

*Lords of Gossamer & Shadow*

# Gossamer Worlds: Ring of Fire



*by Matt Banach*





Rite Publishing Presents:

# Gossamer Worlds: Ring of Fire

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**Special Thanks** to Jason Durall for his help in developing this.

**Based on Lords of Gossamer & Shadow by Jason Durall**

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# Ring of Fire

*“Grit crunched beneath my feet as I moved along the edge of the cavern, cautiously moving toward another darkened alcove. The surrounding rock was dusty, and the normally dank air of the catacombs drew thin and dry. The next Door was hewn from sun-bleached wood – the knotty, gnarled type worn smooth by age while still looking prickly as a porcupine. The rusty doorknob screeched as I gave it a hard turn, and as the Door swung open, I felt the blast of scalding hot desert air laced with a hint of brimstone. As I stepped through onto the crackling yellow grass of a desolate prairie, I felt the weariness of a thousand miles in a single westward stride.” - Yaeger's Travelogue*

## Description

They say the world known as the Ring of Fire rests on the back of a rattlesnake-spirit so big it coils around the sun with room to spare... so spiteful it swallowed its own tail... and so stubborn it won't stop eating until the meal is done. In a spiritual sense, that's pretty dead-on, though just like most things in the multiverse there's a lot more to it; all I know is that every time I set foot on the harsh prairies of this wicked wheel I can feel the menacing rattle of that mean old world-serpent thundering deep beneath the ground. It doesn't matter that those tremors are also structural micro-quakes brought on by uneven solar exposure – I always think of the snake first.

The short version: the so-called Ring of Fire is a helter-skelter frontier realm lining the interior of an ancient Dyson ring, trudging through the last ticks of a doomsday clock countdown. Day by day, hour by hour, the last few-hundred leagues of what was once nearly six hundred million miles of habitable ring are withering under the doom of an eternal high noon. A line of relentless, life-scorching heat creeps ever westward, and all the survivors of this harsh world have become refugees and pilgrims just trying to stay one step ahead of death.

While the fate of this world sounds like something out of hoary legends and god-fearin' tall tales, the reality of the matter is based in pure science – and requires me to explain the mechanics of a Dyson ring, for anyone unfamiliar with such things. A Dyson ring (sometimes referred to as a 'ring-world') is a hoop-shaped astronomical superstructure set spinning around a star, said hoop having a radius equal to the orbital radius of a habitable planet. For a ring the size of one 'Earth' orbit, that's a circumference of about 600 million miles! Multiplied by the width of the ring, that's a *lot* of surface area on which to grow life. A facsimile of night and day is engineered in this instance by interposing a 'shade ring' with finely-tuned shutters of variably-transparent material which also serves to shield the living surface of the ring from the punishing glare of unfiltered sunlight and any excess radiation from solar flares. Centrifugal force from rotation provides the





equivalent of planetary gravity, and other technology manages weather patterns and all the other various minutiae of creating a habitable bio-zone (or, as in this case, millions of unique bio-zones separated by oceans, mountains, walls, or other barriers) so that flora and fauna can live on the inner surface of the ring.

This particular ring-world was crafted millennia ago by a mysterious civilization known in this world only as the First Wrights, its slim halo surrounding a single lonely yellow star adrift without neighbors in a vacant gossamer reality, which had otherwise evaporated into the void of Shadow. There's plenty of speculation about who exactly these master makers were, but my best information is that they were a species of life-curious mechanoids who built and operated the ring as an enormous biology experiment – a hoop-

