have traveled near these lands on my journeys along the caravans of the Water Merchants, and it was from these wise and honorable folk that I get most of what I know of this particular wasteland. Beware; the legends of this place seem to suggest a greater danger beyond mere heat.

According to the Water Merchants of the CrystalTime Clan (who are well-established in the town of Free Water and northwards towards distant False Watertown), the Burning Desert is an awful, forbidding place. It is a dry desert land of unrelenting sands and dunes, intermittent only once in perhaps a hundred miles with the remnants of dry river beds and old salty-bottomed dry lagoons. Rough terrain is uncommon here but not unknown; for the most part, the Water Merchants say, it is merely an expanse of dust that never ends.

The worst part of the Burning Desert is the macabre legends that surround it. According to the CrystalTime, no one enters the Burning Desert and emerges alive – or at least, not sane. Tales tell of an invisible heat that burns all who pass through this barren country, imparting them with an insatiable thirst that cannot be purged even with all the water in the world. Folk who make the mistake of wandering the desert either never come out alive – or come out raving mad, dying of thirst, the heat

so great their hair falls right out their heads.

Though I'm no expert on such things, sounds a great deal similar to what I learned as a boy was the Number One symptom of radiation overdose...

THE KNOWING

The truth about the Burning Lands (or "Burning Desert", as they are equally known) is a much more insidious and lethal danger, beyond the mere heat and lack of water that would otherwise classify it as deadly. No, the Burning Desert is cursed with a greater danger, the danger of *radiation*...

The Burning Desert covers what was once a sprawling area covering half of Kansas (in the southeast) and nearly all of what was once Nebraska (to the northwest). Towards the northwest it blurs into the flat and wind-swept nothingness of the Forbidden Lands, while far, far to the southeast it stretches on and into the northern reaches of the Grass Plains Empire. This entire region was once bespeckled with the secret, isolated nuclear missile silos of the US missile command – and was blasted into oblivion as a result.

Today, complete and utter devastation of this long-lost plains country has left it dead and empty. Sand has managed to collect here in vast waves seen rarely in the old Midwest, creating a dizzying and foreboding sea of sand as far as the eye can see.

This same devastation has also left the desert tainted through and through with radiation (anywhere from 100 to 500 Rads, with unpredictable hotspots of 2000 Rads or more in certain areas) – from the sand-covered soil to the swirling dust itself. Like the Purple Desert, far to the east, the Burning Lands are often the origin of the much-feared radiation storms that rage over lands to the north and south.

Hotspots: Here and there, concealed beneath the shifting sands, under mountains of dust and parched soil, are the remains of old nuclear missile installations and other sites bombarded heavily during the Fall. Gigantic craters have long filled with the waves of dust swirling through the region, and the wide-open spaces of these states have long been swept almost completely clear of their nuked cities and towns. Every now and again, a traveler (walking 10' to 50' above, on the tops of dunes) will actually be passing over such a site – and suffer the effects of the radiation permeating the area.

Such spots typically radiate anywhere from 500 to 5000 Rads – depending on the site's actual nature, and proximity to a sunken crater or long-buried silo. Those who wander the Burning Desert risk unwittingly stumbling through such areas, for there are no existing maps or charts pinpointing the most radiated areas for folks to navigate by. As such, they remain among the Burning Lands' greatest dangers.

Radiation Storms: Radiation storms are not uncommon, typically conjured up once or twice a month due to the unchecked winds blowing across

the blasted Midwest basin. Radiation storms here are merely mundane sandstorms (albeit particularly-violent ones), but the sand they sweep along with them is permeated with lethal radiation. As such, these storms not only cause blindness, disorientation, and a re-shaping of the landscape – but they also carry with them deadly doses of radiation (anywhere from 100 to 500 Rads per day of travel within the storm). Storms in the Burning Lands usually last one to two days at most.

Lifeless: In addition to other dangers, the very desolation of this place itself poses a hazard – no game, edible plant, or other creature of any kind is to be found among the radiant dunes of the Burning Lands. Those that are certainly ill fated travelers or migrating beasts that are slowly succumbing to radiation – and to consume them would be suicide in any event.

AREAS OF INTEREST

Despite being one of the most desolate places in all of the Twisted Earth, the land skirting the dust land, as well as pockets within, are of some interest to travelers nearing the region.

King Lee's Wall: An ancient legend circulating in the Burning Lands speaks of "King Lee's Wall", a wall of stone said to rise straight from the sand abruptly, only to end abruptly just a quarter of a mile or so away, diminishing quickly into the desert. The structure is known by only those of great age, who claim the wall was built by a mad Ancient (during their decadent reign) for no other purpose than to work his subjects to death.

Link Town (CrystalTime Water Clan; former megapolis of Lincoln/Omaha, Nebraska; population 800+): A belt of built-up, soot-blackened ruins stretch from the eastern edge of the Burning Lands, glowing against the weird crimson haze that often gleams off the distant sands, day and night. Here, ancient buildings towering into the sky have long decayed into skeletal stubs that grovel beneath this terrible glow, as if subservient to its power. Link Town is so-named not only due to its Ancient name, but also due to the fact that the CrystalTime Water Merchants use the city's easternmost ruins as a stopping point for their caravans skirting the Burning Desert, north and south. Though they maintain a sizable presence here (along with large numbers of roaming tribals and other nomadic peoples come to shelter in the ruins from the open desert, as well as do trade), they are at the mercy of the great sandstorms that sweep in from the Burning Lands every month or so, tearing through the unprotected streets with almost hurricane-force.

The CrystalTime have adapted to this regular (and deadly danger), by removing water and other community stocks underground and into the old sewers of Link Town, where they remain protected from the power and radiated dust of these storms.

Link Town is well known for its crowded underground marketplace, a gathering point for merchants seeking companion caravans through the wastes. The Water Merchants are also rumored to have uncovered and re-activated an old subterranean power plant, for they light a fraction of the City with beaming blue lights (old street lights, and some lighting on hastily-erected skeleton towers) so that caravans far away can navigate by the city's light, even in high winds and sandstorm conditions.

