

DEPOPULATED PLANET: YOUR TRAVEL GUIDE TO THE KNOWN WORLD



The Grand Cathedral of the Congregation—a Must See stop in the BoneYard. Note the hypnotic Plasma-Screen windows and the neo-gothic architecture. Yes: those cannons are loaded.

Depopulated Planet (“If it seems *lonely* it’s because there’s nobody *left*”) is the number one travel guide to the known world. Why? Because we’ve been there—or if we haven’t it’s because it’s a damn good idea *not to go*—and we’ll let you know.

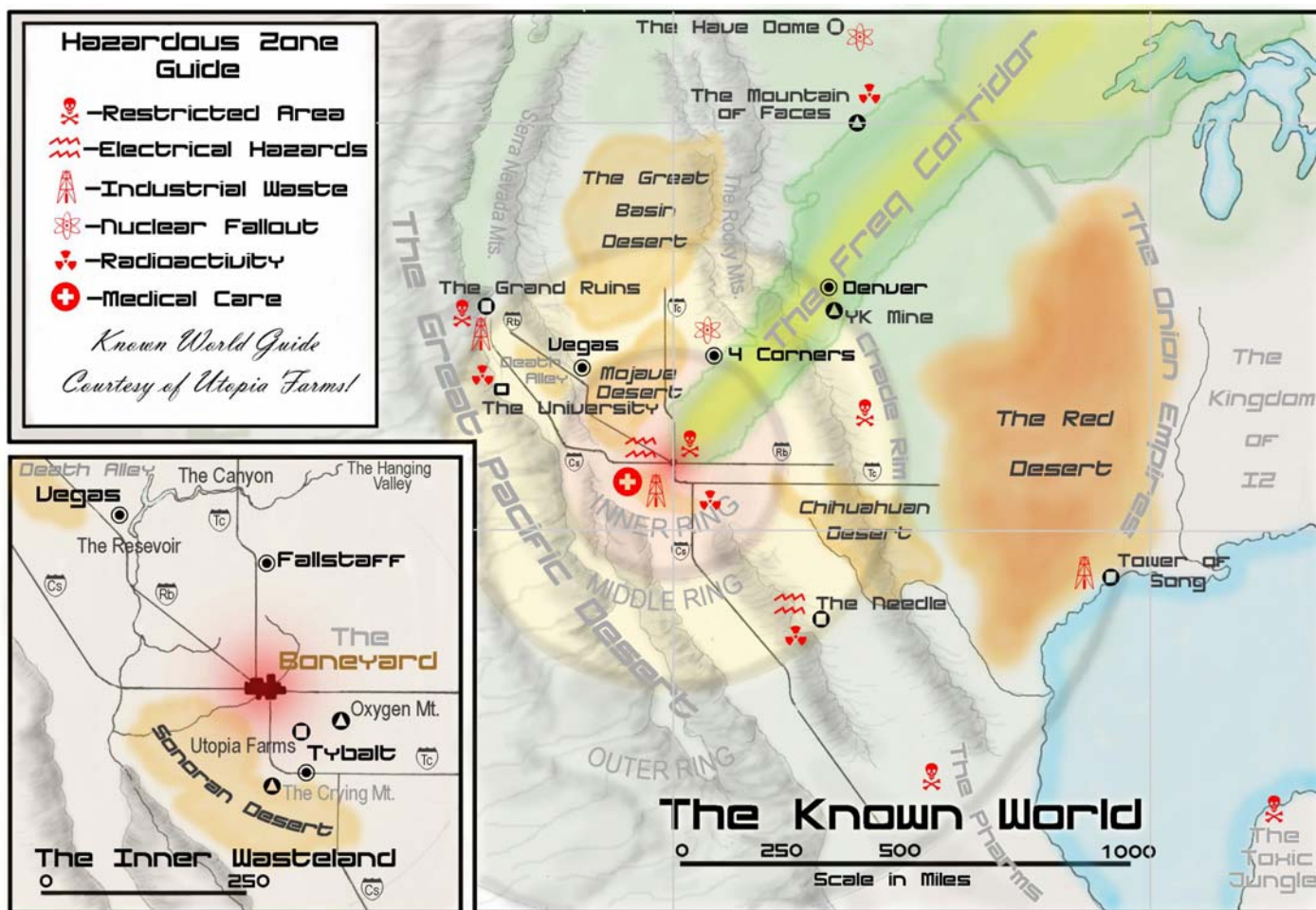
Using This Book

We came up with a *lot* of setting information—and we’ve included it here. This is specific bits: mysteries, places to visit, things to see, and stuff to look for. Whether the world is “actually like this” is, of course, up to the participants (traditionally the GM—but that’s just traditional). So you could junk it entirely. But if you don’t, we wanted to point out two modes of play:

1. Hand it to the players and let their characters have it as common knowledge.
2. The players avoid reading it and it’s used as fodder for exploration. If you are planning on playing in Have-Not, we suggest that you discuss with the GM whether or not you should read this book. In playtest our crew had a good time finding some of this stuff on their own.

NOTE: We considered including stuff like vaccines, weather charts, and all kinds of other data—but decided to keep it to locale content and commentary.

So, traveler, where do you start? Well, let’s start with a map of the known world. When you’re ready to travel then we’ll discuss stocking up on vaccines, hiring armed escort (never leave home without it), getting a bank to underwrite your expedition, and otherwise putting the trip together—but remember: before you set out anywhere you have to know where you’re going. And we think this is a pretty good place to start taking a look:



This is it: the whole thing—all that's left of it—all that we really know about. Here it is. From the deep forests of the northern reaches to the toxic jungles of the south and the deserts on either side this is what you've got to work with. So take a walk through our data files and see what appeals to you, what doesn't, and what scares you.

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Depopulated Planet: Your Guide To The Middle Ring

The Middle Ring's a pretty big honkin' piece of land to try to sum up in a few paragraphs. There's so much *there* there that I could spend a week and a half on the basics and you'd be bored dead and I still wouldn't have told you half the things you need to know to get by.

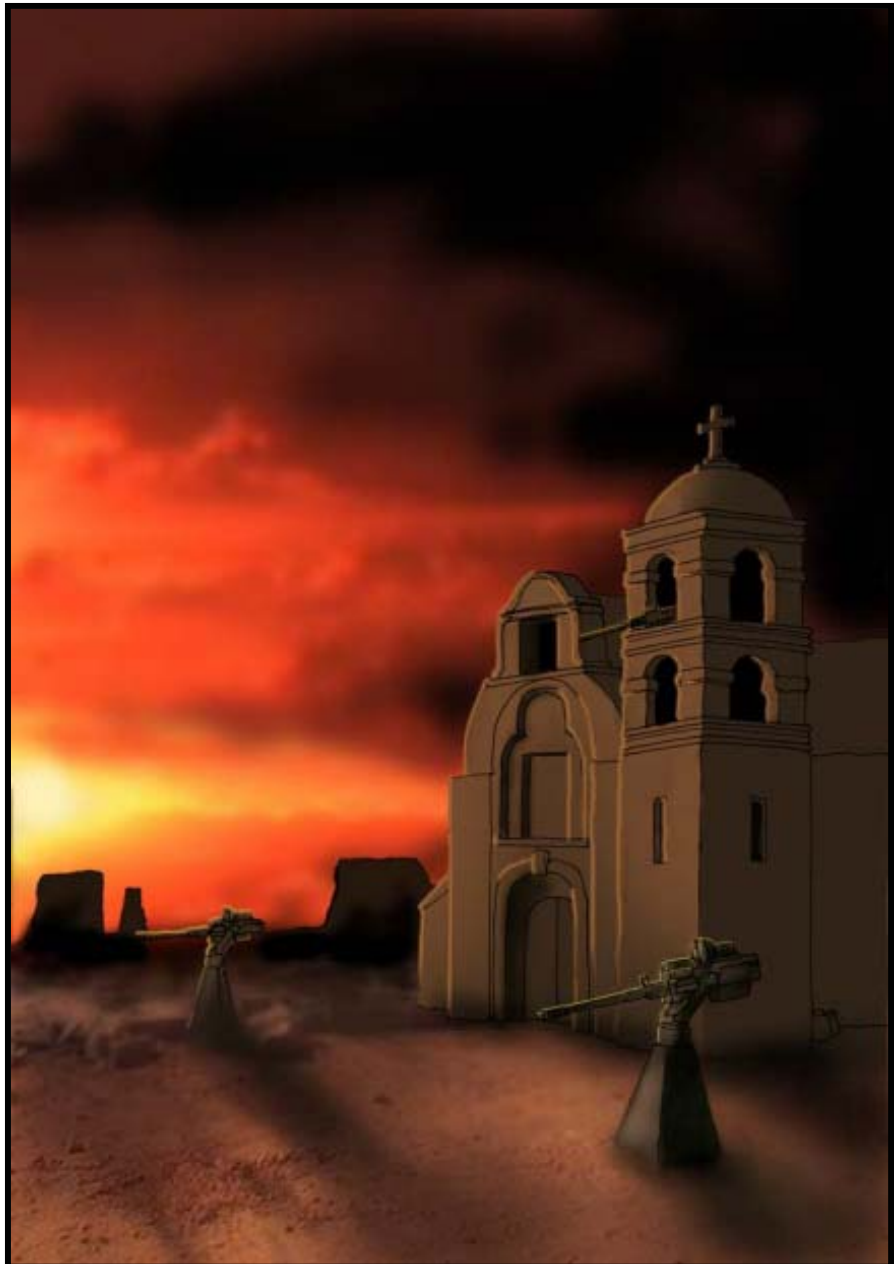
But, hey—they're paying me to write this, and you've paid to read it.

Getting Around

When you're in the Middle Ring, there's four directions—but they're not your basic north, south, east, and west. Instead, there's *clock[wise]*, *counterclock[wise]*, *in*, and *out*. You still need to know that north is noon, and south is six (so bring your compass), but when a local tells you Bakersfield's "sixty clicks clock and in" you'll know he means to go north by northwest around 30 miles.

So now you can figure out where to go. Let's talk about *how* to go.

I really recommend you get your own transportation. Relying on anyone else is like being that kid in high school who didn't have a car. If you had a car, you know what I mean, and if you *were* that kid, you *really* know what I mean (And if you *are* that kid: No—I *won't* drive you out to Radium Flats; not even if you promise to pay for ammo. You still owe me for ammo from *last time*. Ask your mom, man. That's *her* job ...)



Lonely roadside chapels exist throughout the known world. Many are ruins. Some are inhabited—but not always by people. In any event, beware: many are equipped with automated guns.

Getting Along: Superstition and Etiquette in the Middle Ring

Let's say you roll into a new town and you see the streets pretty empty, a bunch of horses and a few rusty cars and pickups around a big barn just a hundred yards outside of town, and from in that barn you see lights and hear music and singing. Looks like a town party. Do you pull on up and help yourself?

No. You don't. And that's why you're reading this.

They might be having a big 'ole barn-dance—and likely you've got no idea what that really entails anyway—but it's just as likely they're having a revival—and you don't want to walk in on that without knowing the town. Trust me.

Etiquette in the Middle Ring can get you killed or save your life. So pay attention.

Revival, Superstition, and the Congregation

There are some funny things out there. Some of what people believe ain't so. Some of it might be so. And some of it is. So be careful what you dismiss. Most of its just kinda ... there. In Cherborg they keep these old radio-antennas broadcasting high-frequency static they believe wards off Nuclear Bombers that are still circling. Never seen one? Fine—but keep your mouth shut and don't go messing with those radios. That's not so bad. Some things are worse.

The Blight

The Blight may or may not exist, but out in the ring, even those who dismiss it ... wonder. A certain number of towns go ghost town every year. It's the law of averages: A well goes bad. A C-Rex demolishes the place. There's a fire or a plague or raiders or, well, just about anything. But some of those ghost towns don't have a good explanation. That's where the Blight comes in. People disagree about the signs. Monsters coming, strange sounds in the night, and clusters of pregnancies all seem to coincide. Water going bad or livestock dying in numbers can be corroborated too. Finally there's the killer ingredient: People ... acting strangely and secretively—meeting in out of the way places ... or new strangers in town. If this sounds like it could apply almost all the time ... you're right. So take the hint: *don't be the stranger*.

The Blight isn't seen so much as a disease as something you can bring to town by being too ... inquisitive ... too wanton ... too cheerful ... maybe too promiscuous ... too different ... or by having met someone who brought the Blight to a town before. Refugees from places that are going bad because of "the Blight" get shut out. But make no mistake: No one thinks it can be treated with medicine.

And if they think you're bringing it to town ... they'll hang you and burn the body. If you see a town with doors with red Xs on them and some smoldering foundations, hit the gas, don't pick up survivors, and drive at least one more town before stopping. Some places don't take it all that seriously. Some places'll shoot you if you come down the wrong road at the wrong time. Sometimes even the townsfolk themselves don't know which is which until something bad happens.

The Aliens Amongst Us

In the Grand Ruins are all those orbital particle beams that were ready to broadcast terawatts of destructive energy into space—the aliens were something the people of the Age of Wonders feared and waited for and dreamed about. Maybe because they didn't have anything better to do. Maybe because on some level they hoped to see the Haves get their asses handed to them. Who knows? But what got us first was the lights going out and then us eating our own babies for breakfast ... right? The aliens never did come. Did they?

Turns out not everyone's so sure. You can find educated people who say that what happened to the earth was the result of orbital bombardment. There are a lot of legends of inhuman things coming out of flying machines. And today, when nothing much flies around, there are persistent stories of lights in the sky, and odd geometric shapes in the tall grass after their passing.

It turns out that the aliens want to corrupt us. They take one of us and reprogram him or her to be an alien in mind if not body. This can, you see, happen to anyone. Wives, husbands, mothers, daughters, sons, and friends may all be co-opted by an alien—and once they get one of you, that person will try to get more of you. This happens by being alone with the person for a little while. Maybe it involves a machine. Maybe deep kissing or sex. Who knows? It changes. Those aliens are sneaky, right?

But when the alien thing is going around, it's best to leave town—but, you know, maybe not too fast. Because an alien who's been found out would want to split out of town so they could continue their business elsewhere. Everyone knows that.

This is bad stuff too. There are laws on the books about fraternizing with 'external influences'—that's code for the aliens. The penalty is death. Sometimes creatively. Nothing dissuades those aliens like a good example to others. And trying to prove your innocence is ... well, that's just what an alien would do. See? So when the alien thing is going around, you want to steer clear. Failing that, get someone important to vouch for you. That'll usually help. But sometimes, if it's bad enough, they'll just hammer the last nail in your coffin.

Mall Day

The Age of Wonders loved the strip mall. It loved big indoor malls even better—but most of those got hammered pretty bad. Some of the strip malls out on the roadsides survived. They're mostly big cement husks now with great big "cubbyholes" where shops used to be and vast parking lots now mostly cracked and grown through with weeds. The best have big pylons that used to have lights on them. A few, lucky survivors, even have signs.

If you happen to catch a town on Mall Day, you can relax somewhat: It's not like the aliens where people get killed, but don't just think it's a big party either. Get too rowdy or disrespectful and you'll discover why it's more than just a celebration.