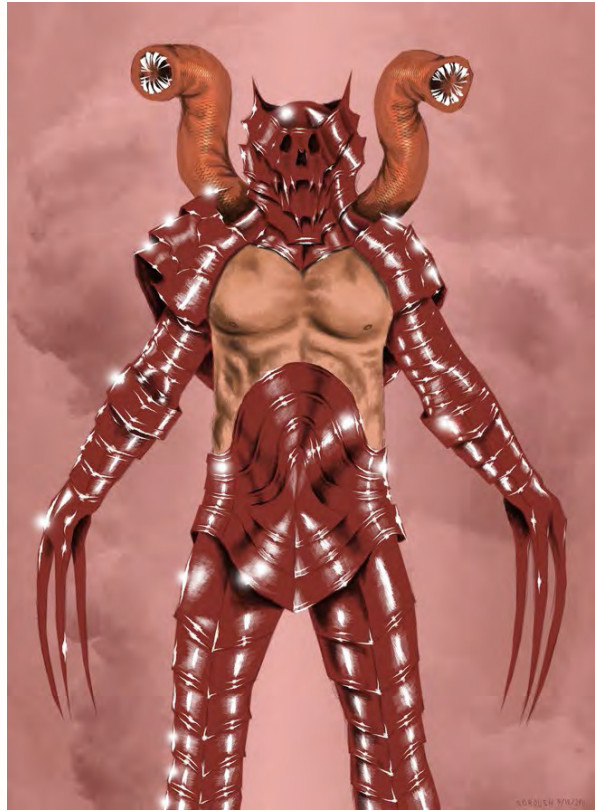
shaped petri dish with room for millions of planet-sized bio-zones, where they could seed and science-up to their hearts' content. Maybe if you're able to get into the inner workings of the thing you can figure out more of the history, but what I know for sure is much more recent.

Five hundred years ago this ring-world was overtaken by a twisted traveler of the Grand Stair – a malevolent body-possessing spirit known as the Man with Red Hands. If that name sounds familiar, that's because I've discussed this bastard before. Originally spawned from the insidious predatory reality known as the Nightmare Kingdom, the Man With Red Hands is an apex-level boogeyman who successfully eradicated the original caretakers of this world and has spent the last several hundred years sowing terror and confusion. Eventually the Man gained



control over Heaven's Shade, the command center located on the ring-world's inner-orbital shade ring, hacking into the automated shade controls and causing the shade-shutters to fix themselves completely open, thereby exposing the ring beneath to the harsh glare of unfiltered solar radiation at an intensity the life-forms of the ring's surface were never designed to withstand. Said another way: the bastard is sun-baking the hapless life-forms on the habitation ring below, with a line of eternal high noon inexorably marching from east to west, heading counter-clockwise around the ring. At first this searing doom (called 'the Bright Scourging') moved swiftly, scorching over 98% of the ring's surface, but fifty years ago the pace of this doom slowed to an average of a few miles per day. It's possible that this change in the rate of the Bright Scourging is a technical issue having to do with failsafes in the shade ring's controls. But, more likely it is deliberate cruelty designed by the Man With Red Hands to sow dread and terror amongst the ring's remaining inhabitants, many of whom are well aware that they're all about to fry – and are racing to stay one step ahead of fate.

Millions of miles of ring-world bio-zones have been burnt and bleached into a dusty, sterile, irradiated wasteland. The last few hundred leagues of un-scorched terrain (called 'the Walking West') are beautiful expanses of plains and plateaus... overrun with droves of refugees racing ever-westward ahead of



*The Man With Red Hands*

the encroaching doom of eternal noon. It is a realm of desperate folk constantly on the move, warring amongst each other over the resources they've brought with them from the million-plus miles of the world-that-was and scavenging everything they can from the frontier lands that fall beneath their shadow.

### *Typical Denizens*

The population of the Ring of Fire was once *much* more biologically varied, with thousands of distinct sentient races populating its various bio-zones as intended by the genetic seeding of the First Wrights. However, almost all of the non-human areas were incinerated in the early days of the Bright Scourging, with