CURSED SEA

The Cursed Sea is a legendary place most folk in the region of the Ultraviolet Empire and even as far north as Barter Town have heard of. But in case the name isn't familiar, I'll spill what I've heard.

According to legend, the Cursed Sea was once, in fact, a great ocean that lay nestled among the Big Rocks, far north of the Big Hole, Styx, and the trade settlements of the south. Salt has been sought here for countless generations, for the Cursed Sea is perhaps the single greatest source of the stuff known to folk of the wasteland. Though many earlier expeditions and peoples tried to establish operations here to mine the salt, it was only upon the arrival of the Salt Merchants (their original clan name is apparently unknown) that a permanent settlement was erected.

The Cursed Desert, according to the tales, is a great dust bowl of salt desert – so salty, in fact, that the very sand gleams blindingly like cut glass during the day, and sparkles at night like a field of fallen stars for as far as the eye can see. Strange formations of salt crystal jut from the dust bed into the air like underwater formations once described by the Ancients, while elsewhere veritable dunes of salt stretch on forever.

More sinister tales surround the Cursed Sea as well. Though the hearty and secretive Salt Merchants have an established settlement at the southernmost reaches of the sea, the rest of the sea is unknown and desolate. Towards the center of the desert, the sand turns aquamarine in color, and the remnants of bones and animals can be found here, petrified, turned to a bright green stone through some "evil magic". Tales also tell of strange glowing creatures that walk the haunted salt sea at night, to be seen moving in the distance, but no such creature has ever been located or killed. If these are connected, none can be sure.

THE KNOWING

The area that is now known as the "Cursed Desert" was formerly the Great Salt Lake Desert (including Great Salt Lake, now long-gone), located among the elevated barrens of northwestern Utah. Circled by towering, wind-swept mountains, the naturally salt-rich basin was forgotten after the Fall for many

decades. Following the drastic climatic changes that swept the planet (affecting many lakes and inland seas), the Great Salt Lake too fell victim, its already salty water disappearing and leaving only a vast bed of sparkling mineral-enriched "dust" (actually crystallized salt), "icebergs" of salt, and weird, haunting formations of bizarre shape and colossal size littering the valley floor for miles in all directions.

Adding to the mystery of this desert is the actual existence of a region of a stranger, "bluer" color that stands out from the pale white expanses, somewhere to the north along what was once the northern shore of the Great Salt Lake. Here, natural mineral consumption of natural detritus and debris (including animal remains, but also loose-pored rocks and the like) has turned the ground and anything in contact with it, slowly, over years, into a turquoise-studded wasteland. Such objects, when found, are brittle and encrusted with the blue mineral – in effect, fossilized and given a coating of thin "stone". This is entirely a natural (albeit uncommon) phenomenon, but one which has lent a cursed air to the salt basin.

Despite the legends of "cursed magic", the people that are the Salt Merchants are no fools, and sometime in their history their wanderings brought them here – and here they have remained. The white, beaming landscape, though blinding under the sun, is continuously worked by these strange but industrious people for shiploads of salt, which they provide to distant cities (such as Styx) for the necessities of life.

Blinding: Workers and slaves of the Salt Merchants are given sun goggles while working the salt sea for any extended period of time. The unrelenting light of the Twisted Earth's sun here is magnified by the brilliance of its polished white "sand", crystallized salt, making it almost impossible to open one's eyes during the height of the day. Laborers working in the open-air salt mines typically begin to go blind after four or five months; after two years or so, their sight is completely gone forever. As such, great caution must be taken by guards, Salt Merchant overseers, etc when out in the desert.

Poisoned Ponds: Every now and again the blinding brightness of the Cursed Desert will be broken by black pools of water bubbling up from below the crusty surface of the land. Though the unknowing often rush forward for a drink at the sight of the unexpected find, Salt Merchants (and even their slaves) know better – these saline-rich pools are lethal if consumed. Though tempting, to drink means madness and certain death.

Lifeless: The Cursed Desert is almost completely lifeless – no natural animal life could possibly live here, the ground being so laden with saline minerals. No plants, herding animals, or other beasts are to be found by the explorer of this desolate region.

Salt Creatures: Some rumors abound of strange

burrowing “worms” and other creatures that attack animals and men wandering the sands. Tales tell how such creatures do not devour the flesh of their victims, but use some special ability to literally “drink” the salt from their bodies – a horrific process to witness indeed.

AREAS OF INTEREST

Despite being one of the most desolate places in all of the Twisted Earth, the land skirting the dustland, as well as pockets within, are of some interest to travelers nearing the region.

City Of The Dead (formerly Salt Lake City; population unknown): Infrequent rumors arise about this lost mountain stronghold of the Ancients, said to be populated only by the skeletons of the Ancients who died there during the Fall. According to some superstitious storytellers, these fleshless dead rise once a year to dance among the streets and beneath the ruins of gnarled skyscrapers and temples to lost gods. The truth, of course, cannot be known.

Salt City (Salt Merchants; population 3,000): “Salt City” is a legendary city few have seen, located over the Big Rocks and across the Deadlands at the base of a great mountainous range, sitting like a vigilant gateway to a dazzling sea of sparkling white sand beyond. What was once a camp for wandering nomads has, over the generations, become a sprawling, bustling city of semi-permanent tents and stucco fortifications and towers. It is the home of the near-mythical Salt Merchants, a people who religiously keep to themselves, only crossing the mountains to civilized lands to trade their most precious spice – salt.

Salt City is a “secret city”, so to speak, one that its inhabitants protectively keep from discovery. Though outside of their homeland the Merchants are relatively hospitable and honest folk, trading freely with all seeking their spice, those who seek to follow their caravans, seek out their source of salt, or otherwise intrude upon their worldwide monopoly are soon marked for death – a *brutal* death.