On Mall Day (and there are several days, the first of Mai being a big one) everyone dresses up and goes to the mall. There are pavilions there that sell stuff in each store and in the parking lot there's usually big tents with ale and sweets. If you have a car you're expected to take it—and park inside the yellow lines. If you look like you have a few extra cred, you're expected to shop. Everything's on sale (never mind that the prices on Mall Day are usually higher than normal).

And if you do shop, it can be a great time if you obey the rules. Firstly: it's not a ruin—it's a mall. You're there for a day of shopping with the kids—and the world didn't fall apart so you don't swear, you don't spit, and you keep your gun in your car (or get permission from the sheriff). Secondly, everything "works." There are lines to the old e-terms to check your "bank account." Stand in one. Pretend to push the buttons. Don't make a fuss. It gets dark and dusty back in the backs of the shops. Don't make a point of it: The lights are on, get it?

There was no war on Mall Day. The Haves might be out there somewhere, but you don't mention them. If someone asks you about watching your "shows," you have—and they were great. On Mall Day no one is sick from a neo-plague (they have a 'chill'). And so on. If there's been a tragedy, it's better to stay home than to go there and cry. No one cries on Mall Day. The rules vary from place to place so pay attention—because if you screw it up you'll get everyone really the hell mad at you.

See, it's not just a celebration. It's well ... look at that husk and imagine it bright and painted with glittering lights and marbled facades. It's gone now, but on Mall Day they want to bring it back. Don't mess with them.

Exiles

Just so you don't get too carried away with yourself, consider the Exiles. What's an Exile? Well, an Exile is a person, just like you or me ... *maybe* ... who hears a "call." Now the big-heads in the BoneYard are pretty sure this "call" does exist and is a for-real telepathic phenomena, but what exactly causes it, and why it works the way it does—the diabolical way it does—is still a mystery. There are places in the Outer Wasteland ... in the Inner Wasteland ... and in the Ruins (and even a few "just out there" in the Middle Ring) where the *Haves* buried ... something.

If you ever see one of these places, *get the hell away*—right then—as soon as you know, and if one of your buddies wants to go and isn't taking 'no' for answer? God help you: He's hearing the call.

Whatever it is that's down there, it's under a cement block about two to five acres in area and surrounded with telepathic broadcast markers that give you a feeling like fingernails being drawn across a blackboard. On the stone itself are warnings in about a billion different languages: "Do Not Dig. Do Not Disturb. Leave Immediately." And, if you're there, and you're fairly fortunate, that's about it.

But that's because you're not hearing the call. If you do (and you can hear it from anywhere in the known world as far as anyone knows) when you get there something *else* happens. The general belief is that whatever's entombed there can "impregnate" you with its malevolence. Then you mutate—radically—and you become a monster. Very few people have studied the psychology of Exiles: They terrorize, they kill, they're tough and with age they get tougher, they're isolated and take to the ruins (thankfully)—but they lurk there, looking for people to dine on. Before whatever happened to them happened they were, well, ordinary people.

Well, maybe not exactly ordinary. The records suggest it's a certain anti-social character type that hears the call. A sort that's drawn there but is already anti-social, anti-authoritarian, and self destructive. When you consider the other superstitions, consider this: We don't *know* the aliens never came. We do *know* that more than one family has had a young man leave home, and never come back ... only to be an eternal monster lurking in the ruins. That, at least, is something to be afraid of.

Places and Things in the Middle Ring

When you're out on the road, it looks like an infinity of *nothing*—and if you don't have a map it just might be. There's not a lot of space in the Middle Ring ... compared to the planet, but there's *way* more than enough to get lost in and there are bad things out there waiting for people who *do*. Here are just some—just a *few*—of the things you might see, or some of the places you might go. And remember: This is *in* the Ring. Get too far off the trail and you're *out* of the Ring ... and then there's no guide anywhere that'll help you. Then you've fallen off the edge of the world. And if you thought there were monsters at home ... you ain't seen nothing yet.

Middle Ring > Northward Travel > Lake Powell (The Water Barons)

PRECIS: Above the Inner Wasteland, lies one of the few remaining unspoiled sources of clean above-ground water. Lake Powell. Water, in the Middle Ring, is life. It is said that the only commodity more precious than water in the Middle Ring, is time. You can buy water; you can't buy time. The Water Barons might disagree – through the sale of water, they have bought themselves time.

If "civilization" exists anywhere outside of The Yard, it might be Lake Powell. The Barons are ancient families run by ancient patriarchs. All of them trace their ancestry back to the powerful men and women of the Age of Wonders. Some of them lived through the Age of War – the Water Barons are cyborgs. Their incredible wealth has bought them eternal life, so long as the money flows and the power stays on. For the Barons, their families, the medical and technical crews which service and maintain them (almost a priesthood), and for their valued employees, life around Lake Powell is magnificent and rarified. Comfortable. Wealthy. A tiny sliver of paradise surrounded by vicious nothingness.

For you, it's a nice place to visit, but don't let the rustic charm fool you: the a night in those little inns costs as much as a luxury suite in the city. A drink in the clean, inviting tavern costs more than a full tank of premium gasoline. And a cottage in the hills? Don't even think about it. The prices are set to keep you out. To keep everyone out. And they're very serious about paying. And they're very serious about curfew. Unless you fit in to their nice, clean fantasy world, be careful. You see, the Barons didn't live to be 300 by being sloppy, trusting, or incautious. They know you're jealous. They know they're bastards. And they know that the only thing worse than being dead is being poor. So they'll do anything to protect their investment and that might include making an example now and again.

[Middle Ring > North > Lake Powell > The Water Barons > The Family Estates](#)

Those big castles you see up in the mountains surrounding the lakes are Family Estates. Each one houses a Patriarch or Matriarch of one of the Baron's families. That means a medical facility, a data center, a nuclear power plant and a backup or two. The Barons, see, are no longer mobile. They've given up walking around to become massive, distributed machines. They've paid all but the last kernel of their humanity to ensure survival. How much does that cost? I've heard it's a fortune apiece a week... but as long as the water flows, it's their fortune to burn.

[North > Lake Powell > Glen Canyon Dam](#)

The secret to Lake Powell, the Water Barons, and the whole deal is the Glen Canyon Dam. Built ages ago, it controls the flow of water, keeps the lake full, and provides the Water Barons with their hegemony. The private security forces you see in the area mean business. They're there to make sure nothing ever happens to that dam, and they're very well paid and very well trained.

You can look at the Dam at a distance. At dusk, its lights, reflected on the river, surrounded by living greenery, are one of the most beautiful things imaginable. Look. Sigh. Then move on.

[Middle Ring > North > Lake Powell > The Water Barons > Speed Traps](#)

One of the rights townships have is the right to impose "velocity limits" on their domain. This is ostensibly to have the "right" to fire on someone blitzing them—but it gets a different deal in places that don't like travelers that much. The *speed trap* consists of a posted limit in the middle of nowhere (and trust me—it looks like one of those ancient signs) and a fast heavily armed "patrol car." Sometimes it's just a stiff fine. Sometimes it's a night in the stockade and a stiff fine. Keep an eye out around here. Observe posted limits, even if it feels silly. You're driving on *their* land and often they don't like it one little bit.

Middle Ring > 10:00 Northwest > Death Alley

PRECIS: You've heard of the Alley Run: a 90 mile race for people who think swallowing a live grenade isn't a flashy enough suicide for them? This is where it happens (when it happens—it was never an official event of any sort—it's just something people have done from time to time: stupid people). Death Alley is the lowest stretch of land that isn't off the Pacific Shelf. It's 120-degrees *easy* in the summer and you'd need 4 gallons of water a day to hike it. But don't break out the big canteens yet: you'd never survive it on foot. Not a chance.

Down in the Alley is another *eco-system*. The story, and there's enough history types that say it's true, is that just before the collapse the *Haves* granted the ability to a geno-artist to create an alternate eco-system. He created two spheres: the New Sun, a big one, and the New Moon, a little one. Both were encased in tungsten steel and both contained ... well ... something. Whatever code it was that made life spring up out of the earth, they say. I think it contained tiny machines to build creatures from the ground up. But what do I know? Anyway, he took both down there. He was an important guy back then (we don't even remember his name today) and he had clout to do some things, like commission volunteers ... well ... a volunteer to be the caretaker. It was supposed to be a monument to what *could've been*. It's not making *that* statement any more.

The moon broke open. There's some stuff about an agent of a Warlord with a voucher for money and power and drugs and anything else you could want. There's a story about a little army of powered troopers and them driving around in the Alley taking shots at things. But it comes down to this: they went to the Sanctuary (it's still down there) and they broke open the Moon. The story ends with them all dying—but who really cares? They were only the first.

Whatever it was, it's stayed *confined* to the valley and that's a good thing. Now, when people have zero sense and a lust for death they start at Big Pine and barrel down 190 until they hit Mushroom Rock then they take the *bad road* (West Side) going right and then either merging with 190 and "chickening out" by heading east to the Death Alley Junction or finishing the run on the *really bad road* (Harry Wade) and exiting south. Not too many vehicles can do it fast—and a whole legion of people who've started haven't finished. And if you're not nuts, you can take what's left of 95 and just go around it.

Middle Ring > 10 O'Clock > Death Alley > Badwater

Badwater's a lake in the south section of the alley. It ain't much of a lake, but next to it is the Temple: the place where the caretakers guard the New Sun. If you stop in Badwater, make sure you have permission (and if you're not sure: you *don't*) and don't be *too* curious. After the thing with the New Moon, they've upgraded to turreted mini-guns, smart mines, and snipers. And then there's the whole telepathic thing. They'll probably know if you're coming—so *don't*. Anyway, what's it look like inside? A big tiled plus-sign of a floor and in the middle is something that looks like a gazebo—a little house they used to have out in gardens. Inside *that* is a 1yard in diameter metal sphere that floats in air. I'm told it's almost indestructible, unlike the New Moon which was a lot less thick-skinned. Good thing too. I'm told if it *did* break, the whole world would be taken over by the new eco-system and we'd be *history*. Believe it if you want ... but please don't go finding out for yourself.

Middle Ring > 10 O'Clock > Death Alley > Culture

About midway down the Alley and outside of it is a nifty little town called Rhyolite. It's as thriving as it gets out there and there's a good deal to see and do. For a few credits, they'll even take you on a tour to the edge of the Alley and you can look down with rented field glasses and see the Gilas. It's worth it. If while you're there, you run into a group of women who have long dark hair, big brown eyes, and sun-browned skin Keep Your Distance: this is definitely "look, but do not touch territory." When they do speak, they're hard to understand. That's because they don't use their voices much. The Alley girls are telepathic. They're also powerfully pyrokenetic—which means they can set you on fire by looking at you. Finally, they're all clones. Don't ask me what they have down there that makes them, but they (she?) are all descendants of the original caretaker. They guard the New Sun where it still lies in its temple.

Middle Ring > 10 O'Clock > Death Alley > Fauna

So what is down there? What animals did the New Moon bring upon us? Well, you've heard of the Gila Monsters, right? Tiger-stripped 90-ton lizards the size of a semi-truck? Did you know they vomit a super-charged "plasmatic acid?" Yes? Okay. There are the lizards, and they are worth the look (from the tour, up in the mountains) but there are other things too.

The acid-rattlers are snakelike things that inject what I'm told is a "super-acid." How super is it? Well it'll eat through an armored tire in a matter of seconds. Combine that with the fact that they litter the road and aggressively attack oncoming vehicles and you have more people changing a tire in the Alley than you'd think. And changing a tire can be *deadly*.

There's also the Shard Birds. They come from one-inch to about fifteen feet across and look like flying black triangles. As their name implies, they're pretty sharp too. A swarm (they're more like insects than birds, really) can impale you like a storm of sharp pieces of glass. There are acidic carpets of moving lichen that, if you walk on, will suck you down like quicksand.

Yeah, it's a nice place.

Middle Ring > Northeast > The Valhalla Mines

PRECIS: When the world ended, that is, when the domes went dark, not everyone rioted. Some started building armies right away. Some tried in vain to put society back together. A few tried to do something else—they tried to escape. Most of these attempts involved either mountain retreats (which were overrun), a whole lot of drugs (which worked ... kind of), or virtual-reality tanks. The latter had promise but inevitably failed due to either lack of power or lack of external defensive systems. That, and the fact that VR, while "advanced," was never a *really good* substitute for real life (so we are told).

The histories that remain tell of former paragons of their respective communities being ripped naked out of VR tanks by a warlord's troops who wanted the gear for other purposes. In short, mainly, it didn't work.

But there's always the story of that *one* that did, right? Well this is it. The city known as Colorado Springs had been home, during the Information Age, to a military nerve center called NORAD. As such, it not only boasted a big granite mountain but substantial corridors and rooms *under* that mountain which were meant to survive a nuclear strike.

In the Age of Wonders, all that had been more or less dismantled. They built an amusement park there, gave tours, and laughed at the barbarism of their ancestors. Word is that in the early days of the Age of War, one of the first tac-nuke mortars was fired at Springs *just because*. Anyway, it got hit—and pretty hard (but not *very* hard—at least not by a nuke).

No. When things went bad, a mover and shaker known as Seymour Caligrad had slammed the big metal bulkhead doors on his internal system *after* admitting his chosen few (who probably came from quite a distance away to get in). Those people, it is said, got to see a nuclear powered, self-sustaining VR-tank with life extension gear to grant them eternal bliss and all of it protected by five-foot thick armor-steel doors and many megatons of solid rock. These privileged people would live in the heavenly virtual estate for as long as they desired and then re-emerge to take advantage of a world that had put itself back together. They were probably planning on something like 25 years of downtime. But still, it sounded like a good plan: The kind of plan that makes people jealous.

They found the door. Well, a warlord known as Virtuvius Ignacious III found it, and he wasn't happy with them. He probably could have broken in if he'd had a mining machine, but he didn't. He'd just defeated the force that was holding the old NORAD complex and he was looking to leave it cleaned out, hopefully for good, and having a bunch of formerly important guys inside a metal drum dreaming happy dreams just plain rubbed him the wrong way. But, as I said, he didn't have mining machine he'd need to get them out.

He did have a Tectonic Warhead, however, and he set it off inside what remained of the NORAD command complex. The part he could reach. Tectonic warheads turn the ground to *soup* for several hundred meters based on power. This was a *big one*. The mountain today looks melted and the VR-tank is, in theory, still in operation some 4000 yards down ... or further. It's said he attached a couple to it, all timed. No one knows how many.

Middle Ring > Northeast > The Valhalla Mines > Topside

When you get to Springs you can still see some of the old loops of the rollercoaster things that were in the amusement park. They're a bit radioactive and mostly buried (more Tech-nukes) but they're pretty to look at: Like the skeletal spines of mammoth Cyborgs.

There's also "the Pit." A massive strip mine that runs pretty much day and night. There are deeper shafts around—probe shafts—and people have tried all kinds of sonar imagery, but there's *so much* stuff buried there, and the rock is so dense, that it's not conclusive. But somewhere down there is *heaven* and the Yohan Kelvin Mining Company means to find it.