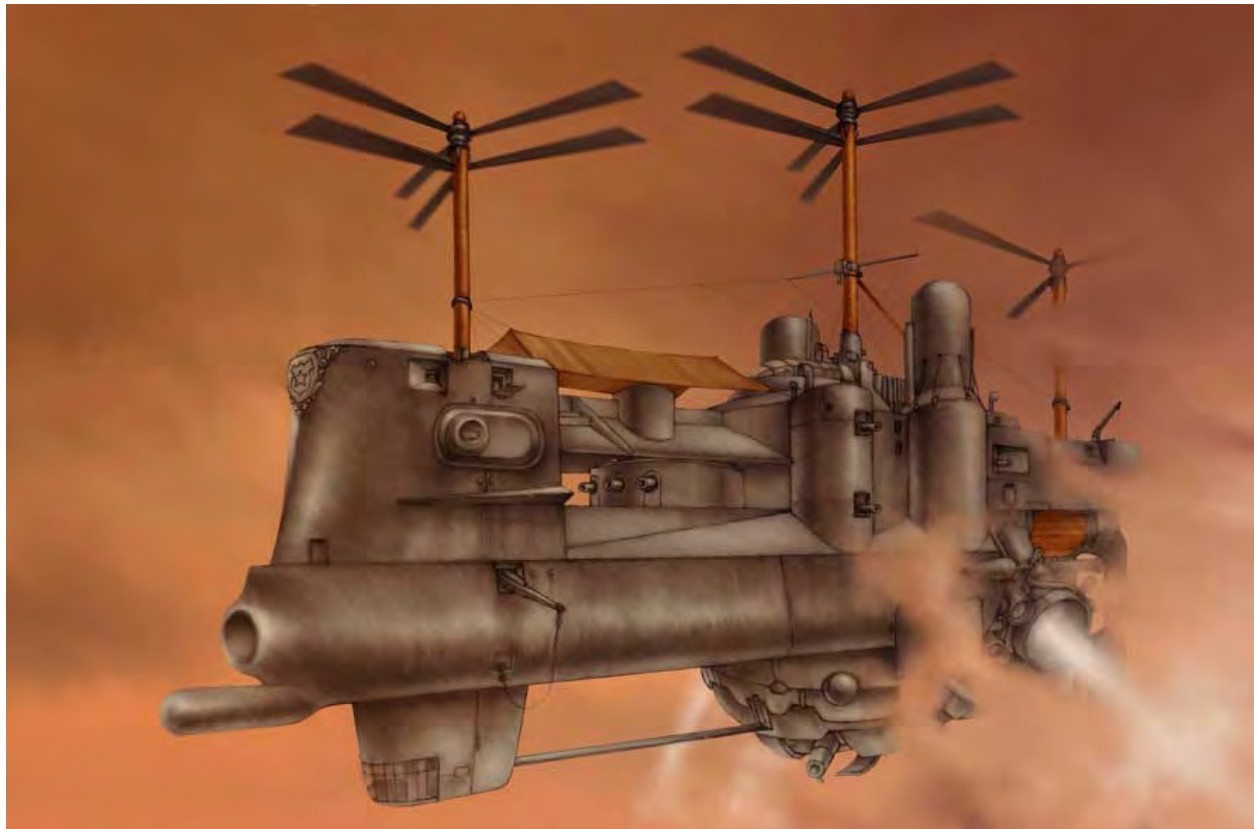
only the faintest traces of their heritage and existence surviving to reach the Walking West in the present day. Hence, while you may at times see the bones of some bizarre beast mounted on the hood of somebody's hard-riden steam-craft, or note a strange traveler with alien features that don't belong on a "man", most of the Walking West is, genetically speaking, human-populated and Earth-like. Except when it's not.

Pilgrims are those people who have fled their native lands in the east, or have just now been uprooted by the coming tide, picking up everything they could carry and scrambling westward once they saw the line of searing heat approaching, or heard the terrible truth from the fleeing hordes who told them what was coming. They are an immense, overwhelming wave of humanity spurred on by the imperative to keep moving for their survival. Modes of transportation vary widely depending on which bio-zone the pilgrims came from. The current bio-zone undergoing the Bright Scourging is one with a technology level equivalent to Earth's "wild west", so horseback riders and wagon trains are common, followed by long processions of hard-trudging marchers too poor or too unlucky to have a decent ride. Pilgrims fight amongst themselves as often as they have to fight the elements and the circumstances; banditry, cannibalism, and fanaticism are rampant, as the harsh realities of life on the run leave little room for building community and even less room for compassion. Many traveling groups have their own enforcers or small cadre of rifle-

trained soldiers, but for the most part there's no justice out there except for what you make. I'd like to say these poor folks are doing the best they can under the circumstances, but if the Man With Red Hands' aim was to push these folks to their psychological and moral breaking point, the plan is working all too well.