A favorite method of execution among the Salt Merchants is to leave a man out in the baking sun, slowly feeding him salt-laden water as his thirst grows until he dies an agonizing and delirious death.

GREAT RIFT VALLEY

The Great Rift Valley lies diagonally across the rough and abyssal territory of southern California. Tales tell how this land was, even in the time of the Ancients, a place of earthquakes and great catastrophes, and by the looks of it today it's no wonder.

The Great Rift Valley is a region riddled with mighty gorges, ravines, and cracks that stretch

from the desert plateau of Kingman Town in the southeast to the Frisco Bay area in the northwest part of the land. At its heart is a single continuous rift, a huge scar upon the land - its rocky, mesa-like cliffs falling anywhere from ten to almost fifty feet at various points along its miles-long length, sometimes even vanishing into the depths of the earth. The cliffs are notoriously unstable, the rift volcanic, and wanderers who've come too close have been said to sometimes fall to horrible deaths in burning lava below. Tremors are still reported to shake the land every few years or so; the glow of underground hotspots in the crack sometimes can be seen as far south as Calico.

The Great Rift represents a monumental barrier to the peoples of the Sierra Gehenna region, separating the lands of the civilized - the valley of the monastery-fortresses of the Foundation on one side, the desolate ruins of Bakersfield and the legendary mega-ruin of Necropolis on the other. Places like Kingman Town sit at strategic points along the Great Rift, where reliable passes down into the valley have been established. These mark important junctures on the trade routes that connect the lands of the east with the territories of the west.

The Great Rift, though largely a rocky dry desert, is not entirely empty. All manner of wildlife has come to populate this terrible region; I myself wandered this land a great deal during my service with the Foundation, and it ain't a safe, hospitable place. Not only the odd band of savage raiders (as well as slavers from up north come looking for captives), but also giant “mole rats”, huge mutated scorpions, and the odd aberration spawned by the radiated atmosphere pervading the belt of devastated cities that ring the valley.

If you ever go to California, you're sure to come to the Great Rift Valley at one point or another – one has to at least skirt it in order to get anywhere. If you ask me, stick to the established trade routes as much as possible. It's a harsh and dangerous place, the Rift Valley.

THE KNOWING

The Great Rift Valley was, of course, formed by the violent movement of the San Andreas Fault, triggered deliberately by the impact of ICBMs targeting the California fault line to cause an unprecedented catastrophic event. Clusters of powerful ground-burst weapons, combined with special nuclear “burrowing bombs”, hit with simultaneous precision all along San Andreas to cause a chain of eruptions, quakes, and massive tectonic movements that helped shake apart what was once California.

The sudden tectonic upheaval of the San Andreas Fault pushed the Pacific Coast Range westwards into the Pacific Ocean, slowly separating a part of the rugged dry terrain from the rest of mainland America in a matter of decades. The tremors and quakes that resulted from this unexpected cataclysm

where unheard of in magnitude and severity, leveling entire cities throughout the California landscape, even sucking those on the edge of the fault line down into the depths created below. A gradual widening occurred, ripping the earth apart and forcing the cold water of the Pacific to drain in from San Francisco Bay in the north. Such flooding helped to cool the subterranean magma rising from the sudden splitting of the earth, creating vast clouds of steam the length of California that served to block out the sun for nearly six months – as well as virtually kill all life, human and animal, along the broken seam (if not by sheer heat and suffocation, than by the after-effect of turning California into a wasteland with no growing vegetation whatsoever).

This was all part of the chaos of the final Fall, when bombs were falling all over the world, and thus the fault line eruptions were largely lost to the more direct impacts of ICBMs in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento, and nearly every major city on the West Coast. In a matter of hours, all human life here was virtually rubbed out of existence anyway.

Over time, however, the San Andreas continued to rumble and spread, and with the decades came to become what is now known as the Great Rift Valley – not exactly a true rift valley (such a feature would require millions of years of plate activity), but enough to be called a “tear”, created by the gradual movement of the Coast Range into the Pacific and the rising of lava from below to cool. This action has created a desolate “badlands” along the valley floor, which is now anywhere from one hundred yards to one mile in places, with broad collapsed regions several miles across in some rare spots. The entire region is dotted with ravines, gorges, and splits in the earth running roughly parallel to the San Andreas Fault. Each year the Rift Valley grows larger by a minuscule amount, but enough to trigger frequent tremors and quakes all across the region.

Quakes: The entire region is frequently affected by at least minor tremors that rumble throughout the Sierra Gehenna range to the coast of the Poisoned Sea. Most tremors are minor, but their unusual frequency (perhaps once or twice each year, regularly) speaks volumes of the continued instability of the San Andreas Fault. In mountainous areas, more violent quakes have the potential to wipe out entire communities in mudslides or avalanches; in the valleys, sandstorms have been known to be kicked up as a result of major quakes that sweep the desert in the wake of cataclysmic collapses and fires to cause further death and destruction.

Sandstorms: Sandstorms are not as frequent in the Rift Valley region as in other spots on the Twisted Earth, but earthquakes have been known to kick up storms lasting anywhere from ten to twenty hours.

Radiation: Large areas of the old California landscape were ravaged by the nuclear war, leaving

in some spots mile upon mile of radiated, glowing sands. Rad hotspots range from 100 to 500 Rads in such areas.

AREAS OF INTEREST

The region of the Rift Valley is filled with lost cities and ruins, as well as other physical oddities that stand as mute testament to the power and devastation of the Final War.

Bernardino (Cartel; formerly San Bernardino, California; population 800): The city of Bernardino was ravaged by food riots and panic during the last weeks prior to the Fall, and it shows clearly in the wrecked buildings, burned-out skyscrapers, and highways leading in and out cluttered with column upon column of old abandoned cars, trucks, and other vehicles left to rust and disintegrate under the ugly yellow sun.