Middle Ring > Northeast > The Valhalla Mines > The Yohan Kelvin Mining Company

The YK Mining company is one of the most well funded in the world. Don't make the mistake of thinking the *mining* is profitable—no—Yohan makes his money right *here* in the BoneYard, with military contracts. And he does pull a lotta junk out of the pit, but it's not worth so much (mostly radioactive). But if the mining isn't profitable, the *mine* is: There are people who think he's gonna hit pay dirt and dig down to Vahalla—still running, still offering heaven to those who can get in and hook up. Yohan has a list of benefactors and special people, and if you're on it, and he digs it up, you get in. People pay to be on that list. They pay a lot.

But normal folk can get on it too, they'll tell you. You sign up to mine. First you prove you're *worthy* by handing over everything you came with (which isn't much). Then you and your family (even the little ones can find something to do) work day and night. You dig hard, take no pay (the company will keep you alive) and live right. And if you do, one of the secret over-watchers with the authority might take a shine to you, and you're on the list. They're gonna find it any day now. Just listen to them.

Middle Ring > 3:15 Far East > The Chade Rim

PRECIS: Heading east into the Red Desert gets ugly fast, but until you hit Chade, you're still in the part of the Ring where people can and commonly *do* travel. By the time you've hit Chade though, you're in the dunes. There are a few scattered outposts here, the outer edge of western civilization before you hit the Onion Empires and then further east to the near mythical Kingdom of IZ. But Chade is far enough east and plenty desolate for most people.

Middle Ring > 3:15 and OUT > The Chade Rim > Corosong Outpost

The Outpost looks like a collection of mudbrick houses amidst the red dunes. The road there is covered some times of the year and there is a water well down there, but expect to bring your own. They don't share, they sell. Go most times of the year and you'll see people with shawls and hoods and desert robes walking around. But go when a trade crew from the Onion Empires or IZ comes through and it's a whole other story.

When the caravan is in town there's music, there's trade, there's alcohol (who knows where they keep it the rest of the time). There's dancing and psychoactive onions and all *kinds* of things. Trade happens here *first*. A lot of small weird things that never make it to the 'Yard get sold here. If you're obviously a gawky tourist you'll just get drunk and robbed (hopefully in that order), but if you can blend there are always interesting deals to do and people to talk to. Sure, most of the soldiers are strung out on Dead Line, but their commanders aren't, and they aren't as cautiously cool as they are by the time they make the 'Yard.

Middle Ring > 3:15 and OUT > The Chade Rim > Markarak's Spur

The Spur is an ancient installation. It rises out of the desert, 8 stories of gray steel with massive industrial vents, fans, and twisting pipes showing. It belonged to a warlord named Markarik (its *origin* is a mystery) and was taken by the 'Yard in the far distant past. If you can reach it, you will find what is probably the furthest reach of the 'Yard's civilization. The spur is some sort of huge machine. In the multilevel basement are huge generators and ancient fuel cells. Even more strangely, the writing on the controls is of a language unknown to historians. It is not the Standard Alphabet that was spoken world wide in the Age of Wonder. A research team, an observation team, and a guard team labor there (and have for decades) trying to plumb its depths and discover its mysteries. If you can reach it, you may get a warm reception if you power down your vehicles and peace bond your weapons. With so little contact, the crews are less hostile than they might be if you can show 'Yard ID. Who knows? Maybe you'll even discover something.

Middle Ring > 3:15 and OUT > The Chade Rim > Fauna

The tribes hunt the Chade Shark. You've heard of Sand Dragons that burrow under the dunes. The Shark does that too, but it's different. There are natural Cyborgs like the C-Rex, Cycletaur, and War Dogs. The sharks take that a bit further. Cut one open? It's got a valve in its lungs that's a perfect fit for an engine fuel injection system control system. Muscle? You don't even have to cure it—it comes out smooth and shiny like leather. Veins? Surgical tubing—it's not plastic ... but it doesn't rot. They have bones with regular holes that make a full set of socket wrenches. Trust me, these things are vicious and deadly but they did *not* happen by accident.

Middle Ring > 3:15 and OUT > The Chade Rim > Getting Around

Roads are unreliable out there: The dunes shift. But you can usually off-road it pretty well. If you're adventurous, you can try a Sand Board. The natives build them and you may see a sail or two in the distance. Take a board of polished, waxed wood that looks like it belongs in the water and put a sail on top (brightly colored translucent plastic), a small jet engine on the back, and a light-hover pod to make it almost weightless and you have a Sand Board. It takes skill to ride and it won't work well on earth harder than the dunes, but if you're good you can do 35 miles an hour or better all day long—or as long as your fuel holds out.

Middle Ring > East > 1:15 and Middle > Four Corners Area

PRECIS: When the end of the Age of War came, most of the major players had already been hit with a nuke. The final battles were tiny compared to the first few, and more often than not, ended in compromise of some sort. The Four Corners Area was controlled by a warlord whose defeat was one of the final chapters in the rise of the Hierarchy. But it's one that's not quite done yet. Horatio Umberto the Fifth was taken without a fight, but his spirit lives on in the "Corners." It isn't a wholly *nice* spirit, but it's one you might not want to miss.

Umberto was one of the great winners of the history lottery. The records that remain show him as an amiable hedonist who wound up in control of his family's army just in time to win a few wars and then fold like a house of cards before the might of Hierarchy, saving his life and leaving his citadel as a monument rather than a crater.

Today the "Corners" look like a slightly sprawling collection of little mud-brick villas and slightly larger estates. If you drive through it, you'll see all the normal town-life stuff but there's something a *little* different in the atmosphere: there's music. There's a little celebration every night when the sun goes down (see the Dance Floor) and in the distance is the ruin of Umberto's castle. Oh—and something else? When people go to the Corners they pay careful attention to who they make deals with or who they sleep with: they say everyone in the town is a shape shifter.

Middle Ring > 1:15 and Middle > Four Corners Area > Sight Seeing > The Dance Floor

Sometime in the past, four great states met to decide on ... something. I can't tell you what, nobody remembers. For all I know it may just have been that they were "four great states and hey, here's where we all meet." It doesn't matter—they put up a flat expanse of concrete with steps cut into four equal square sections (Get it? "Four Corners?" See why I might think they had little poetry in their soul?) Anyway: Umberto turned it into a monument of his own called The Dance Floor, and there's always live music during the dusk hours. Nice lightshow too.

Middle Ring > 1:15 and Middle > Four Corners Area > Attractions > White Pit Saloon

An odd little place: The food is cooked by a salvaged "automated kitchen" hauled out of one of the ruins. It has a "distinctly Mexican Flavor," whatever that is. You can see the inner workings through the windows. Want the real scoop? The machine's a fake; all the food is made by hand.

Middle Ring > 1:15 and Middle > Four Corners Area > Attractions > Snake Dancers

One of the more interesting sights that's common in the Corners are the Snake Dancers. They're (mostly) lean, hairless guys covered with tattoos and "wearing" snakes. Not snake-skin. Snakes. Brightly colored ones. Both parties are intelligent—and they're symbiotic. No one knows how it got started, but they have a reputation for being mystics, con-men, artists, and shamans. Be careful: the snakes (which are highly venomous) are basically married to their host and if you insult one of the "dancers" by telling him his "pet" can't ride with you but he's welcome, you're asking for trouble later.

Middle Ring > 1:15 and Middle > Four Corners Area > Events > Samhain

In the middle of Yuly is the event known in the Corners as Samhain. It's a musical event and a chance to drop some *really* strong drugs and a chance to engage in wanton revelry as few people *ever* engage in wanton revelry. It's the night all the shapechangers are out in force and putting on their freakshows. The *real* radicals come up from The Canyon to hang out and listen to the live musicians play. And if you've got two arms and two legs and, y'know, could pass for normal in a trench coat, wear a mask. It doesn't *fool* anyone, it shows respect.

Middle Ring > 1:15 and Middle > Four Corners Area > Metamorphs

There's something in the gene pool in Four Corners. Umberto was a shape shifter and so was his family—the word is that he slept around a lot (easy to believe from the records: he was more party animal than warlord even in his heyday). As a result the sleepy little town is host to shape shifters, mimics, and meta-morphs. That lovely Senorita who's giving you the eye might turn out to be a bald, muscular leather clad male biker type the other 364 days of the year—and yes, it seems that stunt *never* does get old. Watch yourself.

Middle Ring > East > 2:30 and Through > The Freq Corridor

PRECIS: The Freq's (pronounced *Freaks*) are a mystery. A nasty brutish mystery that probably wouldn't be all that fun to crack, but a mystery nonetheless and a big hazard. I've seen a Freq attack and if you can imagine a squad of armed dune buggies with grappling hooks and machine guns and stuffed with idiot, leering, bald-headed guys roaring out of the desert towards you, you're dead on the money. Imagine them with unhealthy looking yellowish skin and blocky radio gear slammed into their skulls and you have a complete picture.

And they keep coming. They come en mass. They come with guns and ammo. And they come to kill. Maybe there's still a warlord somewhere up there, breeding Freqs and sending them down in wave after wave. Maybe it's some kind of sick cosmic joke. Certainly *someone* knows or knew something we don't. But whatever the case, a stretch of land about 75 miles wide is called the Freq Corridor and it's where they're most active, all the way down to the Inner Wasteland in some cases. It makes traveling through this area dangerous. Living there is almost *insane*, but traversing the corridor is better than going through the Inner Wasteland (there you *know* you'll see something horrid—and in the Corridor you don't have to drive 125mph just to live), so it's a fact of life for too many people.

Places in the Corridor run jamming fields, broadcast signals that hold the Freqs at bay. This sounds simple, but it takes a *loud* frequency, a stronger signal than even most convoys can manufacture. So getting enough power out there is always a problem.

Middle Ring > 2:30 and Through > The Freq Corridor > Places To Go > The Library

There's something about the Congregation that makes you think they're never telling what they really think. That everything they say or do is meant for the audience and that they're keeping all the good stuff for themselves. If that's true, if they are, then that good stuff is probably hinted at in The Library. You can see the building, a bunker with steeples, gun towers, and all that. It's open for services, of course, but you have to go through two security arches and there's acolytes watching your every move. And they have submachine guns under those robes, buddy.

If you want to see the stacks you need permission, and you gotta have more pull than I do. But I've talked to people who've been in there (down there, through there) and this is what they tell me: The Stacks hundreds of miles long of shelves with thousands and thousands of magnetic-tape cartridges. The readers are special machines: ugly, black metal. Heavy. You sit and press your face against the view port and forward wind and rewind to find the records you need.

So what's in those tapes? Where did they come from? Some people I've spoken with said that these stacks contain the records of the *Aquarian Heresy*—the telepathic movement of the Age of Wonders that so offended the Haves that it was banned. Others say that they're Have diaries, that they're personal records left before the domes went dark. There's other theories as well: That they're records psychic insights. That they're a riddle left by the Haves to explain why they left. That they're messages from the aliens. The really cool thing is that no one can agree on what they say. Two people view (read?) the same tape and come away with completely different understandings. Sources familiar with the translation effort (now in its 108th year) say that the true hazard of the job is the overwhelming frustration of the work. No wonder those acolytes at the gate are always in a bad, hair-trigger mood.

Middle Ring > 2:30 and Through > The Freq Corridor > Strange Desert

There's a place in the corridor about the middle called the Moon Walk Café. It's a diner, out in the middle of the desert—and I've been there: it's like no place else you'll ever go. It's all chrome and Formica and vinyl. They have this great big lit-up music machine called a Juke Box and they serve hamburger and great big mikshakes and more or less act like the world never ended. It's got a dream-like quality even in the middle of the day. It's *strange*.

There are stone pyramids. Not so big—but well crafted—and obviously not an accident. *No one* knows who built them, or why. Or when. They're *strange*.

There's an outpost called Texaco with a giant glowing red star that you can see for miles. They battle with the Freq's almost constantly—they live and die by the power to their Jammers. What are they guarding? *Nothing*. Sure, they save travelers who get in over their heads *often*, but the Yard doesn't station them out there, and it's hard bad land. They could just move. But they don't. They're fiercely proud of the little clump of rocks they've got. It's *strange*.

Whatever you choose to believe, people in the corridor vanish—and it isn't all due to Freqs or monsters or bandits—at least not statistically. So if you're crossing it, stay in radio contact (they say it helps). And don't take anything—*anything* in the corridor for granted.

Watch yourself.

Middle Ring > 7:00 Southwest > Sonora Desert

PRECIS: South of the Inner Wasteland is the vast, empty Sonora Desert. If you go deep enough into it, you'll find the jungle again and the Pharms. But those things are so far away, they might as well be myths. Before you get there, you'll find yourself in Sonora. For the most part it's typical Middle Ring with a little less water and a little more industry. Small towns, strung out along the fading highways. In the heat of the day, it's *siesta*. The streets are empty. Even the larger towns look like they've gone ghost. But then, as the sun shifts, shadows start to move and people emerge. By the time the sun goes down the hanging candles have been lit, and the music starts up. Before dawn, and after dark, Sonora comes *alive*.

Like most places in the Ring, strangers who spend their money and keep to themselves are appreciated. Strangers who ask questions or cause trouble are not. Even visitors from *other parts* of the Middle Ring find the Sonorans a little strange though, but usually in ways outsiders might not even notice. They say they're *dreamers* and that they *keep secrets*. Maybe they have secrets to keep. That makes me think of the Konkaak.

[The Middle Ring > South > The Konkaak](#)

Ask any Sonoran, and they'll tell you the Konkaak don't exist any more. They're clear about that. Back in the Age of Wonders they were already a legend: People who lived in the worst of the badlands. People lived in the sand and the ruins back when they *weren't* sand and ruins. The Konkaak. A people who were mythical, even in a mythical time.

[The Middle Ring > South > The Konkaak > The Dreaming Turtles](#)

Out there on those weird, endless plains you might (if you're very lucky) come across a fat, dome-shaped rock covered with bright colors; psychedelic blues and yellows and oranges, so bright it's hard to look at. If you do look, though, long enough, you'll see the rock *move*. These are the Dreaming Turtles -- *la tortuga que sueña*. They're all different sizes, but the average is about a yard across and almost that high.

According to reports, the dreaming turtles emit a variety of radio signals. They're not *powerful*, but with the right equipment, you can pick'em up miles away. Most folks say it's nothing but gibberish. But it's *interesting* gibberish. It's words and phrases in a human voice. Sometimes it the voices talk over each other. There's a name for it; *word salad*. I don't know what that means, but it sounds about right. According to the *legends*, the Konkaak could understand the turtles and knew their radio broadcasts were transmissions from the turtle's dreams. So far, so good, but they also said the wise, ancient turtles dreamed about the *future*. I guess that's a good thing. A good sign. Means we still have a future. Keeps the hope alive, you know...

[The Middle Ring > South > The Vale of Cortez > Spawning Grounds](#)

The middle of the Vale of Cortez is a low place on the earth. Sheltered on all sides by high rock walls (the cliffs) it is one of the most inhospitable landscapes ever imagined. Few people have seen it. Travel there is problematic; there are no roads. There are soft sands that confound even the most hearty machinery. The heat is brutal, the wind furious. Even on an apparently calm day, the sands never stop shifting. Lay down for an hour to rest and you might find yourself being slowly buried.