Brass Imperials, also known as Golems, are steam-savvy refugees from a more technologically advanced empire to the near east – the previous bio-zone to burn beneath the Bright Scourging. Physically, imperials are tall, muscular humanoids with coppery metallic skin, jeweled eyes, and over-wide mouths filled with iron-gray teeth. Mechanically adept, they have the know-how to build themselves steam-powered airships and massive walking-machines to help them survive the mobile apocalypse; while they have the science to build gasoline engines as well, any hope based on fossil fuels evaporated when they had to leave every oil well and refinery they'd ever built a thousand miles behind. Basing their current marvels on furnace-fed steam engines which burn plant matter gobbled up from the terrain in front of them, the Golems are constantly adapting their technologies to the rough conditions of perpetual travel, where absolute efficiency is a matter of life and death. A few of their best scientists are on the verge of feasible solar power, which would be a game-changer, but they're not there yet and research is tricky on the road. While most of their resources are devote by necessity to transportation, Golems have been known to defend their





caravans with clockwork automatons, steam-powered battle suits, and the occasional lightning gun. The largest gaggle of Golems traveling across the Walking West is a herd of hundreds of lumbering walking machines led by their Emperor-in-Exile, Lord Sovereign Davi Barthzamus-Kai. I've met him; he's a fat, entitled, ruthless despot whose only redeeming quality is his unwavering dedication to the survival of his people. Barthzamus-Kai has convinced his loyal followers that one day they'll reach safety and rebuild their (his) empire – without regard for who they'll displace, consume, or trample along the way. Golems aren't evil as a whole, but with much greater technology than the pilgrims and unspoiled they overrun in their westward march, and no social compunctions about

seizing humans as slave labor, these imperial titans tend to be the bullies and greedy villains of many a tale.

'The Unspoiled' are the indigenous people still out there in the verdant frontier to the west, just ahead of the massive tide of pilgrims, imperials, and other mobile refugees. As I mentioned before, the current bio-zone being overrun is similar in population to Earth's Wild West, so the Unspoiled are thousands of tribes of primitive human herdsman and hunter-gatherers who once thought themselves safe and content in the vast wilderness of grassy prairies, virginal woodlands, and canyon-riddled plateaus. Every day more of these people fall under the shadow of the encroaching tide of pilgrims, and deadly conflicts are

commonplace; sometimes the unspoiled warriors succeed in ambushing a wagon train of invaders, sometimes entire villages are razed to the ground by armored imperials hungry for livestock, metals, fuel, and other resources. While they are hopelessly outgunned in terms of technological weaponry, the Unspoiled are not entirely defenseless; magic (which is otherwise rare in this world) is known to their eldest shamans, and desperate times have given rise to a resurgence in mystical might. Thus far their displays of outright sorcery have been limited to elemental manipulation, shape-shifting, and totemic animal summonings, but I have it on good authority that the greatest of the shamans are preparing terrible curses – and even some workings which might reach up beyond the sky to touch the devil himself.

## Threats

The Man With Red Hands is a malevolent disembodied spirit and apex-level boogeyman originating from the horrific predatory reality known as the Nightmare Kingdom. I've written about that particular very bad place already – you can look it up. The Man is a master of possessing the bodies of others, his creepy smile stitched across the face of whatever poor victim is forced to serve as his meat-suit, murdering and mutilating until his hands are covered in that namesake blood. In his recent evil escapades on the Ring of Fire, the Man has taken up quasi-permanent residence

### ***The Man With Red Hands (in Crimson Brute body)***

While possessing the hulking form known as the 'Crimson Brute', the Man with Red Hands has the following qualities:

Immense Vitality [4 Points]

Tireless Stamina [4 Points]

Combat Reflexes [2 Points]

Deadly Damage [4 Points] – *inflicting terrible wounds with its long claws or bites from its toothy tentacles*

Resistant to Firearms [2 Points]

Psychic Barrier [4 Points]

Pass Through Door [1 Point]

Mold Gossamer Creatures [2 Points] – *adept at possession, mind control, and emotional manipulation*

Rapid Healing [2 Points]

True Name is Warded [2 Points]

The invisible, bodiless spirit which is the true essence of the Man With Red Hands has a base Psyche score of 55, though that score can increase as it feeds on fear and decrease if it is starved of fear.