Despite the eerie appearance of this lost ruin and the horrific sight of its crowded, congested roads, Bernardino has become a major outpost of the Cartel trade movement in recent years. Based east in Kingman Town, the Cartel first came here seeking to establish control of the fabled Necropolis – only to abandon these efforts after only a few months to concentrate on a “sure bet” – the holding of the Bernardino ruins. Since then Bernardino has become a growing base for the Cartel in southern California.

In addition to the Cartel, all major merchants from as far north as the Crux have a presence here – mostly a detachment of mercs, one or two large warehouses for storing trade goods from Kingman Town and the east, and maybe even their own walled compound. The Cartel don’t take too kindly to those who won’t contribute, though, and they’ve recently begun levying a heavy tariff on lone wanderers and scavengers – in an effort to keep out the small-fries that waste their time with junk trinkets or who are prone to theft and petty crimes.

It’s not a friendly place, but it’s a bustling place, and where there’s money to be made there’s sure to follow civilization.

Cactus Forest: Skirting the Cartel trade routes of the south is the so-called “Cactus Forest”, a dry wasteland of wind-blown brown dirt, bare animal bones jutting from the earth, and a maze of small, large, and gigantic mutant cacti rising into the sky. A virtual forest of prickly vegetation covers this wasteland, haven to all kinds of life from the deserts outside. Shade, secret underground pockets of water, and other animal life make it ideal for the perpetuation of this small enclave of nature among the sands.

Tribals from the desert come to the forest frequently to hunt birds and Snuffle Hogs dwelling among the taller cactus fronds, and forage for fruit, moisture-rich leaves, and berries. Cacti milk is fermented and sold by the poor tribals to passing Cartel caravans, which has become popular for its

unique flavor and texture as far east as Socorro.

Calico (Cartel; formerly Barstow, California; population 150): The outpost-town of Calico rises from abandoned, burned-out ruins at the edge of a frontier of radiated deserts and wasteland. A Cartel fort along the trade routes, Calico is the last settled area for a long, long time north and east.

The Cartel came to build up these ruins to provide security to trade caravans moving to the Rift Valley region from the Foundation lands of the north, as well as the City of Lights and other settlements in the Deadlands. It is a major arterial nexus connecting Bernardino and Junkyard as well, making it an important site for trade in the area.

In addition to a small Cartel force garrisoning the fort, as well as a sizable civilian population (mostly laborers bonded to the Cartel, but also independent scavengers come to sell goods in the market), the Foundation maintains a presence here in a part of town given them by the Cartel for their own purposes. Surrounded by walls and defended by a small force of their mysterious paladins, the Foundation provides much-desired additional security to the Cartel here – no one will attack Calico as long as they remain.

Rumors are already beginning to spread, however, as to why the Foundation has come so far south from the Sierra Gehenna region to set up an outpost here, but some speculate they are only here due to Calico's proximity to numerous sites of interest to the Foundation – including the Melted Wastes, the Scarlands, and Junkyard (which, some say, the Foundation is actually spying on for a planned raid sometime in the future).

Death Valley: History has blazed a terrible reputation of this lost valley, where it is said no life can live for long in its dry, unforgiving expanse. Desolate and dry, with air thick with dust and mile upon mile of no plant or animal life, it is said the temperatures here rise so high during the summer that the sands grow so hot that men will burn both mind and body in a matter of hours.

Tribals from the surrounding regions are said to sometimes send potential chiefs to the valley as rites of passage, where they must suffer and survive on willpower alone for at least a week to prove themselves worthy.

Junkyard (formerly Twentynine Palms MC Base; population 250): The town of Junkyard lies north of the Cactus Forest among blowing sandy wastes that stretch on from horizon to horizon. Built from the ruins of an abandoned Marine base deserted during the Final War, Junkyard is just that – a graveyard of outdated military vehicles, equipment, and discarded wrecks. When the Fall came, there was no time to reactivate much of this old junk for service, and the base was abandoned and sealed-up with automated traps to last decades. And so it stood, lost and forgotten in the wastes, until about thirty years ago.

Refugees from the desert were the first to discover the old Marine base – standing untouched, dusted with sand from the decades of neglect, like a metal and stone oasis rising from the desert. Desperate for food, water, and shelter from the mutant raiders pursuing them and the harsh elements, the group decided to brave the unknown and attempt to penetrate the base. Though several of the desperate scavengers died of booby traps and automated defenses, at long last they made it to the secret command bunker of the base where they proceeded to turn the defenses around to guard their new home against future attacks.

Since that time Junkyard has become a trade city of sorts in the region, lying along the routes to the Foundation strongholds of the Sierra Gehenna and the roads to the City of Lights in the Deadlands. Built almost entirely of junked military equipment, the city is a growing metropolis of rusted, decayed beauty that stands in stark contrast to the world outside. Some power has been devised within the city to power old watchtowers and searchlights to guard the approaches of the base, and fences of barbed wire, burned-out cars, sandbags, and even old crates/concrete road blocks surround the place in an improved perimeter.

Beyond these walls a virtual city has been set up in the base's heart, where traders and scavengers gather to do trade, day and night – in Junkyard, business *never* stops. Locals in town sell off minor military items (old web gear, helmets, body armor, and sometimes arms and munitions) frequently in exchange for water, foodstuffs, and other goods not readily available among the junk heaps. Junkyard also possesses a small fleet of refurbished jeeps and cars, and is even guarded by immobilized tanks built up into pillboxes to watch over its vulnerable points.

Junkyard is a sprawling place, and rumor has it the locals have only revealed part of the city's glory to traders visiting its bazaars. It is said that beyond lie places the local folk forbid others to go, but where it is almost certain other, rarer, and more powerful artifacts of military power lie dormant in warehouses, junk piles, and old refuse pits.

Leaning City Of Fresno (formerly Fresno, California; population 120): Located north along the trade routes from the south towards the Sierra Gehenna settlements, the so-called "Leaning City" hangs precariously along a dramatic slope slipping with each passing year into the Great Rift Valley. Here the old city ruins have largely collapsed leaving only scattered rubble buried in piled-up sands, but old signposts, telephone poles, and monorail pilons rise above the dusty slope at bizarre angles into the sky. Odd campfires can be seen burning in the charcoal-black rubble, and the sounds of wind chimes and barking animals echo out even as far as the trade route trails.