Those who have pressed in and returned say that there is a thin strip of damp, dark earth that runs the length of the middle of the Vale of Cortez, and it is the Spawning Ground. Here, black worm-like things as long as a man's arm breed, grow, consume each other, and die in the sun. It is said that on hatching day, the earth erupts in an orgy of mating, howling, and cannibalistic violence. The dark eel things are murderously intense, their frenzy is part of a strange, pathological lifecycle that returns their bodies to the earth, fertilizing the ground with their blood for the next iteration of life in this forsaken place.

The worm things are nameless, except that they are called eels by the humans who live in the vale, and they are harvested by those who know the secret ways of the vale (how to get in, how to get out, how not to get lost or buried in a sandstorm, and how to collect the eels without being consumed in their tight, vicious circle of life). It is said that the meat of the eels makes one strong, hard. and brave.

[The Middle Ring > South > The Vale of Cortez > Upstairs, Downstairs](#)

Up on the cliffs there are magnificent private mansions where the *Jefe's* live. Down, on the plain, there is baking death and stultifying poverty. Money – what little of it trickles in – comes from *shell hunting* (the collection and sale of the baked exoskeletons of long-extinct sea life), salt mining (the ground is permeated with salt; it is the engine that keeps the Jefe's far above living in the style to which they are accustom), and the sale of unique *salted meats* from the spawning grounds deep within the Vale.

Travel up and down the cliffs is done on narrow stone stairs carved ages ago. The lowest of the cliffs are eighty meters high and in many places, they're over two hundred. Travel from the top to the bottom is exhausting and even dangerous; a misstep or slip on the vertical cliff face can mean a quick death on the jagged rocks far below.

The Inner Wasteland

The Inner Wasteland is not a fun place. It's not just a waste of land because the ground's poisonous, the rain's toxic, and the radiation count out there is higher than you'll find in some freaking nuclear craters. No, it's wasteland because the things that *do* live out there are *bad*.

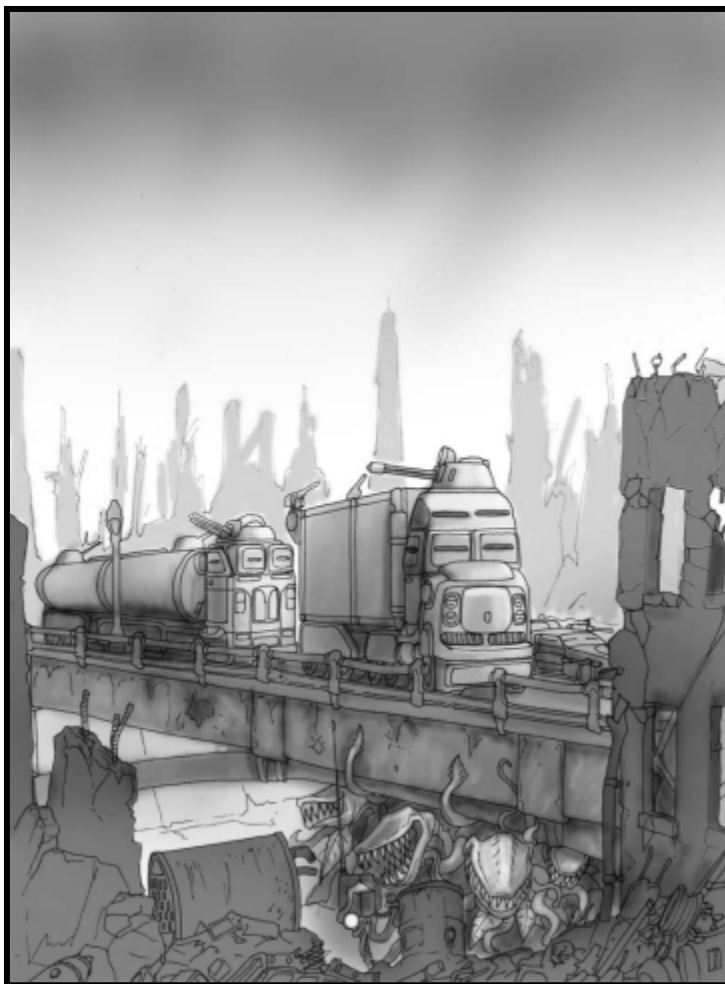
Most of the time, you'll want to get through the Inner Wasteland part of your trip as quickly as possible. Once you're out of the Yard Oversight Zone, your driver should keep the peddle *down* and your gunner should keep an eye on *everything*. Fast, furious, and don't hesitate to worry about conserving ammo—if you didn't bring enough, you're not going to make it anyway.

So that's the end of the *good* advice for traveling in the Inner Wasteland. But someone always wants more. "The things that live in the desert are bad," they repeat incredulously (you know who you are). "*We're* bad," they say (yeah—you), "Bring it on!"

So I'm gonna climb up on my soapbox for a second and tell you something: the Inner Wasteland is dangerous. It's not sexy. It's exciting the way a pack of rabid wolves trying to kill you is exciting. It's not fun. People will tell you there's fortunes to be had *not* a two hours drive from here. Well, I've been there (that's why they pay me to write this) and I've seen damn few people come back with a fortune. I've seen damn few people come back at all.

So take my advice: You wanna see the Middle Ring? Fine, you can survive the Inner Wasteland the way I told you a couple of paragraphs up: Drive fast, fight hard, and don't relax for a second until you're through. And that goes for the first time and *every* time. I did the *Run* six times before I had any trouble, and when it came, I was glad I had a round in the chamber. Death's *that* fast out there. But they (the editors) want what comes next. They think it'll sell books.

So against my better judgment, here's the rest of it. The things you might catch a glimpse of as you go by at ninety miles an hour, squinting through your gun sight. Here's the *things to see and do* in the Inner Wasteland.



A convoy travels through Falstaff. Keep your weapons trained and your eyes open. And beware of believing anything you hear on the radio.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel

North's not a bad direction to go. At least there's water in that direction (if you don't mind boiling it), and once you get where you're going, things are pretty cool up there. If you're going to be spending time in the north Middle Ring, don't forget to visit Lake Powell or Zion. But for heaven's sake, stop there. Unless you're a lunatic, you don't want to *keep going* and head for some nightmare Outer Wasteland horror show like Salt Lake or (don't even think about it) Denver or Detroit.

But before you can check the Middle Ring, you've got to survive the Inner Wastes, and there's a few things we should talk about.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > Falstaff

PRECIS: Not one of the *grand ruins*, but for a wreck close to home, it's pretty intense. Falstaff saw a lot of violence during the last age and there're a lot of things around there, asleep, laying in wait. Do not be the phucker who wakes them up. See, it's not just *your* ass. It's yours and the next couple of guys who take seventeen straight, trying to save time on the bypass. Once the things in Falstaff get excited, it takes a few weeks for them to totally settle down.

What's in there? Some folks say it's a machine hive. There's a standing bounty for anyone who can prove this by taking it out. Other folks say it's just a lot of old weapons systems too stubborn and stupid to admit they're obsolete. But if it were just the robots, it'd be bad enough. It's not just the robots...

[Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > Falstaff > Roadside Temples](#)

See, I think they leave those skulls out there so people like you will say, "Hey, where do all those skulls come from? You know, maybe if I were to just *get off the highway* and *poke around* I might find out! What a brilliant little idea I just had!" I think the moment you get there you notice that your compass is going all screwy and you notice that each of the little skulls has all these spindly hermitcrab-little legs coming out of it and then it's too damn late and the next time someone comes along there's *another* little skull...

[Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > Falstaff > Don't Do It > Voice Channels](#)

Don't trust them. Whatever you *do*, man, don't trust them. On the radio, anyone with a voice synthesizer and a dirty mind can be a dream princess just waiting for someone like you to come along and rescue her. Like just about everything else coming out Falstaff, it's a trap and a pretty obvious one. So sure, have CB-sex with the voices if you feel like it, but don't take her up on the "let's meet in person" part unless you never want to be heard from again...

[Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > Falstaff > Events > Spring geysers](#)

They melt your flesh, but if you can stay away from them, they're pretty cool. I'm not saying you should go, but...

[Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > Falstaff > When To Go](#)

Never. Ever. Don't get off the main road in Falstaff. It *looks* calm. Peaceful. Dead. Empty. It *looks* like the kind of place that might have something that would make you a rich man lying under a thin coat of dust in some office somewhere, just for the picking up. It's really full of deadly things sleeping in the shadows under the off ramp, listening with one cybernetic ear for a fool like yourself. Do *not* get off.

[Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > Falstaff > Environment](#)

Very deadly. Ruins in the Middle Ring are bad enough. Ruins in the Wasteland are impregnated with microbes and alpha particles and heavy metals, and all kinds of wonderful fun-to-eat things. Inhaling the air there is bad. If you, for some reason, *eat* anything there, you might get lucky and get sick immediately. Otherwise, say hello to a bouncing, baby tumor or three.

[Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > Falstaff > The pipes under Falstaff](#)

Falstaff has a curious underground pipe network which violet reek flow through. The reek is, in essence, living toxic sludge. It is mindless, liquid aggression. Reek attacks in colonies that come as small as your fist and as large as a swimming pool, but on average, they're about the size of a small car.

According to BoneYard records, the Biomass Recycling and Processing Center lies somewhere under the Municipal Offices. In theory, a brave and capable team could fight their way through the undercity and manually close the valves that spill violet reek throughout the city. In theory. In practice, I wouldn't go in there unless you're looking for a really painful way to commit suicide.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > The Canyon

PRECIS: You've heard about the Canyon and you want to see it. Sigh. I don't blame you. I've seen it; it's worth it (and you'll only hear me say that a couple of times about stuff in the Wasteland). So here's how—you *don't* go through the wasteland. You *don't* get off the main highways. You go up—all the way up—to the Ring, and then you come *down* from the top. Got it? Good. Now I can tell you about The Canyon.

The first guy who ever saw it (and every guy after that) knew he was on to something special. It's ancient. So ancient it makes the ruins look young. And it's magical in a way no one's ever been able to really capture. What can you *do* at the Canyon? You *look* at it. You marvel at it. You go out there and stare and go *Damn, something beautiful survived after all*. And you think to yourself that when the ruins are *finally* gone, the Canyon's still gonna be there.

Wow.

For a place in the Inner Waste, the Canyon's got a pretty thriving population. It's close enough to the Middle Ring to make it a handy place to hide out for raiders and bandits. It's also a maze of cliffs and caves – plenty of places to hide, all kinds of good places to defend from. The water in the river is poison sludge, but there's plenty of animals (lethal ones) that don't mind drinking poison sludge, and with the right equipment and a little patience (and iodine pills) you can make it into a frosty beverage that agrees with you.

I suggest sightseeing with a heavily armed party in the middle of the day, and I suggest a guide from one of the mutant tribes that lives in the shadow of the Canyon. You can pick them up in town and for a nice fee they'll take you there and back. You can find ones that'll work for free, but they'll probably roll you once you're out there, and they might eat you. Some mutant tribes do that.

Some folks go to The Canyon looking for stories. Over the years a lot of things have happened out there. Little wars. Big ones. Fortunes were made and the people carrying them lost out there. There's a forgotten history up and down the Colorado River, and if you're into history (you know what I mean, Prospector), the Canyon's not a bad place to go looking. Me? I just recommend looking – a good, long look—to remind yourself that there's *something* beautiful they couldn't wreck. And then get the hell out of there before nightfall.

Because remember all that history I was talking about? Round sundown, it comes looking for you.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > The Canyon > Environment

Being at the edge, the Canyon's not as bad as the heartland. But remember, the river that runs down the middle has been through some rough territory. *Don't* drink the water.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > The Canyon > Culture

Unlike a lot of the Inner Wasteland, the Canyon has an indigenous population. The mutant tribes, as they call themselves, are at once too warped to live in "normal" society and hearty enough to make a life in the inhospitable mess called the Inner Wasteland. Even when you're a radiation emitting, rock-eating mutant, life in the Wasteland is *hard*. These guys are brutal by necessity. But they're primal by *choice*. Don't forget that. They might dress like primitives. They might not have had formal schooling in a few generations. They might not really speak your language, and they might cover their bodies in ritual scars and tattoos. But they're *not* stupid.

The Mutants out here generally reject (and have been rejected by) normal civilization (and relatively human looking people) except when it suits their purpose (trade, military arrangements, etc.) These guys have been excluded from a society that thinks two heads is better than one, and a weird red eye is pretty cool, so, yeah, you might want to visit for the *freak show* aspect... but don't get caught staring.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > The Canyon > Activities

Staring at the landscape's the big one. Prospecting, treasure hunting, and various kinds of non-intrusive profiteering are not unpopular either. There used to be some kind of "black water rafting" club, but I heard they all got eaten by carnivorous catfish. Oh yeah, and bounty hunting. Most patrols from the Ring won't go *in*, so raiders brave enough to make their home here, do. If you're brave enough to go after them, there's a living to be made. Most of the really successful guys I've known who hunt the Canyon do it with a lot of help from the Mutants. Mostly, the Mutants ignore raiders who are dangerous enough to fend them off and keep to themselves, but they do keep track of where they are, when they're moving, how many and so on. And for the right price, they're almost always willing to sell out a neighbor.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > The Hanging Valley

PRECIS: I mentioned there were a couple of things worth seeing in the Middle Ring? One's the Canyon. This is the other one. They call it the Hanging Valley, also the Floating Mountain. I guess those are OK names (I can't think of a better one), but... damn.

Like the Canyon, the Valley's right at the edge of the Wasteland, just about as far north as you can go and still be in the soup. Which is a good thing, because it means you can take 17 all the way up and cut over through the Ring.

If the Canyon's a natural wonder of the world that survived the Fall of Mankind, the Valley's a natural wonder that was *enhanced* by it. Some folks say a UFO crashed here. Other say a Have took a natural work of art and in an incomprehensible act of arrogance, signed it as his own. And many who have looked at it say it was touched by the hand of God.

I don't know the truth, but I can tell you what I see: a landscape so bleak and beautiful, no painter's imagination could possibly evoke it. And out of these amber plains come weird rock towers – spires, loops, great boulders leaning against each other. And unlike the Canyon, there is no water there to coyly hint at what might have carved the pressed rock.

But then I look up, and I see the rocks *hanging, unsupported* in the air. Great rocks. Some small mountains, others boulders, or even stepping stones, hovering silently above the ground. And if some rocks float, some are simply *light*, so that they stack, like unbalanced, irregular toys, in great towers that go up, and up, and impossibly up. The whole scene looks like something from a dream or a hallucination, but it's real. You can walk on it. You can climb up, into the heavens, on stones that float.

There is some kind of explanation for this – science types talk about "quintessence" and "a-polarity" but I won't even try. It's enough to say it's real, it's there, and it's awesome. Don't miss the Valley.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > The Hanging Valley > Activities

There are folks who never go into the valley and folks who go there often. The Congregation, for what it's worth, *hates* the place. Scared of it, it sounds like to me. They probably know something I don't, but if it was just a matter of "it's dangerous," well, there's all kinds of dangerous places out there that don't offend them. If you're trying to be good friends with The Congregation, just don't bring it up and stay away. I'm serious. If they find out you've even *visited* there's some of them that won't trust you...