inside a beefy demigod of a body harvested from elsewhere on the Grand Stair. This body is superhumanly strong and tough, clad in a bizarre suit of bare-chested crimson plate armor glistening with the unwholesome sheen of wet latex. Its hands are overlong crimson claws, and its head is encased in a weird, skull-like helmet with no discernible eye-holes. Two mouth-capped tentacles sprout from its shoulders, snapping at hissing with minds of their own. This was the physical form the Man used to slaughter his way through the original custodians of the upper



control ring. However, the spirit still has the ability to occasionally leave the brute and inhabit lesser creatures on the surface far below; during these temporary possessions of lesser forms the Crimson Brute body slumps and drools, since by now it is nothing more than a psychically lobotomized pile of perverted flesh. It is tempting to believe the Man With Red Hands' cruel schemes are terror, destruction, and genocide for their own horrific sake, but rumor is that the doom of this world and the slaughter of *trillions* is merely the setup for its true project: the harrowing torture of a *single* soul – 'the one who got away'.

Preachers are the mortal minions of the Man with Red Hands who have been twisted into sadistic Umbra-aligned prophets of doom, insidiously demoralizing and manipulating poor pilgrims already running for their lives. Though they come in many guises, common are the fiery religious fanatics who rant and rave about how mortal sin has cursed the world and how the only true penance is suffering and death. Forming secret (or not-so-secret) mobile cults based around human sacrifice, ritual torture, and self-mutilation, the preachers hide themselves amongst the diaspora, moving their schemes along with everyone else. While their true knacks are psychological manipulation and old-fashioned fear-mongering, preachers with more than a hundred followers have been known to manifest sorcerous effects similar to the common



*Gunslinger*

spells of Mind Touch, Quell, Death, and Weaken. The most powerful of the preachers is the Reverend Ezekiah Lot, a fanatical firebrand who leads a flock of thousands marching just days ahead of the searing heat of the Bright Scourging, trudging bloody-footed by day and holding ecstatic revivals by night, leaving flayed sinners staked to the ground to meet the unrelenting sun. In my experience these evil, twisted sickos are not insane – they've simply accepted the fact that there's only one all-powerful spirit looking down on them, and “the Man Upstairs” wants the world to burn, suffer, and die.

Gunslingers are the last remaining champions of this realm, selected by fate and empowered by the Eidolon as incorruptible protectors and agents of sanity in a world gone mad. It seems that when they first built the ring-world, the First Makers encoded failsafes deep within the genes of the population – reservoirs of genetic potential designed to combine with ultra-advanced nanotech systems hidden throughout the superstructure. In other words, the creators of this world ensured that in times of trouble some serious badasses would pop up in order to defend the world. That time is now. Gunslingers are ordinary-looking men and women who, through a combination of Eidolon-infused nanotechnology and sheer grit, have the powers of righteous angels: lightning-quick reflexes, tough-as-nails bodies, and enhanced senses. Armed with perfect six-shooters and armor-piercing Eidolon-infused bullets, a gunslinger can blast the laugh off a hyena from a mile away. Unfortunately, tough as they are the gunslingers can't exactly shoot down sunlight, so while they can do their part to combat the jerks and jackals of the ever-moving frontier, they remain helpless to stop the Bright Scourging. Most of them don't even know what's really going on or why their world is burning up mile by mile, only that something is terribly wrong and they'd love to shoot the bastards responsible.

### ***Gunslingers***

The average gunslinger has the following qualities:

Double Vitality [2 Points]

Double Speed [2 Points]

Paragon Stamina [2 Points]

Combat Mastery [4 Points] – *peerless saints of violence with firearms, capable of making impossible shots at incredible ranges*

Deadly Damage [4 Points] – *equipped with revolvers and rifles firing Eidolon-infused ammunition*

Resistant to Normal Weapons [1 Point]

Psychic Resistance [1 Point]

Mold Gossamer Matter [1 Point] – *the gunslinger's nano-bots can 3D-print bullets and spare parts for their weapons from surrounding matter*

Self Healing [1 Point]

In times of great need a Gunslinger can also use the abilities *Opposing the Umbra* and *Physical Fortification* as if they possessed the Power of Eidolon Mastery, though such exertions are taxing and can result in coma or death.