Fresno was one of several California cities

destroyed by the upset of the San Andreas Fault, but unlike Bakersfield, it was not swallowed "whole" by the formation of the rift. Instead, Fresno perched precariously on its lip, slowly slipping with passing time into the bowels of this volcanic abyss.

Abandoned to its fate by the merchants of the region due to the inherent dangers of living there, Fresno has nonetheless come to be inhabited over the years by a fluctuating population of refugees and the miserable dispossessed. With nowhere else to go, the roving scavengers have come to make the dilapidated ruins and their slipping slopes as their home, dwelling among the collapsed buildings or in makeshift camps amid the jungle of rubble. Campfires and small groups of grubby survivors can often be seen from the trade route higher up along the Rift's edge.

In recent years traders have ventured into Fresno's ruins to potentially trade with the refugees there, hoping for lost finds from the rubble, only to discover that plague is prevalent in a large portion of the population. Since that time traders have begun moving quickly past the Leaning City instead of stopping and camping, even at night or in the face of sandstorms. Some caravans have even contemplated abandoning the trails north unless someone does something about the problem.

Melted Wastes (formerly Edwards AFB): The Melted Wastes were once one of the Ancients' greatest military bases; where gigantic birds of steel rose into the sky to deliver fiery arrows down upon the enemy half a world away. Entire fleets of these birds, numbering into the hundreds, rose from here and never again returned, marking the end of mankind.

This great place was destroyed during the Fall, blasted from the map by nuclear strikes that still cause the surrounding deserts to glow with a hellish radiance of light, day and night. All animal life in the region ceased to exist long ago, leaving the borders scattered with bones that come and go with the rising and ebbing of the desert sands. Towards the heart of the twenty miles or so of wasteland, just north of the fabled Necropolis and the San Gabriel Mountains, it is said the very sands were fused by the tremendous heat, filling the huge bomb craters with "glass" that gleams with blinding light on clear days – visible as pinpoint flashes from miles away.

Necropolis (formerly Los Angeles, California; population unknown): The sprawling ruins of old Los Angeles, known by the legendary title of the "Necropolis" ("City of The Dead"), lie like a forgotten ash-heap on the far side of the San Gabriel Mountains, sandwiched between these formidable peaks and the shores of the awful black waters of the Poisoned Sea. Legends throughout the history of the Twisted Earth speak of this dreadful, massive metropolis, its maze of ash-covered streets, towering pinnacles and spires, and abundant life living among its lost streets and valleys.

Seeking to explore these largest of city ruins, various groups (including the Cartel and Foundation) have throughout the past attempted to gain some kind of foothold in the Necropolis, to no avail. The mutant creatures dwelling there congregate in huge packs, splitting vast neighborhoods amongst their various clans and peoples – wild men, too, infest the inner regions of the city in great numbers.

According to Foundation reports, the Necropolis is dominated by a number of powerful groups, including a race of warlike mutants called the "Broken Ones" (who have turned many of the ancient coliseums into bloody arenas for the cruel entertainment of their savage people), "serpent people" among the dead skyscrapers of the city's heart, and outlying regions infested with giant mutant bugs and their towering hills of mucus and stone, built from rubble scavenged from the ruins and the body parts of the communities they have wiped out in the path of their expansion. It is even said that robots freely walk sections of the streets, futilely attempting to reconquer the city in the name of their ancient masters who died so long ago.

Poisoned Shores (formerly San Diego, California): Once a major naval base of the Ancients for operations in the Poisoned Sea, this great city was apparently targeted en masse by weapons of the Great Enemy during the Fall. Crushed almost to dust by numerous catering blasts, the city and its millions of inhabitants were wiped from the planet in a matter of minutes, leaving only glowing red clouds to blow in from the shore to devastate miles of populated suburbs to the east.

Now the Poisoned Shores are shunned as one of many major radiated sites along the coastal waters – in this case, nearly twenty miles north and south where old blasted ruins run right up to the waters. At the city's old heart, it is said that huge towers of steel (former dockyards) rise right from the waters like drowned skeletal giants, along with the half-exposed grounded remains of rusted and burned-out transports and warships.

Tales say that the waters off of Poisoned Shores glow once the sun sets, revealing the presence of unexploded but leaking nuclear warheads still submerged off the coast and throughout the city's harbor.

Radiant Mountains: On the far side of the Great Rift Valley tower the so-called "Radiant Mountains", formerly the Pacific Coast Range of old California. Though only fifty miles or so away, the presence of the Valley between the eastern wasteland and the mountains seem to make them appear a world away. Civilization has long left the Radiant Mountains and the western side of the Rift, and only obscure legends remain of this distant coastal range.

The mountains get their name from the glowing spots seen at twilight through dawn along the entire western horizon – glows which range in color from crimson to greenish-yellow, peeking out from

just behind the mountains from old coastal sites bombarded during the Fall. These sites include Los Alamos, Vandenburg Air Force Base (a major missile site), Camp Roberts and Hunter Liggett Military Reservations, and other, forgotten coastal cities and installations. Lost to time and the slow growth of the Rift Valley, whatever these blasted sites may now contain can only be speculated at. Certainly no one makes the journey across the Rift and through the Radiant Mountains to find out.

Scarlands: The terrain of this bleak region is near legendary among the wastelands of old California. From horizon to horizon, the flat deserts are swept by raging winds driven by burning gales circulating at the Scarlands' heart. Here, the once-level ground has become a virtual badlands of craters of colossal size and seemingly random placement, as if the entire stretch of desert was saturated during the Fall for some unknown reason. Now there is nothing but flattened wastes as far as the eye can see, broken only now and again by the subtlest remnants of buildings separated in places by up to twenty miles distance.