As for the rest of us, the folks who live within a day's travel or so from the Valley (that's Middle Ring folks; if you go *in* from the Valley, you'll find toxic swamp and some very nasty, disease-ridden turbo-rodents) have made a living out of exploiting it. You can visit the little temples and listen to speeches about alien space ships or *Have* magic, or whatever for days if you're inclined. Some of it's entertaining. Just make sure you don't end up *paying* for any of that. And if you feel like buying a seat in a "seminar" that "explains" the science there, make sure the money comes from your *entertainment* budget.

In the Ring, you'll find all kinds of guides willing to walk you in under the pretext of a bewildering array of ancient customs. Some that even predate the floating rocks. The Valley was a pretty weird place even way back. Most of these adventures involve going out at night and watching the stars. If that turns you on, go for it. Go with a well organized, respectable, well-armed group. *Don't* go on a "Totem Quest" with some guy you met in a Middle Ring bar who offers to show you the Valley. *Those* stories all end with someone being left in a dry riverbed with nothing but their underwear and a flare gun.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > The Hanging Valley > Environment

This is a *weird* place, and floating rocks are just the beginning of it. I've heard folks who spend a lot of time there say that it's *folded*, whatever that means, in most places and downright *twisted* in some. People turn strange out there. They have visions, or maybe they just meet some really strange things in the Hanging Valley. I guess what I'm trying to say is that it doesn't just look dreamlike, it *is* dreamlike. And not always in a good way.

They talk about *the haze*. About three days is safe (don't spend the night if you're psychic). After that, you start to perceive time passing differently. People talk about forgetting things or remembering things that never happened. People talk about seeing time slow down or speed up. And people who spend even more time there talk about the valley getting *long*. That is bigger. Wider. They'll tell you about places you can only get to and things you can only meet when "the Valley's long for you." I'd call it delusions (and hell, maybe it is), but there's freaking floating rocks out there.

Trust me, look at the Valley. And then get the hell home.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > The Hanging Valley > History

I've heard that the Hanging Valley became the Hanging Valley sometime during the Age of War. This makes me think there's more likelihood to the story that its peculiar properties are the result of something crashing there rather than something the *Haves* did. It's been blowing people's minds ever since.

[Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > The Hanging Valley > The Crater](#)

You can also go visit "The Crater," or, as some folks put it, "The Crash Site." The crater's big and looks (to me) like a 25 kt nuke. It's also hot, very hot, like it was a dirty bomb. There are these stones around it that were put there a long time ago, and the whole thing is creepy and mysterious. There's also a legend that the "early responders," the guys who went out to see the site, were *executed* by their commander (presumably they saw *too much!*) and are buried somewhere in the area. Now, this sounds like prospector bait, but it seems there's just enough evidence that there were responders, that there was something worth investigating in the crater, and so on that I'm gonna say, "If you're interested, look into it." Just remember to bring a serious rad-suit.

[Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > The Hanging Valley > Pinnacle](#)

Oh, and if you're into climbing, you can get what I guarantee is the most surreal climbing experience this side of virtual reality. There are "stepping stone" rocks that an agile and risk-inclined person can use to get up on top of those rocks. There are three "peaks" and the highest one is called Pinnacle. I didn't go up there, but I'm told that there's a stone circle up there that's *just like the one around The Crater!*

Make of that what you will. My take? The same guys who put up the first one did it again...

[Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > The Hanging Valley > Activities > Vortex Tours](#)

The Valley has about eleven "mapped" (that is, people know where they are) active vortices. Most of them are "owned" by folks who live nearby and do a reasonably good job of camping them (Water Barons, Rock Mountain merchant princes, and the like). You can take a tour. These are above-ground, open-air doorways, so there's scattered, rusted junk spread around them in all directions. A sort of cosmic, surprisingly artistic-looking junkyard. Go with a tour, and you won't be accused of trying to loot them; go by yourself and you might get lucky.

[Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > The Hanging Valley > Culture](#)

There are no organized, indigenous cultures that live in the Valley. There are all kinds of cults and drug cultures, and false prophets and real prophets living ringside around it. There are also several powerful interests in the area who are concerned with *owning* the Valley, controlling or at least monitoring who goes in and comes out.

There's also a lot of scientific speculation about what happened (and is clearly still going on) there. Some people think that The Valley holds the keys to the secrets to our world. It's certainly spectacular enough.

All this concern and interest leads to a good deal of activity (and sometimes violence) in the region *surrounding* the Valley, but the valley itself is preternaturally tranquil and serene.



Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > Vegas, Baby

PRECIS: You could write a whole guide to Vegas. *I* could write a whole guide to Vegas. But they offered the gig to someone else, so I'll just tell you that after hundreds of years of war and collapse, Vegas still hasn't lost its charm. You've heard it's *not* a ruin. You're right.

Technically, they say that Vegas was hit with neutron weapons, high radiation bursts that killed everyone and left the buildings standing, and left the whole place glowing in the dark. But then, Vegas has *always* glowed in the dark.

What that means is that as you approach, you can see the spires and glass towers, and signs and images and the iconic Welcome to Las Vegas sign, rising out of the desert like some impossible Camelot dream. What that means is that if you're willing to take the risks (and radiation is the *least* of it), you can visit a city frozen in time. Empty and quiet (except for other people like you and a vanishingly few weirdoes who live there), it's been hit by the only *preservational* act of the Age of War.

And about the ghosts, there are ghosts. They might not be spirits of dead people. I don't know what they are, but there are, *definitely* ghosts. I've seen them. And yeah, you've heard right, they *do* want you to join them in their creepy, lounge-lizard eternity. I recommend *not*.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > Vegas, Baby > Events

Anytime's a good time to go to Vegas if you're well armed and up, up, up on your meds. I don't even really count it as Inner Wasteland (if not for the ultra-rad there, it'd be a Middle Ring phenom). But there are a couple of events that are especially worth your while if you're in the area.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > Vegas, Baby > Events > The Mint 4K

The 'Yard sponsors the Mint 4K every third Corvember— a three hundred mile roadrally right *through* the Inner Wasteland, up to Vegas, and back. If you've ever seen it on TV, you know it's exciting (the shooting starts as soon as the racers are out of the control zone and doesn't stop until everyone's bleeding or someone's won). Real aficionados watch from the Sands. You can't get rooms there unless you *know* someone (and, buddy, I'm guessing you *don't* know anyone *that* well), but you *can* hang out in the Keno lounge and watch the racers roll into town, party together during "Amnesty Night at Midway," and then resume the carnage on the way home.

The Mint Committee opens the hotel for that one night only, with a full staff and kitchen (in the high-radiation atmosphere, they say the chicken-rama actually cooks *itself*) and a wetbar to die for. It's a good place to watch some really over-the-top action (the cars are sponsored by the big banks, and are always way over-loaded with eye-catching firepower), get drunk, and meet some real movers and shakers.

I recommend staying away from the *journalists*, however. They're just there to have fun and if you're not careful, you *might* end up in one of their stories.

The Vegas Ghosts

The Vegas Ghosts are a mystery. People have reported signs of "life" in the empty, radioactive Vegas-strip zone: Cards on a blackjack table. A cup of coffee on a counter in a diner. Stuff like that. Then, if you stay a little longer, you start *seeing people*: A guy checking in at a hotel. A figure down the street. These images dissolve if you get too close, but if you're seeing them, it's time to leave: People who see them *vanish*. Some people say they try to separate groups. Others, who've stuck together report a psionic assault as though by a Level 3 Telepath of some power. Whatever the case, if you're seeing the ghosts and you lose consciousness alone ... you don't come back.

Inner Wasteland > Northward Travel > Vegas, Baby > Events > Nomdex

The other time to go would be Yarnary. That's when the Strip Plaza opens its doors and the lights come on in the Temple Anu for the Ritual of the Naming (also known as Nomdex). A lot of people think Nomdex is a *Congregation* ritual, but it's not — it started way *before* the Congregation existed — they were doing Nomdex, even before *the Fall*.

The Naming was an appeal to the *Haves* by the most wretched and oppressed of the people of the Age of Wonders, namely sex workers and engineers. They would gather together (the legends say Nomdex was the *only* time engineers had anything to *do* with sex. Ha. Ha.) and appeal to the *Haves* to provide the kind of future they knew they deserved.

They would *Name* their future, describing it in colorful booths and with seminars and shows, and *Celebrate* it with wild parties that went beyond orgies into cybernetic revelries and perversions that have no name. We don't have the capability to party like they used to (and maybe it's a good thing), and these days the ratio of sex workers to engineers is a lot higher than it used to be (which is probably *also* a good thing), but Nomdex is still a sight to behold and experience to... experience. Just remember the visitor's mantra: rad medication, antibiotics ... rad medication, antibiotics ...

Inner Wasteland > Southward Travel

If you take 10 south, you're going to the *Dreaming Planes*. Without the Colorado River in the north, the land here is parched and dry. Desiccated. It's a lot flatter, also. Cracked mud-plains stretch on for miles. Mutant cacti rise to mountain-like heights. The air shimmers with heat coming off of it (even in the early evening), giving everything a harsh, liquid quality.

Inner Wasteland > Southward Travel > Tybalt

PRECIS: Once you've hit Tybalt, you're halfway through. Don't stop to celebrate. While not as vicious and deadly as Falstaff, Tybalt is a ruin you probably don't want to have anything to do with. Its reputation as a good "starter" ruin for newbie prospectors comes from its accessibility (it's only about an hour away, and you *can't* miss it) and its reputation for being relatively well preserved.

You see, Tybalt saw its action – two small nuclear events – early in the Age of War. Shattered and gutted, a mass pyre for its inhabitants, Tybalt was abandoned in every meaningful sense. To the extent that it remained in further use, it saw waves of refugees passing through it, stopping long enough to get radiation sickness on their journey south. There are a few minor battle fields to the west and some footnotes of history taking place *within* Tybalt, but instead of just getting wrecked or *buried* it mainly just got evacuated. That means someone already took the good stuff.

But, of course, you never know what "the good stuff" is going to be a long, hard century later, and as the prospector's cliché goes "There's always *something* left." So people keep coming back. That brings *other things* back too.

[Inner Wasteland > Southward Travel > Tybalt > Environment > Twin Craters Outlet Mall](#)

The word "mall" had strong connotations to the survivors of the early strikes in the Age of War. To them it a mystical place where anything you wanted or needed could be had and at reasonable prices. The Twin Craters Outlet Mall was therefore a monument to the lengths of cruel deception man will go to in order to pull off a scam.

The mall (a mass of shopping, parking, and parks) did exist and even kind of survived on the edge of the primary central crater in the middle of Amphitheater Road. The shop keepers had, at the time, nothing to sell save rags and old cardboard boxes. But the owners (and at this time there were refugees streaming through Tybalt) charged admission and there are photo-records that show lines stretched around the shattered streets hoping that something they needed could be satisfied at Twin Craters (which was neither an outlet mall nor near the other crater).

All they got was radiation sickness. That's all that was left to give them for what was highly probably their last shopping spree, but you can go by and look at the building. It's been shot up in the decades since it and Tybalt closed business, but it still has that air of hope about it somehow. That gleam that promises three floors of food, fashion, and family fun—that glow that's gone now from everywhere but the architecture.

[Inner Wasteland > Southward Travel > Tybalt > Activities > The Dome](#)

If you take the Highway 10 south south-east you'll run right through Tybalt. Over it, really. When you're on the freeway you can stop (on the road, not an exit) and take a look at the dome. It's big, blue-green, and about 3/4th of it survived the nuclear shelling Tybalt took. It's kind of pretty. It's an old government building that grew and grew when the place was inhabited.

[Inner Wasteland > Southward Travel > Tybalt > Utopia Farms](#)

You may notice that not so far from Tybalt is the one none-BoneYard exit that doesn't look so bad. You'll see billboards—great big painted signs if you don't know what that is—all over the place (and in the 'Yard itself) for Utopia Farms. They show a happy young couple dressed in gray overalls standing with a hydroponics PH-meter on rolling green hills with a brilliant blue sky and sun overhead. They promise food, lodging, and medicine. Whatever you do don't stop there. Even if you break down, don't walk there. If you're being taken there, save a bullet for yourself. I don't know how the commune survives or what exactly they do (*it is hydroponics* farming—they export food). But the psychological damage I've seen from people who've escaped (and there's damn few of those) makes me shiver even now. Do NOT stop at Utopia Farms.

Inner Wasteland > Southward Travel > Carnivorous Saguaro

PRECIS: A lot of mutants *will* hurt you even if you've got no intention of hurting them. Not the Carnivorous Saguaro. My biology tutor taught me that billions of years ago "good old fashioned" cacti developed a tough outer skin and spines and thorns to protect themselves from tenacious desert predators (desert insects, birds, like that). Apparently it worked pretty well for a long time.

Not anymore. Now to protect yourself from tenacious desert predators these days you need 24" maws and tentacles covered with poisonous spikes. The Saguaro in the South Wasteland are *bad*, and they will eat you and the jeep you road in on. But not because they're hungry, they're just taking care of themselves.

And that, dear traveler, means that if you keep your distance, you can take a good look at these majestic, butt-ugly towers of spines.

The Carnivorous Saguaro rise up to 15 meters from the desert floor. Normally, when they are *undisturbed*, they do what cacti have done for millennia—sit there and soak up the bright desert sun. But should you come to close you'll discover that they'd learned a few tricks since the insect / bird days. The Saguaro come to life violently, lashing out with blows that'll rend metal. They don't *need* to eat meat, but a little extra fertilizer never hurt.

Just because they're not relentlessly aggressive *doesn't* mean I'm suggesting you go and spend time out there (you can see them from the highway just fine, and there are *plenty* of things in the South Wasteland that will hunt you down and kill you. But I thought I'd mention them: they're interesting to think about, just in case.

And, yeah, those stories you've heard about there being good prospecting in the Saguaro fields aren't *entirely* untrue. Here's the bottom line: you can never be sure what the *safe distance* is. So people who go wandering around off road long enough tend to get eaten by a cactus. This leaves their stuff lying around, and if the next group comes along with the right mix of wenchies, grappling hooks, and harpoon guns, they might be able to haul some relatively undamaged junk out there.

I've seen Cactus Fishers make some pretty good hauls. I also know that every time you cast a line, you're taking a risk; rolling the dice. Roll long enough, and you'll end up cactus food. All those successful Fishers I just told you about? They've all lost a lot of friends. By all means seek your fortune, man. Just not in the Inner Waste.

[Inner Wasteland > Southward Travel > Heela Bend](#)

Heela Bend is south-southwest. You'll go by it if you're heading to the great ruins one way (8) or the other (10). There's an exit off the interstate which is why anyone even remembers it's there. There used to be a town, but a warlord parked his mobile command center in there and it was hit by a Tectonic Nuke. The whole town is about 30-feet underground (sorry, they already excavated the command center), and pretty well preserved if you want to go digging. I don't advise it: you can see from the few ruins that *do* stick up that there was some pretty fierce fighting there (and lots of old craters and unexploded ordinance). But the real kicker was that some idiot flew an aircraft over it and dumped several hundred gallons of a mercury-super-fluid alloy. Now it's skin-toxic and it *will* kill you. Happy digging.