The Scarlands were once used by the Ancients to test their most advanced weapons and technologies, centered around the Fort Irwin military reservation. During the Fall, it was once of the first places to be struck by nuclear strikes, reducing the hundred miles or so of research areas to glowing, radiated rubble.

Even to this day, the Scarlands are shunned by inhabitants of the region, due to the prevalence of Red Fever in the sands and ruins there. Radiation levels rarely top 500 Rads in the open country, but certain hotspots do exist around telltale craters where Rad levels skyrocket to over 3000 Rads.

Sunken City (formerly Bakersfield, California): The legendary "Sunken City" can be seen by travelers along the Cartel routes from far away, resting at the bottom of the Great Rift Valley like a cemetery of broken headstones and collapsed skyscrapers. The rift swallowed up the city when it first opened during the Fall, sucked down to the valley bed below in a matter of violent hours. They say the end for the millions living there was like the fall of Pompeii, happening so quickly that no one within was able to escape alive.

Though flattened ruins of the old city surround the Rift crack here, the Sunken City's heart sits at the bottom of a ravine branch nearly a mile wide, along the eastern side of the valley, where jagged cliffs rise straight up for nearly 100 or so feet – the deepest point of the fault line. It is this that mainly keeps travelers and scavengers from descending into the tempting ruins to scavenge, for there has never been found a safe way down to the valley floor where the Sunken City lies.

Now and again, traders coming up and down the trails will sometimes speak of strange noises echoing from the sunken ruins in the valley below,

as well as sightings of strange, short-lived lights among the darkened ruins.

DEADLANDS

The Deadlands are a region of desert and dry mountains that occupy the land north of the great desert oasis of Vegas (the so-called "City Of Lights") and the territory of the near-legendary Rangers. Rugged, unpredictable, and deadly in their dryness and heat, travelers (such as the trail-borne nomads) also tell of glowing horizons at night, strange reddish aurora, and weird mutant creatures that wander out of its heart to terrorize the settlements of the desert.

There is another, rather curious point I'd like to relate here. Legends surviving from my own people speak of a place, near the "Glimmering Oasis", which once served as the testing-grounds for the awesome Fire Arrows of the Ancients. Called "nuclear bombs", these weapons are the source of what today we know as radiation. Perhaps the "Glimmering Oasis" in fact refers to Vegas, and thus the Deadlands are so-called because only the most horrendously mutated life can thrive there (the radiation being so strong from experiments of the Ancients in the vicinity).

Whatever the reason for its terrible life, the Deadlands are far from dead, despite its name. All manner of mutant beasts originate from this hot-bed of new life. Water in the Deadlands is abysmally scarce, and legends tell of false waterholes filled with poisoned, radiated liquid.

THE KNOWING

The Deadlands, despite their name, are among the most thriving regions of mutant and animal life on the Twisted Earth – and yet one of the oldest deserts as well, having been a basin of dust and barren rock since well before the Fall of the Ancients themselves.

The Deadlands cover all of what was once Nevada, and into southwest Utah. Here, sand is the soil, and broken mesas the thriving life that grows from it. In the southern expanses the land is generally level, however, a sprawling ocean of hard-packed sand that goes on for as far as the eye can see, over which a semi-permanent sky filled with suspended dust glows orange or hellish red by the varying light of the rising or setting sun. The odd settlement or two of humanoid habitation rises from this desolate, oppressive landscape here and there, often as not vanishing in a few years due to abandonment or the depavations of another group from the Deadlands.

In the north, across a barren, inhospitable belt of desert, the land is broken by the rude upshot of table- and mushroom-like mesas and mountains of bare-naked rock, looking like petrified sentries from some heroic past. Here the sedimentary fog of the

sky finds a barrier, and sandstorms rage angrily against their stoic faces almost year-round.

Sandstorms: Sandstorms are frequent in the Deadlands, especially in the north but sometimes ranging as far south as the fabled City of Lights itself. Such storms are strong and violent, but often short-lived (lasting a day or so at most), though their effects can be devastation on unprepared communities and nomadic camps – leveling them in a single night’s time, as well as disorienting travelers in the region, re-shaping the dunes and covering old landmarks with equal ease.

Radiated Areas: The entire western edge of the Deadlands are known widely for their inhospitable nature – not due to mutant creatures (prevalent everywhere else in the region), but due to the glowing sands which are the tell-tale sign of radiation (Rads range in the 200-500 area, with spikes in old detonation sites reaching upwards of 800 or more).

Stretching as far south as what was once Death Valley, to north past the outskirts of Reno, this huge region lends an eerie green-yellow glow to the entire western horizon once the sun dips low and its own radiance is dispelled from the world. In this twisted, nightmare light, beasts from this distant part of the desert emerge and begin their infestation of the eastern country, moving ever closer in growing numbers towards the odd settlement and community among the sands.

Creatures: All manner of creatures exist as a result of the radiated hotspots of the Deadlands, dwelling among the mesa country or skittering in packs over the dry open expanses of the south desert. In the highlands, where bizarre rock outcroppings and overhangs create deepening shadows, terrolopsi are known to hunt for prey, prey that includes proxx beasts wandering north from the gloom-lit deserts. Flying creatures are believed to also reside among the tall mesas, but the rumors are unsubstantiated.

In the rest of the Deadlands, where only rolling sands are likely to meet the eye, mutant raider bands are actually quite common – though generally small (those with any power typically set up settlements of a kind, close to other areas where there are people to raid) – as are roving packs of mutant coyotes, wolves, and (in abundance) wild dogs.

AREAS OF INTEREST

The Deadlands are home to numerous fledgling communities, and at least one major city.

City Of Lights (Brotherhood of Radiation; formerly Las Vegas, Nevada; population 8,000+): Legends of this fantastic city are known far and wide, carried on the awed lips of visitors and merchants who have seen the city either up close or from afar, silhouetted against the gloomy miasmal sand-sky by day, or the dim western glow by night. Kept lit by the bizarre inhabitants of the city, the fabled “Holy City” literally glows like an

oasis of glittering jewels in the otherwise desolate and hideous ocean of choking dust.