[Inner Wasteland > Southward Travel > Flora > Jumping Cholla](#)

They bear some mention. They're a white-ish cactus that looks like a fuzzy collection of stubby tubes. It's actually kinda *cute* to look at. Firstly, they *leap* at you if you come close. It's disturbing to see. Secondly, they're covered with spines. Thirdly, the spines are barbed. Fourthly, the barbs are toxic. But, hey, they *look* cuddly! It's like a vicious poisoned teddy bear!

[Inner Wasteland > Southward Travel > Spotlight Basin](#)

If you go South and *West* (and there's no reason you should—it's not like there's a *road* there, or anything), and you travel at *night* (and there's no reason you should; the whole region's under a mosquito-born plague advisory and the mosquitoes are the size of your hand), you'll start to see some columns of light coming up from a vast, deep sinkhole travelers started calling *Spotlight Basin*.

You might start to wonder: What is that? Who put it there? What keeps the spotlights running? Man, I wish I could tell you. But first off, it's a trap. There's a zone there of about 3 miles by three miles where not a lot moves. That means some of those rocks are raider vehicles covered with cameo-tarpS. And if you *don't* belong to their club you'll be attacked.

But when you get closer to the lights, something happens. They say there are big toothy *mouths* under the sand big enough to eat a bike whole and strong enough (and sharp enough) to disable a car with the first bite. The few people I've talked to who are incurably curious and somehow have managed to survive that usually terminal condition say they've seen the light attracting other things, "natural things," to their doom. The mindless things in the Wasteland apparently head in there on a regular basis. Try to be smarter than that.

Inner Wasteland > Southward Travel > The Lady of the Toxic Lakes

PRECIS: People talk about "The Toxic Lakes." That doesn't even sound very nice, but the truth is even uglier. Out beyond everything else, so far west you're just about in the red desert, there's an above-ground chemical weapons dump. Someone left hundreds of thousands of gallons of what they call "non-aerosolized" chem in a series of bedrock quarries and channels.

The Toxic Lakes.

For ten to fifteen miles, in all directions the air stinks and the land is barren dust. Not even weeds grow. At about six miles, you start to see a heavy haze at the pit of the valley and breathing the air will kill you. At about two miles, exposed skin is a lethal hazard. The wire and warning signs start about here, and so do the bones. A lot of people have died out here over the years.

If you're nuts, and you keep going, you start to see the "canisters": Rusted oil-drums piled high by the hundreds, gutted military-looking trucks, and other signs of some kind of massive operation. A handful of sand from this range can kill everyone unprotected in the room. It's a good place to pick up souvenirs for someone you hate.

Eventually you reach the lakes. They steam and boil, but the gas is, thankfully, lighter than air. The heavy 'fog' that hangs over them never leaves the valley. I guess whoever put it there was thoughtful that way. If you've gone that far, you've probably come to see "the Lady" so I might as well explain.

They say something *lives* in the lake. Several somethings, actually. The Lady's Daughters. I, personally, have been close enough to see the mists, and that's it. I haven't seen the Daughters, and the pictures I saw could have been whipped up on someone's computer. But for what it's worth, they're fat, translucent, amphibian things with tails and fluted openings and webbed forelegs. They're ugly and vicious, and they *breathe* nerve gas.

The Daughters are probably real. The Lady—I have no idea. But the story keeps the Daughter's fed with flesh and the ground littered with fresh bones.

They say that the poison was put there for a reason – not to *kill* something, but to keep something that *would not die* dead. That it was put there by men who had looked upon an abomination and could only cover it with a worse sin. They say that under that lake of death lies a golden sarcophagus and within it lies the body of an Abnegated King. I *won't* go into what *that* is; if you don't know, good.

But suffice it to say that people couldn't live well enough alone, and the folks pouring the nerve gas knew it. As sure as they could bury something they wanted gone for a million million years, some crazy phuker would come along and dig it up. So they didn't just leave the poison. They left a guardian. They left *the Lady*.

If I had to guess, I'd say that The Lady is a really big freaking Dragon-Lizard-Frog thing. And maybe she is. But those who *claim* to have seen her, say she's *beautiful*. Whatever that means.

[Inner Wasteland > Southward Travel > The Lady of the Toxic Lakes > The Story](#)

The story doesn't stop there. It just takes a break. And it starts up a few hundred years later, when the Age of War was drawing to a close, and Marmoch The Deposed was exiled from the BoneYard, never to return. Marmoch's greed and tyranny and his apocalyptic visions (the 'Yard remolded as a great, dead Mausoleum dedicated to *him*) are all too well recorded. His exile from the Yard is as well, but his fate after he disappeared on foot into the Inner Wasteland is, officially, undetermined.

Those who believe the Story of the Lake believe he came here. They say that he walked through the blistering heat, heading toward where he knew he would find vengeance. And in vengeance, glory. And in glory, victory. And in victory, death for everyone ... or simply death. He came to the lake, seeking the deeply legendary casket that (supposedly) lies beneath it. Even in *those* long ago days, the legends of the Abnegated Kings were myths, but desperate men have always clung to myth and Marmoch would have been deeply and truly desperate. So maybe it's true.

And if it's true he traveled to the lake, then maybe it is also true that he entered its waters, unafraid of the boiling death there, because he held in his hand RapStar IV, the blade forged in the Age of Wonders by the Great Studios. RapStar IV – the sword that, if you believe the legends, could call down orbital strikes from its own satellite network, and cast a protective field around its owner so that no bullet or beam might harm him – kept him safe from the poison, but not from what the waters hid.

The legend says that the Lady, protecting the buried tomb, rose above him and a great battle ensued, with Marmoch calling down fire from the heavens and the Lady rending the energies that fell about him like a waterfall of light. And the Legend says that when the battle was done, Marmoch was gone and the Great Blade was embedded in the Lady's neck where it remains today.

So that is why people visit the Lake, Children. To catch the monster. To retrieve the blade. Happy hunting.

Inner Wasteland > Southward Travel > The Weeping Hill (The Observatory)

PRECIS: When people wax pretentious about the *Haves* they like to say, "Everything they *did* was art." Then they talk about the domes. If you ask someone who knows (for this book, I did), they'll tell you otherwise. Everything they did was *elegant*. Everything they did was *beautiful*. Everything they did was *evocative*. But art? No. If you asked a *Have* about *art*, he'd tell you that all that beauty and awe and magnificence came as second-nature to them. They did it casually, without even thinking about it.

When it came time to do *art*, they wrote on the sky.

The *Haves* had a few art forms. One was microscopic and biological; they designed viruses that were beautiful in their *terrifying lethality*. The other was "astronomy" or "star naming."

This might all be a *joke* they played on us, but if you believe it, then their greatest form of art was to *co-opt* the heavens, themselves. They would look up into the night sky and invent *constellations* in what they saw there. And in the course of a year, as those constellations rolled past, they would tell *epic* stories.

These stories were not written down, of course. There was no need for it. After all, they were there. Up *there*. Visible for everyone to look at. You see, the *Have's* conceit was that they were *not* making shit up, or even *reading* the stars, but actually *writing* with them. Creating and imposing meaning on the cosmos's random slate.

Astronomy was a performance art, and was held in outdoor theaters on high, desolate mountains. These theaters were called *observatories* and one that's still around (that you could visit if you were a *complete phucking idiot*) is south of the Yard on the way out of the Inner Wasteland. Place called Kitt Peak, in the Tohono O'odham Reservation in the Sonoran Desert.

Inner Wasteland > South > The Weeping Hill (The Observatory) > Standup Astronomy (The Audience)

During the Age of Wonders, Kitt Peak was *off limits* to most normal humans. The Astronomy that was performed there was for *Haves* only, and it was said to be so glorious and incandescent that normal mortals *couldn't get it*. Apparently a bunch of bewildered, (or worse, snickering) humans in the back gallery ruined the experience for everyone.

But the *Haves* were a reserved lot, and so to express their emotion and gratitude, they had *servants* built – the things they called "spirits." It is said that there are five spirits-in-residence there and that their names are Mayall, Burrell-Schmidt, McMath-Pierce, Wiyn, and Sara. These were called, collectively, The Audience.

The Audience, the ancient stories say, were built for the purpose of *appreciation*. They were designed to absorb and *understand* the beauty of the performances they bore witness to. They were to express the emotion that the *Haves* would or could not.

It is said that for hundreds of years they did. It is said that they filled the bleak, dark mountaintop with laughter, with applause, with cheers, and with gasps of awe at the cosmic audacity they observed. It is said that they were gifted with an impossibly deep understanding of physics and space, that they might better understand how the *Haves* were *using* the universe as their canvas.

The stories go on like this, but they always end with the *Last Performance*.

[Inner Wasteland > South > The Weeping Hill \(The Observatory\) > Standup Astronomy > The Last Performance](#)

There were many observatories where astronomy was practiced, but the one here, near us, was the greatest and every summer, during the darkest months, the greatest Have Astronomers would gather and imprint their stories upon the cosmos. They all told *different* stories, but the best (the truest, they said) was the one that stuck.

Year after year, they re-wrote the heavens (of course the stars never moved, the fabric of the void never shifted—it would be more correct to say they re-wrote the *meaning* of the Heavens), until one year a Have who had never performed before came to the Observatory and imposed upon the stars, a tale of such power and depth and *truth and beauty* that the Audience, for the first time ever, was moved to tears. And try as they might, they could not stop crying.

For the Audience was made *defenseless* against beauty and in the presence of such magnificent beauty, they were rent asunder at their souls. And so they cried. And they wailed. And every moment that they look up, into the heavens, they see that story play out again, year after year. And every moment of it tears at them. Every tick of every clock exposes them to the unbearable magnificence of the *Have's* story.

Today, you can still hear them wail. As you approach, you hear soft moans, and as you get closer, you'll hear five distinct voices, trapped under a vast hammer of artwork inscribed on the heavens. It is said that the spirits have great knowledge of the world and of the heavens. Of the past and the future. It is said that if there were a way to *rescue them* that they might be grateful that whoever should do so would be made a God by them. That might be true, but no one who has ever approached that lonely hilltop has ever come back, so perhaps we'll never know.

Inner Wasteland > Eastward Travel

Let's face it – there's no *good* way to go East through the Wasteland. As a result, the Eastern Ring is one of the most isolated, savage parts of the Known World. If you're going to the *Ring*, then go North or South and then take a clock turn. But every year dozens of fools, profiteers, and extreme prospectors disappear into the Eastern Wasteland, so let's talk about it.

Inner Wasteland > Eastward Travel > Route 88

PRECIS: It's probably the saddest stretch of self repairing highway the *Haves* built and its one of the most twisted. Furthermore, it lays at "ground level" which, like a lot of the area, is all the hell up and down heading east by northeast. If you must go east, take the Highway J Overarch, not Route 88.

But a lot of people *do* take Route 88 or some of its tributaries and go winding into the hills. A lot of these are people on the run from the authorities. If you are taking the "scenic route" keep away from the low areas: That fog there is the misty top of a pool of poison, and those rocks look melted because they *are*, by industrial acids. On the other hand, there are ... well, a few places to stop.

And by stop, I mean if you have a really serious medical emergency *and* your vehicle is damaged *and* your radio is out, *and* your spare is out too. Yeah, there are roads to drive around on out there and a little bit of life still clinging to them, but don't go thinking it's all that different from the rest of the mess.

[Inner Wasteland > Eastward Travel > Route 88 > Jake's Corner](#)

There's a bend in the road north of '88 with a big ... well ... shelf of rock near it. Sometime during the Age of War someone decided it was a good place to move a cache of weapons to, so they dug a hole in the side of the shelf. Today the weapons are gone, but Jake's still remains. Jake's. Last I was there, has been taken over by Misuses Jake, a mutant that looks like a cross between a giant octopus and a grizzly bear. The "café" is half cave, half diner. It can be a rough place (and the owner eats rock and doesn't mind breathing poisons so she doesn't care—check the atmosphere before you get out). If there's not a toxin advisory, the food is actually pretty good. Just don't ask what's in it. I'm not joking.

[Inner Wasteland > Eastward Travel > The Dagger Mirage](#)

Out there in the middle of the rocky wilderness is something that creates images. You can see them from the J-Overarch. You can even get out there if you really try, but why bother? You don't come back. The images look real though; you can see them with field glasses. You'll see a raised sign with these *golden arches on it* (One Trillion Served) and see old-style *refueling stations* and *water using Laundromats* and what used to be called "24-7 Convenience Stores." You'll see all of that out there—a little stretch of lit up town from the Information Age. Something out there remembers it, something near the rock formation Dagger. There are no roads that go there, so you have to off-road it, and then, I think, hike. So if you're really curious you can go and try to find out what makes the image of the way the world was sometimes appear out there. But not if you want to live.

Inner Wasteland > Eastward Travel > The Manufacturing Ruins

PRECIS: There used to be a lot of heavy industry, the "milling" of the Wonders for the whole western American seaboard in this area. It was bombed and sunk and otherwise destroyed during the Age of War. But the remnants are still there, scattered amongst the hills, some of them apparently have forgotten that they've been destroyed. This is where the Red Desert begins if you head east. It's a ruddy colored sand that smells of rust and carries tetanus. It's the ground up bones of the final gasp of the Industrial Age.

[Inner Wasteland > Eastward Travel > Manufacturing Ruins > Big Iron \(Factory Ruins\)](#)

As you drive along highway 60, you see rusted towers, lattice grates, and cement stacks rising out of the corrosion-tinted gravel. These scattered ruins are not the kind of cities you'd find in the north or south. In the Red Desert (and this goes for the wasteland as well as the ring), the ruins tend to be "complexes," "compounds," or "factories." In the previous ages (the Age of Wonders and the Age of War), the vast eastern desert was the compliment to the Distro-Points of the west. It was where the modular components and raw materials from the points were assembled, molded, forged, or otherwise *finished* into complex goods. The Red Desert was a massive industrial park and a distribution point (There are still the remains of a rail system and a monorail system long gone).

I believe that the Kingdom of IZ – that far-away, pseudo-mythical place beyond the Outer Wastes was once the same kind of thing on an even grander scale. We know that a lot of what the Distro-Point gives us isn't ready for use. It almost must have been.

So what's out there? Factory after factory, and these were mechanized factories: great concrete halls filled with robots working 24/7. There were rail hubs above and below ground to move the goods from one center to another. In the Age of Wonders, the factories put together the complex and *customized* consumer goods that fed and drove the ravenous retail culture. In the Age of War, the factories made weapons.

The Factory Complexes were strategic sites, very valuable and in the end, all too vulnerable. The wars that raged in the Red Desert left very few of them standing. Those that you see are only a fraction of what was once there, and it must have been astounding.

The majority of these structures are simply empty and badly damaged. Empty of anything valuable, that is. Assume that, in the Inner Wasteland, any structure you see with a roof is full of monsters. Inside, there's a barrenness and a cathedral-like quiet with evocative fixtures and markings to suggest the floor plan of the past age (An auto lathe went here. A smelting laser, there. And a conveyor belt ran down the middle...)