The City of Lights is the home of the widespread Brotherhood of Radiation, a cult of holistic new-world mutants who have risen from humble beginnings as refugees to command the entire city – and even begun to spread out along the caravan routes east and west like mind-numbing poppy seeds carried on the wind. Bringing with them a pacifist vision of a united future for all mutantkind, in the ashes of the Ancients, they are a people that believe the Fall was a punishment invoked on man, and that they, mutantkind, have been given a chance to learn from this and set up a new civilization of peace and harmony.

The City of Lights is a semi-public citadel, open to pilgrims from distant lands and visitors who seek to know more about the Brotherhood and its message for the world. The City itself is a miracle of preservation – the city, though still largely empty in many districts, appears to have been spared the devastation of the nuclear war. The Brothers appear to have somehow managed to turn the lights back on in ol’ Vegas, bringing a marvelous aura of color to its dusty skyline. The signs and storefronts of ancient casinos, clubs, bars, and strip joints glitter, sparkle, and hum in the city’s maze of streets and sand-dusted boulevards. Old parks, once elegantly kept by water pumped into the city, are now dry dustbowls where sprawling, decrepit camps of faithful pilgrims rise now and then with the newest influx of newcomers.

At the heart of the City of Lights is the Great Temple, a structure believed once to have been a major power plant supplying the entire region. This is the worldwide center of the Brotherhood, but what secrets lie within are for the Brotherhood and its most trusted circles to keep – and keep alone.

Copper Pit (formerly Ruth, Nevada; population 1,000): Far to the north of the City of Lights lies “Copper Pit”, a dark and evil place if any could be labeled that. Copper Pit is a grotesque and disordered mess of the dispossessed who somehow managed to miss the attentions of the Brotherhood of Radiation – and were instead lured here by the promise of food and shelter, and fellowship with other mutants suffering from the same deformations and mutations.

Copper Pit is home to a growing “pseudo-society” of mutants, raiders, and slavers, all from a number of now-defunct groups and bands all over the Deadlands. Once, the nearby town of Ruth served as their meeting place and communal gathering point, but since the explosion of mutant refugees from across the Deadlands, the indistinct leadership has converted a massive copper strip-mine on the town’s outskirts (almost five miles wide at its largest point) into a huge, open-air “tent city” for their varied peoples. Rumor is spreading about who it might be who is now leading these ex-raiders and

why, and also the real motivation for his invitation to refugees to come to Copper Pit. Many suspect the raiders of Copper Pit to be led by a particularly cunning mutant being, likely a reject or outcast from the Brotherhood, attempting to create a mutant army from the discontent and homeless for some upcoming conquest of the entire Deadlands.

Copper Pit itself lies in the shadow of a great mountain, surrounded by old walls of stucco reinforced with metal plate, razor wire, and even the odd mine or two to keep out rampaging beasts (and unwanted scum) from the Deadlands. One can't really tell if this place existed before the Fall, or whether the locals built it up afterwards – it looks like a well-ordered dump with streets running through it like a fancy city grid.

Copper Pit is like a magnet to desert bounty hunters, mutant survivalists, and gunrunners. In fact, outside of the mysterious mutants who allegedly rule the place, the law here is pretty much dictated by the town's powerful gunrunners – and everyone else pretty much either works for them or hopes to barter with them. Anyone else left in town is either in the wrong place or just doesn't know it yet.

Croptown (population 100): In the Deadlands, "Croptown" is perhaps the sole source of replenishable food in the region. Once a kind of "biodome" built high up in the Nevada Mountains and away from the cities, it was home to some fascinating botanical experiments that were meant to double or even triple the agricultural output of the Ancients in their wars. The experiments didn't succeed in time, and the center was abandoned during the chaos of the apocalypse. Over time nomads and survivors came to find the domed town largely intact, and those with agricultural knowledge brought the place back to life.

Behind the stucco walls of this mountain fortress grow fields of beans, carrots, and corn, along with other crops that the inhabitants use to trade with the other communities of the Deadlands. In exchange for their large and abundant foodstuffs (which are obviously highly desired), the people of Croptown receive muskets, rifles, and ammunition, as well as other goods such as medicines and the like from the traders of the area.

Fortress (formerly Lake Mead Penitentiary; population 500): Located on the far side of the long-dried up Lake Mead (now but a sandy canyon separating this side of the Deadlands from the basin where the City of Lights glows eerily night and day), the "Fortress" is the home of the militaristic Deadlands society known only as the "Rangers". The Fortress itself is just that, a citadel of intact stone and steel built during the time of the Ancients to house the worst of their criminals and murderers. Abandoned during the war, the broken, desperate remnants of a military unit surviving the Fall came to shelter here – and survive.

The Rangers operate from this legendary base to bring hard justice to the Deadlands, operating in small covert patrols making regular circuits through the villages and settlements of the wastes. Tradition binds the Rangers to aid those who petition them in a "legal and acceptable" manner, and their campaigns against raider threats, road gangs, mutant uprisings, and other forces of evil have long been a part of the Deadlands' colorful and violent history.

In addition to the forbidding fortress itself (which is closed to outsiders who might compromise its secret defenses), a small settlement has begun to grow in the shadow of the old penitentiary walls. Scavs, refugees, and homeless survivors from raider attacks have come here to seek the vigilance and protection of the Rangers, offering basic goods in trade.

Mercury Caves (formerly the Nevada Nuclear Test Site, near Mercury, Nevada): Well-known among the folk of the Deadlands are the so-called "Mercury Caves", somewhere in the heart of the desert. The caves are said to cover hundreds of miles underground, and appear to have once been man-made for some unknown purpose, beneath otherwise unassuming desert country. Stories abound of hideous, super-powerful creatures with batteries of mutations that every now and again find their way out of the caves and into the desert, to prey on outlying Deadlands communities. No force has ever mounted an expedition powerful enough to investigate the cave system in full, or find the unknown source that spawns these ghastly, mindless creatures to feed upon the surface world.