Prospectors keep going in there. Why? Because every so often someone comes out with a cache of weapons, or bolts of *unrefined* neonium, or a cluster of super servers. But that doesn't happen much, and it won't happen to you. Most of what people find in the rusted plains of the Inner Wasteland are what they find pretty much everywhere *else* in the Inner Wasteland: a fast death if they're lucky and a slow one if they're not.

[Inner Wasteland > Eastward Travel > Manufacturing Ruins > The Depot\(s\)](#)

In the Red Desert, tantalizingly close to the 'Yard, they say, there is a massive train yard – the legendary Depot, where the robotic rails systems that connected the Factory complexes came together, a "nerve-center" or brain of the entire sprawling system. And in this Depot, there would be hundreds of interweaving lines getting denser and denser – more tightly *woven* until they meet in a vast, enclosed hall. The Hall is described as a pyramid, hollow on the inside, with arches and buttresses and ramparts built for giants. Inside, there would be great metal servants capable of moving a rail car, or an entire train itself, from one "wheel" to another, a switching hub on a god-like scale.

If such a place exists (and so many people say it *must*) what would it hold? Certainly fascinating remains of the old rail systems. Offices of the rail administration (where the mainframe computers that ran the factory system no doubt lie). Power floors – halls full of dynamos and nuclear pods. And what else? Warehouses? Underground store-rooms filled with undelivered goods? Defense systems (now dormant) loaded with Age of War ordinance?

The stories become even more enticing when one can find so many maps to tell you *exactly* where the Depot is! Why it's right there, just beyond the end of 60... or over there, near the ringward edge... or. The fact is the maps disagree, and the fact is the Depot, as it exists in legend, is a myth.

There was no central switching hub. The "factory system" was, in fact, a network of smaller systems, each serviced by its own, specialized rail network. Most of the largest switching hubs were destroyed (if you're looking for them, follow your Geiger counter to the big, glowing crater). Some train yards *do* exist, and in one respect, the legends *are* right: they are impressive and evocative. If the *factories* are spare, utilitarian bunkers, the train yards have an artistic flourish in their architecture. They are, after a way, things of beauty, even in ruin.

They're also deadly. The materials transported to and from the factories were very toxic and often radioactive. The yards were permeated with poisons long before the Bone Yard began its *own* assembly and finishing work. Even in the Age of Wonders, the Inner Wasteland was a toxic swamp. And it's only gotten worse. The depots are heavily fortified installations (like the Factories but a lot more so), and the ones that are left tend to be *haunted* by the things that live in the Wasteland.

[Inner Wasteland > Eastward Travel > Manufacturing Ruins > Oxygen Mountain](#)

Oxygen Mountain is still on the air. You can navigate by its radio beacon if you're so inclined, and if you get close enough to it, you can see the great columns from its exhaust vents. It looks like a metal anthill rising out of the sand, with antenna and smokestacks and fluted vents.

Around it, for more than a mile in all directions, is a great "ticking battlefield" of blasted robots piled upon each other. The Mountain is probably the *only* remaining foundry still capable of making the great War Machines that defined battle in the Red Desert during the Age of War. It is, I guess you'd say, "The Winner." After all, it's still there. Its cause (whatever *that* was), its owner (the Warlord who ran it), and even its history are forgotten to the outside world, but the foundry continues to run and the computer general inside, continues to pursue its original goals (defend the complex, capture ground). If Oxygen Mountain were still receiving shipments of supplies and raw materials, it would probably still be sending waves of robot soldiers to capture the Bone Yard. *Then* the Hierarchy would see to it that it was taken care of "once and for all."

Instead, the Mountain is quiet and waiting. One day its "standing army" (the defense force that surrounds it) will fail, and we'll be able to look inside, a "living museum" from the Age of War. Until then, stay away. It's efficient and deadly.

[Inner Wasteland > Eastward Travel > Manufacturing Ruins > Salvage in the Ticking Fields](#)

If the prospector in you is screaming "Robot brains! Power supplies! Arms and armor!", hold on to your horses. The robot soldiers that were thrown away by the hundreds of thousands were *not* executive system toys, they were a *lot* more primitive and that cuts down on the retail value. Largely mechanical, they have *simple* computer brains that were directed by strategic computer minds far away.

And the power supplies they have are mostly old chemical batteries, long run-down, supplemented by geomagnetic filters and solar receptors that drink in just enough ambient power to track their weapons and trigger their clockwork gears. There *are* components worth salvaging out there, but they're few and vanishing far between.

And remember this: If there *are* things to find there, then you're not in an ancient, long defunct battlefield, but in an open plain surrounded by almost-working robots designed to target and kill you. That's a completely different story.

[Inner Wasteland > Eastward Travel > Manufacturing Ruins > The Ticking Fields](#)

The "famous" Ticking Field (the one you've heard of) is right at the end of Highway 60. And *that* one isn't so dangerous. It's seen a lot of visitors over the years; it's been, largely, pacified. The Ticking Fields are so named because of the sounds the half-buried war machines make as they try to train their weapons on you. Click-clickety-click. They *tick*.

They're old battlefields, see. Places where machine armies clashed and suffered mutual annihilation. In many cases, computer generals sent wave after wave of robot soldiers directly from the factories that made them to the battlefield where they fell. In cases where the opposing forces were evenly matched, the wars were fought at a devastating stand-still for *months* or even *decades*. Someone I talked to who knows about these things says there are probably *millions* of robot carcasses down in the Red Fields. They might be shattered, they might be crippled, but they're still fighting. They're still tracking targets, and they're still sending "fire-now" signals to their cannons, which ran out of ammo a century ago.

The "ticking" isn't loud; you can hardly hear it over the wind, an ultra-soft whisper of gears slipping or locking ratchets slowly raising the barrel of a cannon. It's kind of creepy, but I'll admit it – it's kind of cool.

Inner Wasteland > Westward Travel > Neurosphex

PRECIS: I hate the Neurosphex; everyone hates the Neurosphex. Nobody ever does anything about them because when it comes down to it, wiping them off the face of the earth is just too *darn* hard, and the truth is, they keep to themselves. You can find them if you look for them, though – head west down 10—and start looking for exits.

Eventually you'll find one that looks like a salvage picker's dream—down at the bottom, partly under some toxic fluid that might be water, are a bunch of submerged cars. That's when you've found it (okay, numerically it's near 98, there, are you happy?).

Just incase you *didn't know*, the Nurosphex are organized intelligent mutations that look a bit like wasps given a bright red and black armored coat. They're about 4-6 feet in length—and yes, they have a dangerous stinger.

They're brain-harvesters. If they get you, they pry your brain out of your skull and drop its quivering gray mass into something called a *Think Tank*. Think Tanks were created in the Age of Wonders as a way for a mind to transcend the body: a fluid bath that provides oxygen and whatever nutrients your noodle needs—and symbiotic cerebral parasites that devote themselves to neuron repair.

[Inner Wasteland > Westward Travel > Neurosphex >The Brain Gardens](#)

The Neurosphex are symbiotic to a machine—that means the machine needs them (they keep it running) and they need the machine. It's located in a bunker of some sort that's mostly underground and is hardened as hell anyway. The 'sphex are smart, use conventional weapons, and have several vehicular grade turrets around it. What's down inside is the Brain Garden.

The larval form of the Neurosphex feeds on the telepathic transmissions of dreaming minds—and that's what mummy and daddy bring them: minds ... your minds if you're not careful.

[Inner Wasteland > Westward Travel > Neurosphex >The Asylum](#)

The Think Tank is a powerful piece of psychoactive machinery. It's telepathic, very powerful, and multi-function. It isn't artificially intelligent though—but the Neurosphex supply the ... hmm ... brain power? In that department anyway.

They also do some trade in telepathic cracking for special clients (you'd better be a special client if you plan to visit the hive and return) and psychoactive repair.

They can be quite cordial in a militaristic "we-eat-your-kind" sort of way.

Inner Wasteland > Westward Travel > The Reservoir

PRECIS: You take 93 West and you'll see something *incredible*. It's *old* and it's *big*. It's a giant reservoir that was built centuries ago (and reinforced in the Age of Wonders—which is good because it was hit with sub-nuclear bombardment: you can still see the craters in its face and a big ominous crack down the middle).

It's over seven hundred feet high and over twelve hundred feet wide—and that's a *lot* of wall. It used to be some kind of hydro-electric power-plant. Now the water that flows through it is so full of industrial toxins you could almost just use it for rocket fuel.

The dam is an armory—a Hierarchy base and research station—it's also an executive retreat: a little home away from home in the Inner Wasteland. You can see the heli-ports there—and it's, maybe, the one place that air-traffic still runs pretty regularly.

If you come in driving, don't bring any trouble: there's a 12" thick steel gate, a mine field and several energy-mortars that create a land-air overkill zone. Gate crashing is *not* a good idea.

Inside there's parking and even executive accommodations (150c per night)—although there's a "holding facility" for emergency cases or refugees if you come in "on fire."

[Inner Wasteland > Westward Travel > The Reservoir >Lake Mead > Water Refineries](#)

Above the dam is a 250 square mile lake—Lake Mead. It's home to a variety of life-forms indigenous to the Inner Wasteland, some of them quite big and vicious under the surface of the water—but the Hierarchy has invested money in Water Refineries that can draw clean drinkable H₂O from the waters. So if you take the path around you'll see the Water Depots.

These are rough little towns with high electric fences and automated gun-towers that keep the Inner Wasteland at bay—you can find Video Poker Saloons, some of the dirtiest, weirdest Simu-Sex booths (as well as the real thing) and a variety of Chemo-Dens that cater to the disease of your choice. Being outside the 'Yard, some of these places have reputations for being places where *business* goes down—the kind of *business* one doesn't do in the BoneYard. That's a sort of business to be wary of, whatever form it takes.

[Inner Wasteland > Westward Travel > The Reservoir >Lake Mead > Gambling Palace](#)

The last casinos didn't die with Vegas—not entirely. There's plenty of gambling all over the place—but the *Texas* is, without question, the most prestigious place to play in the known world. It's a river boat that makes a nightly trek out into Lake Mead. Its underside is covered with electrical rails that create a death-field in the water around it if anything gets too close. It has a glass bottom and search-lights on the underside: you can look out into the murky green depths and see the silhouettes of monsters in the darkness ... and you can play with your life: literally.

The owners: a private concern in the 'Yard, will let you bet your life for 250c plus or minus various valuation factors. It works like this: cash yourself in (you have to pass a medical screening) and then you have to buy yourself out. They'll give you a collar with microbes in it that'll kill you if you leave the boat prematurely.

If they like the look of you—and you lose your money, you work for them. If not, well, they'll make a statement with you (and some of the patrons find this entertaining—I suggest you don't even go and look. If you do, don't try to excuse it as *curiosity*—you're going to see a person get executed). Don't think they won't. No one is more heartless than a casino: it's the humanitarian equivalent of absolute zero.

[Inner Wasteland > Westward Travel > The Reservoir >The Talon Angles](#)

Sometime in the past someone came along and created the Talon Angles. They're indigenous to the place—humanoid mutations that breed true with cybernetics. They've got wings and bronze skin. The look, I'm told, is "Olympian." You can see them flying in the spray of the sluice gates of the dam.

They're beautiful. They live up in the rocks and have clearance to come and go at all levels of the dam itself. The Hierarchy guards don't shoot them down or mess with them—and if you do they'll shoot *you* down.

It's not clear why: The Angles (with bird talons for feet) are scary in a fight (they've got heavy armor, they're very strong, they're fast, they fly, and they have bladed claws)—but it's less than fear and more than tradition.

There are those who swear the Talon Angles (who, it seems, have nothing to do with the trials of man) have a racial memory of the mechanics of the dam and a psionic resonance in tune with it: they know if it is damaged and how to repair it.

The Outer Wasteland

It's the last trip a lot of people ever take—it's one with no clear destination. Think you're going to the Kingdom of IZ? Think again—yes, there are caravans—but we have no statistics at all on how many people from there never make it here. We know (as well as we can) that about sixty percent of the people from *here* don't show up *there*. But if you want to see a *Have* dome or you want to visit some of the really ancient, really mysterious places left on the planet (no doubt looking for somewhat *less* mysterious treasure) here's a short-list of places to go, things to see, and ways to die. Don't say I didn't warn you.

Outer Wasteland > North > Northern Reach

PRECIS: Start at Denver and head straight up north. There are some good roads (part of the notorious Denver Death Trap, I guess) and some pretty scenery. The desert, as you go north, gives way to forest—forest that's tangled and dark and looks like it's about 1000 years old. It can't be—I know—but if you ever look for yourself, try to tell me I'm wrong. About 30 miles out of Denver up the highway is the Calanan Outpost—one of the few places in the Outer Wasteland that's been beating the odds. It's run by a family of semi-anthropomorphic panda bears (and they look fuzzy but they're tough as hell, trust me on this) and it's a friendly enough place if you can get there (and aren't bringing trouble). And that's where my tale stops. That's as far as I went. Everything else is conjecture.

Outer Wasteland > North > Northern Reach > The Machine Herds

Out there in the vast empty stretches as far north as anyone has ever gone there are reports of machines—big beetle like things sort of like the heavily armed *Crawler* death machines that inhabit the ruins of cities—but these are different. For one thing, they seem to migrate (as far as anyone can tell) for another, they're not *reportedly* hostile (as opposed to the *Crawlers* which are unrelentingly hostile), finally, they're *bigger*. The large ones are over 300 yards long and over 50 yards high. But there are smaller ones too. It is speculated that the "breed" and the smaller ones are "young.". The herd is seen in the plains areas up north, sometimes found in the massive craters. There are people who believe they are *reclamation machines*—designed by the Haves to repair environmental damage.

Outer Wasteland > North > Northern Reach > The Abyss

If you're north of Denver there's something else you can find up that way. It's called the Abyss and it's a pit so deep no one knows how deep—and that's not for trying: I've seen transcript of a radio beacon dropped into it. It fell over six thousand miles before it stopped broadcasting. Do some math: either the signals were interfered with—or that's deeper than the planet. I'm not sure which answer I prefer. Surrounding the Abyss is some of the strangest terrain going too: massive collections of geysers, rock formations that look like they might've come from the moon.

Outer Wasteland > North > Northern Reach > Mountain of Faces

They say that further up, into those woods, you can go—and keep going—and find something amazing. A massive mountain carved with about 12 giant human faces. Apparently at one point it was a solemn monument—but then, later, there was a game show or something and they just started putting *anyone* up there. But, I'm told, it hasn't lost its charm: from the massive pile of rubble at the bottom to the moss-covered heads at the top it's a place to go and look—a place of *power*. If you're up that way, check it out. Take some pictures. I'd like to see 'em.

Outer Wasteland > South > The Pharms

PRECIS: South—far south, at the rim of the Outer Wasteland and on the edge of a savage, ultra-toxic jungle are three *massive* chemical refineries. Still functioning from the Age of Wonders, the Pharms produce drugs, chemicals, and medicines for the world. They produce Dead-Line, an ultra-addictive amphetamine that rulers use to keep shock-troops in line. They produce hallucinogens and happy-pills and smart antibiotics and other things. The people are exotic looking and quiet—extremely quiet, their lives governed by psycho-chemicals that make them docile and productive and utterly *the same*.

Outer Wasteland > South > The Pharms > the Dead Line Trade

The Pharm's "greatest gift" to the world is not medicine—but a narcotic: *Dead-Line*. It is a powerful stimulant, it is fiercely addictive, and if you withdraw, you die. The warlords of the Onion Empires, the shock troops of the Pharms and the Congregation, and the external militia of the Kingdom of IZ all use Dead-Line to keep their troops loyal and controllable. It is illegal to sell or distribute in all of those lands (to keep deserters from finding another source)—and the Hierarchy (the only major power not to use Dead-Line) executes traffickers it catches.

Dead-Line comes pre-packaged in plastic syringes called *sub-derms*. A lot of other things do too, but Dead-Line has a unique black plastic packaging with a red ring around the top.

Shock-troops out in the desert, glassy-eyed and "jumped up" on Dead-Line are a cliché of the Onion Empires. Troops on *the line* trend towards things like needless massacres and brave but suicidal assaults.

There is some question as to *why* the Hierarchy doesn't use the drug. The most obvious answer is that they don't want to be dependant on the Pharms to keep their fighting force going—but analysis of what their spokesmen have said also lends credence to the view that they find it somewhat repulsive.

Outer Wasteland > South > The Pharms > The Overlords

The rulers—those who dominate the plants and govern the perfectly organized societies laid out around them, are carefully designed mutations. Obese yet healthy and strong (due to an intravenous diet of chemical cocktails that warp the genome and run their hearts and lungs on synthetic fuels) they are urbane, intelligent (it is said they take intellect enhancers so as to have minds like computer databanks) and utterly inhuman. Their wet, broad smiles show teeth which appear normal but house internal injection devices—they command—or even dispatch their servants with a bite. Their cruelty—when necessary to make a point to an observer—or simply for their own pleasure, is legendary.

Outer Wasteland > South > The Pharms > The Rappaccini Jungle

South of the Pharms is jungle—toxic jungle. They call it a Rappaccini Ecology—flower's perfume is a nerve gas. An insects sting a military grade toxin, the entire ecosystem aggressively hostile. People have made it into the jungle (they say there are cities back there, all overgrown with deadly plants)—and there are stranger stories still. But no one has lasted long enough to be sure.

Outer Wasteland > South > The Pharms > The Pyramid

As you head south, towards the bottom of the world you will approach a six-story, silver pyramid, subdivided into six levels. Around it, breaking through the grass are computer-controlled guns in hardened concrete bunkers. Along each silver side of the building are engraved names of chemicals—long names, nonsensical to almost all those who see them. At the bottom are the chemicals, the *Wonder-drugs*, that the rulers of the Pharm's claim will serve the individual's *physiological* needs. At the top are drugs that simulate *spiritual peace and enlightenment*.

Outer Wasteland > South > The Pharms > The Gulf

The largest known body of water is off the shore of the Pharms. It's a great gray ocean deemed too dangerous to navigate (there are aquatic hunter killer robots and sharks the size of old naval destroyers, for starters)—but it's there—there's still water left. Judging from a globe either it shouldn't be there, it's walled in—or something is really strange (considering the Pacific Ocean, or lack thereof).

Outer Wasteland > South > The Church of the Congregation

PRECIS: South of the 'Yard, down the *Have*-built highway is a white line that stretches up into the sky. Impossibly tall, it simply shimmers there for miles and then starts to grow thicker—then the dunes of garbage and broken down vehicles begin to pile up. Radio broadcasters transmit sermons over all frequencies and masses of refugees and supplicants and pilgrims traveling by foot start to appear. In the midst of wretched refugee camps (surrounded with chain-link fences, guard towers with massive halogen search lamps, and electrified razor-wire) are pylons from which *The Word* thunders for the faithful to hear. And all the while the white strip in the sky gets thicker and wider.

It is called *The Needle* and it is an elevator—a space elevator—to Heaven (or more appropriately the HeavenSide orbital habitat). It is built of the same indestructible egg-shell white material as the *Have* domes—but unlike them, it is open. Surrounding the "space port" is a circular walled city—the Holy City of the Congregation. Beyond those walls are the filthy disease and garbage ridden masses that come to ask for blessing, forgiveness, or hope.

The chief tenant of the Congregation is that the *Haves* left us because we were *bad*—that we were cast out like unruly sons and daughters and must *atone* for our wicked ways. The Congregation is powerful and enjoys support amongst the superstitious and the desperate. Even in the BoneYard the Congregation enjoys considerable political power. And their access to the secrets of the Heavenside station, perhaps the only remaining *Have* habitat that is actually *opened* gives them bargaining tools in the political machinations in which they engage.

Outer Wasteland > South > The Church of the Congregation > The Tower of Song

About 150 miles East of the Needle, in the desert, is a crater. In that crater is a piece of one of the orbital that crashed to earth some 95 years ago. No one is certain of what event led to the ejection of a piece of the station—or if it's landing spot was random or not—but it's there—and it "sings"—babbling in the telepathic spectrum. You can hear it for miles.

People come from the Ring and the Yard to do penance there (it's a pilgrimage) and to visit the outpost around it (which has enough inequity that you can go back and do double penance after spending a night there). It's a rough outpost and the pilgrims that aren't well defended get robbed regularly. But if you're at the Tower, you can listen to the "music"—the almost incomprehensible babble of voices from its broadcast—and you can imagine that maybe it's saying something to you. It's weird, I can tell you that. Or you can make the big donation that "assures you a place" when the *Haves* return—and the monks will take you down to the still burning reactor chamber and open the three seals—and let you look in ... and blind you.

Outer Wasteland > South > The Church of the Congregation > Hell TV

Whatever else is up there on Heavenside, there's a heck of a broadcaster. The Congregation gets world-wide TV coverage: and their most popular show is trips through computer generated hells (which await those who displease the *Haves*). Spit bodies writhing in electric fire (don't ask us—that's what it looks like) and the stereophonic pandemonium of the damned are popular shows both within the 'Yard and outside.

Outer Wasteland > South > The Church of the Congregation > Pilgrimage and Tithe

One way you can convince the *Haves* you are ready for their return is to make a pilgrimage to the Holy city. Hundreds die along the way. More die from dysentery and pneumonia upon arrival—but a steady stream, bearing all their passions flows constantly (that's why the city is surrounded by garbage) into the holding pens.

Outer Wasteland > South > The Church of the Congregation > The Lottery

And once it a while the Pilgrimage "pays off." Each year, a drawing of 10 of the supplicants is chosen to *ascend*—they are taken to a platform and give their thanks to the wondrousness of the *Haves*—and then they enter the needle—and are carried up—and up—and up. They are never seen nor heard from again.

Outer Wasteland > South > The Church of the Congregation > The Book

The Tract—the text of the beliefs of the Congregation is ubiquitous throughout the remaining world. It is sold by missionaries and updated constantly. In some stops it is a *crime* not to hold the latest book (and you never have the most recent)—of course the roadblock will be happy to *sell* you one—for a *reasonable* price.

Outer Wasteland > South > The Church of the Congregation > The Needle

The space elevator is called The Needle by almost everyone—and from a distance it looks like a bright white, perfectly straight needle that pierces the sky. The Hierarchy, the Pharms, even the Kingdom of IZ would *love* to capture it—to see what wonders lie in the floating habitat to which it connects. Perhaps the doors at the top of the Needle are sealed—but no body thinks so—the Congregation certainly alludes to the wonders that will be bestowed upon *everyone* when we are good enough—and the *Haves* bless us with their return.

Although the Congregation has a very elite fighting force, it is *small* and close enough to the 'Yard that the Hierarchy could take it in a fight—but that has not happened (and probably never will): the Three Protocols ensure it.

The First Protocol: If attacked—if an army approaches the outer wall, the first protocol will be enacted: the senior members of the church will enter The Needle and the Church's army will attempt to hold the wall.

The Second Protocol: If the wall is breached, from within The Needle, the doors (un-openable, and unbreakable) will be shut and the elders will *ascend*, rising up to Heavenside station.

The Third Protocol: If the army does not fully surrender the lead technician will generate a random locking code for the doors and throw a switch: the control chambers will be flooded with a persistent, deadly nerve agent—forever sealing it from the inside. No one will ever use it again

Outer Wasteland > East > The Onion Empires and the Kingdom of IZ

PRECIS: The Kingdom of IZ rests on the far outer edge of the Outer Wasteland. East of IZ, there is toxic industrial cityscape and poisoned fields. The air is deadly. The ground is radioactive, and ancient battle machines still prowl the land. Furthermore, even the most dedicated expeditions have traveled into that wasteland and found ... *nothing*. Maps tell of an ocean still further East—but it has never been reached.

The Kingdom of IZ revolves around 20th and 21st century technology—massive industrial plants—hundreds of them, still run (their power sources unknown—but more and more stop every year—and they're closer to running out of people than plants). Were it not for a working Distro-Point in the 'Yard, IZ would be the predominant military power on earth.

But they are not. It is said the people worship clocks: time-clocks by which they live and regulate their lives. Whether this is true or not, observers have reported that as a society they are slowly "winding down." There are more deaths and fewer births each year. Although military machinery is produced (mostly sold to the Onion Empires for food—the Kingdom of IZ cannot grow its own in the deep rusty desert and the fields poisoned by industry).

Outer Wasteland > East > The Kingdom of IZ > the Hourglasses

Travelers have reported that within the city there is a hall of 24 pillars, appearing in the forms of hourglasses. They are filled with a thick green liquid and are fully twice the size of a man. Indeed, within the chambers *are* men—curled into fetal positions, neither moving nor breathing—*suspended* in the solution. The liquid drains—slowly—over *decades*. At some point the men will be exposed and, perhaps, awakened. Each of the men appear as idealized "gods" and each bears a number—appearing as a birthmark, rising naturally from the flesh. Some say that when the last member of the kingdom dies off, the beings in the glasses will be born—and mankind will fall before them; but nothing is really known for sure.

Outer Wasteland > East > The Kingdom of IZ > the Expiration Soldiers

The Kingdom of IZ has little by way of *Have* era technology save what it salvages (mostly in the form of ancient machines) and what it trades for (it trades with the Salt and Pepper complexes, deep-wasteland prospectors who bring back relics, and *The Hierarchy* and the *Pharms*). However, it has developed its own peculiar breed of Cyborgs. The Expiration Soldiers are thought by some to be phantoms—but others swear they are all too real. They are hooded figures (wearing dark brown desert robes that hide their face). Beneath the cloth they are only *barely* human. A cybernetic tank keeps the heart and lungs and brain alive—but beyond that they are robots—and not the relatively clean robots the *Haves* would have built. They are black-metal clawed nightmares—pulley systems, gears, pumps and articulated motors replace bone, muscle, and tendons. Their faces are misshapen sheets of glass with red sensor-lasers beneath. Their voice a raspy hiss through a "throat-mounted" speaker. They are said to shamble as they move—but move they do—tirelessly, needing neither food nor water, but extracting nutrients from air and heat. They are assassins with built in poisoned weapons, expertly aimed firearms, and possessors of exotic combat techniques. Their job is to kill those who rebel against the Time Clocks—and to "collect" the lives of those whose time has "expired."

Outer Wasteland > East > The Onion Empires

Head east, across red desert and into the Outer Wasteland and you'll find, amongst the dunes and the ruins, and the other things a series of roads that fork—and lead to great—*miles in radius* cement pipes that rise several hundred yards out of the sand. These pipes are marked with fading painted numbers and symbols and their purpose remains a mystery. Built on a scale that is unimaginable they *must* be *Have-era* constructs—but the technology is not ultra-modern. In any event, within their walls are cement basins with tubes that run to seemingly infinite water wells. Within these massive walls, cities have been built (soil imported from the greener lands centuries ago, terraced fortresses built up the walls, and entryways carved or blasted in the outer ring.

Outer Wasteland > West > The Pacific Desert and the Shelf

PRECIS: West is, mostly, the Grand Ruins—there are two: LA to Tijuana and San Francisco. Both of these are massive, quiet, and deadly. Mostly “still standing” you can see them from a great distance—like concrete-gray mountain ranges against the western sky.

But you can go past them and down the Shelf—off into the Pacific Desert. There's a pretty big drop—and down there—down there it gets weird fast—and hot—and dry—and mean. Real mean. But you can get around there—and visit the nomads on the other side of the city. Many of them have never even *heard* of the BoneYard—a lot of them speak a language we don't know much about. They have their own legends about what happened to the world. You can get there if you're dedicated. A lot of people don't come

Outer Wasteland > West > The University

Smack in the middle of the Grand Ruins is one last gasp of an earlier age. The University with the most powerful Research and Development Artelect (artificial intelligence) left on the planet is an enclave—armed, with walls, surrounded by rubble and death—that recalls an earlier time. If you can get there (armed convoys run like clockwork buy only two or three times a year)—or even *get in*—you get to see a “campus” that real students lived at centuries ago. They have deep reservoirs—and the campus is green. There are classes—people working to try to reclaim the Breakthrough—to understand the mysteries of time and space and history and everything.

To most people who even know about it, the kids there—taken at a young age—there are teams who travel around with computerized testing kits—it's just a magnificently unfair lottery. To people in power it's (mostly) seen as a waste of money and resources.

But the Hierarchy—the family that controls the BoneYard—the most powerful force on earth—and perhaps one of the most ruthless—keeps writing the checks—keeps sending the trucks—because who knows, some day it might pay off.

If you can get out there on official business, take a look around. Inside the walls you'd never know the world ended. It's a nice, safe, quiet little world where they don't allow weapons or narcotics or foolin' around if you aren't “of age” and married. It's weird. And just having been there hurts sometimes—knowing that once that was *normal*—and now it's almost all gone.

Outer Wasteland > West > The Yiggs

Up at the northern edge of the San Francisco Grand Ruins are the Yiggs. They're trees some 300 stories tall. I've seen them—hell, you can see them pretty easily if you know what to look for—it looks like a nice green cloud of smoke—but when you click in on the field glasses you suddenly see ... *trees*. These things are big—I was told by a psychic that in the end days the trees got their wishes granted and their wishes were to be *huge*—and they are. Incredibly. And they're not happy with us. That's what the psychic told me—and I believe her.

In the Age of War there were columns of armor and powered infantry that were moved through there. They stopped doing that: the hardware wasn't coming back out. I've been to the outskirts of the trees (they come up right out of the city ruins—so getting there is a trick and half already—and I can tell you it *feels* eerie.

And I've seen tapes—old Age of War tapes. I've seen arms, still twitching, holding laser rifles sticking right out of the massive sides of the trees. I've seen a tape—slowed down so you could see it—of an Armored Personnel Carrier getting sucked under—into the earth—solid earth that a tank had just rolled over so fast you'd blink and miss it. There's an intellect there—and secrets amongst those mammoth trees—no one I've ever met has journeyed far inside.