Reno (population 2,500): The squalid ruin of Reno has, by and large, escaped much of the devastation that struck the rest of the Twisted Earth. Lying far, far to the west across the worst of the Deadlands, beyond the barrier of glowing sands, Reno grew from a forgotten landmark among the whipping sands to a thriving den of obscene iniquity. Its also a seductive pit of quicksand that few can escape.

Originally only shattered survivors of the Fall, few in number and dwindling fast, called the towering spires and crowded avenues of this ghost town home, but the arrival of ruthless profiteers from Foundation-held lands in old California changed everything. Arriving in motorized caravans like a band of savages, they found only a weak and easily cowed populace among the city ruins. Their takeover was swift, and soon Reno became the subject of a bizarre project – to once again "open business".

Since their arrival, these loosely associated brigands (among them many unscrupulous merchants expelled from their respective clans) have come to rule the city. Some twenty or so small groups have since coagulated into five or six major "families", each controlling a sector of Old Reno, all of which converge on the flashy, downtown quarter.

WILDS OF DESOLATION

Each family has ruthlessly garnered local support in their respective neighborhoods, fielding "armies" from those addicted to their drugs or under their "protection". The families of Reno are preservers of some of the oldest and most profitable ventures – gambling, prostitution, and especially drug-manufacturing. Each family has its specialty, and thus each district of the city is like walking into a separate kind of Sodom and Gomorra.

Reno exists under an open-door policy to one and all – so long as visitors keep their views on local activities out of their city. The abundance of drugs has meant the near-total slavery of the entire city populace to the families, however, with families selling off their rare and precious daughters to one family or another to supply the next drug shipment. Visitors to the city are first drawn by the intact lights of the casinos and clubs that stand out among the ash-blackened ruins, only to be swayed by hookers (many transvestite, due to the shortage of women these days) and, inevitably, by the powders and needles that promise an escape from the nightmare world of the desert. The dead (whether they died from disease, shootings, or drug overdose) are carted out of town and buried in the graveyard that rings the ruins like a grim shackle – a vast, gloomy cemetery almost as big as the city of Reno itself.

Ruin (formerly Nellis AFB): The so-called "Ruin" is a garbled flatland of wind-swept rubble and radiated wastes whose glow can be seen as a colorful aura from the nearby City of Lights. It is common knowledge that this was once a powerful base of the Ancients, but the detonation of ICBMs targeting the site completely destroyed it. Much of the radiation here has diminished over time, but it is clear the area is entirely desolate.

Yucca Mountain: A vague, confused legend among the mutants of the Deadlands has been circulating for generations – the legend of "Yucca Mountain". According to the tales, this was a lonely, isolated mountain where the Ancients, in their fear of radiation and the powerful mutants its taint might create, stored millions of barrels of radiated waste and sealed it all underground in a vast, unlit labyrinth of stone and steel.

According to legend the mountain still exists, and beneath it the great vats of radioactive fluid that could potentially seed the entire Twisted Earth with its glow, spawning a new race of "super-beings" that will fruitfully multiply and eventually conquer the world, making it ripe for a new age of mutantkind.

The legend of Yucca Mountain is especially well known among second and third generation mutants in the Deadlands; the mythical mountain is also believed to be secretly sought after by the Brotherhood of Radiation. Various stories place the legendary mountain throughout the Deadlands, from the glowing barrier in the west to north of Copper Pit, to somewhere among the high mesas and their twisted heights.

A region exists along the frontier of the Grass Plains Empire, where the rule of the mighty Savants ends and the chaos of savage mutantkind begins. Though little is known of this rugged, mountainous enclave of terrain, it is said that tribes of mutants fleeing Savant rule and lordship have made this barren wasteland home for numerous generations. Savages one and all, these tribes are said to sever heads and shrink them in boiling chemicals, and wear them as charms of luck to inspire valor in battle.

Other stories also speak of cannibalism, and powerful shamen among their ranks that command weird mental powers to shield their brethren against the onslaught of Savant expeditions set after them into the Wilds.

THE KNOWING

The Wilds of Desolation are anything but desolate, and the stories about this rugged natural country are largely true. Inhabited by mutant tribes fleeing the Savant armies of the south (who mentally dominate them and use them as thralls and slaves in their growing armies across the grass plains), the Wilds have become a virtual "Stalingrad", a bloodbath and meat-grinder against savant expansion.

The Wilds are currently home to almost twenty separate tribes and primitive communities, none of which have technological capabilities beyond spears, javelins, and slings.

Mutants: The Wilds are home to warlike and cruel mutants who have no concept of mercy. Strapped for resources, these tribes are more likely to kill (ambush) strangers entering their part of the Wilds than make peaceful contact. Those with signs of advanced technology are certain to be slain outright, either mistaken for Savants or simply to glean their artifacts for the mutants' use.

Creatures: The mutant tribes share the Wilds of Desolation with other creatures as well, many of them bizarre oddities finding their way southwest from the Purple Desert, across the Big Muddy. Though rare, these strange creatures are feared by the mutants of the Wilds, and often an appearance will be taken as an omen, and used as a tribe's totem for generations.

AREAS OF INTEREST

There are few areas of interest in the Wilds of Desolation, with only one worthy of note.

Zark's Sky-Lake: Nestled high up in the mountains of the Wilds lies a dying lake, the shores of which still echo the calls of mutant birds and vulture-like carrion feeders soaring on the mountain

winds. Zark's "Sky-Lake" is believed to be one of the last places where natural life still lives, thriving at the depths of the lake in the form of fish and fresh water life.

The mutants of the Wilds come here every year or so en masse, a gathering of the bestial tribes to show off their new articles of war, war songs, and carefully-groomed champions. Such gatherings draw tribals from all over the Wilds numbering up into the thousands, and are marked by drinking contests, the trading of slaves, captives, and other goods, as well as ritual combat and gladiatorial games.