### ***Notable Locations***

The Noonlands are the vast scorched and sunburnt wasteland, which makes up nearly 98% of the Ring of Fire's surface – trillions and trillions of square miles of formerly verdant terrain, all reduced to bleached cinders by the Bright Scourging. Constantly exposed to the unfiltered solar radiation due to the Man with Red Hands' sadistic tampering with the





ring-world's shade controls, the Noonlands swelter at temperatures typically in excess of 250 degrees Fahrenheit, spiking higher when solar flares hit the surface. Anything green has been baked away, and the bones of great civilizations are nothing more than ash-choked ghost towns. This vast expanse is bleak and depressing, but not entirely devoid of activity; razor-thin wraiths made of crystalline filaments stalk the deserts, and smoldering imps with sulfur-based physiologies infest abandoned cities. Deep beneath the surface of the Noonlands there are scattered underground holdouts where a lucky few scientists and survivalists of the species-who-are-gone have carved out well-shielded niches, but these pockets of life are so distant and isolated that each might as well be on its own planet. One Door to

the Ring of Fire opens on the leading edge of the Noonlands, out the front steps of a smoldering country courthouse recently fallen under the glare; once that structure catches fire and burns to the ground, it is anyone's guess where the next stable Door will appear.

The Sweetgrass Territory is in the Earth-like bio-zone, which is currently the front line of the Walking West, as the hot line of the Bright Scourging is presently swallowing up the territory mile after mile. Once a peaceful and verdant grassland thousands of miles across, dotted with shady woodlands and lonely hills, this vast prairie is now overrun with untold numbers of constantly moving pilgrims, Brass Imperials, and the rest of the desperate and displaced diaspora. While many have already passed it by as a

trap or at best a fool's refuge, thousands of the fleeing have swarmed the frontier boomtown of Gabriel's Trumpet – a place made insanely valuable by virtue of its nearby hardwood forests, a lumber mill, an iron mine, and stagecoach factory. All churning at top speed to nail together wheels and wagons for the fleeing masses. The beleaguered mayor of Gabriel's Trumpet was shot down in a bloody resource dispute fairly recently, leaving grizzled lawman (and gunslinger) Yancy Polk as the last voice for sanity as everyone else is seeing fit to tear each other apart as they run for the horizon.

Heaven's Shade is the name for the Ring of Fire's inner-orbital shade ring and observation-and-command platform. Itself a massive superstructure with the circumference of a more closely-orbiting planet, the vast majority of the Shade's area is nothing but (malfunctioning) solar shutters, with only thin atmosphere-holding corridors connecting the few control centers that are up there. If you think the Grand Stair can make for a long walk, there's at least one featureless hallway up there where you can walk in an almost imperceptible arc for a couple hundred million miles without having to take a single sidestep – you know, in case you just want to jog a quarter-lap around the sun in the morning. There is one dark jewel on this lofty crown – a fortress of a command module known as the God's Eye, where

the Man with Red Hands has made his nest and oversees the ruin of this world. Surrounded by sensors, a genius-level artificial intelligence security system, and layers of shielded bulkheads and booby-trapped airlocks, the place is all but impenetrable. 'All but', so I'm told, includes the fact that there's a Door up there to some impossibly remote expanse of the Grand Stair – leaving the Man free to come and go as he pleases, but good luck to the rest of us in figuring out a shortcut up there. In his inner sanctum within the God's Eye the Man with Red Hands has assembled for himself a throne of bones before a bank of hundreds of monitor screens, so that he can watch in comfort the chaos and carnage his machinations have wrought.

### *Final Thoughts*

The Ring of Fire is a desperate, volatile place. It isn't stable, it isn't safe, and it sure as hell isn't getting better any time soon. Pretty soon the entire ring will have been scorched to cinders, and presumably by then the bad guy's plan will have run its course and the worst of troubles will be over. But, knowing all this, whether you can just sit back and let it happen is up to you. I've already made my choice, but then again I never slept well anyway.

*~ Yaeger Zane*



## Ring of Fire Domain Table

<b>Technology Level:</b>	Gunpowder/Steam/Post-Fusion
<b>Magic Level:</b>	Rare
<b>Security:</b>	None
<b>Type:</b>	Personal Domain [1 Point] (current owner: the Man with Red Hands)
<b>Control:</b>	Control of Contents [1 Point]
<b>Influence on the Powers:</b>	Eidolon – Average Umbra – Average Wrighting – Average
<b>Special:</b>	<i>Magic is For the Living and the Dead</i> - The mystical laws of this gossamer reality and the heavy investment of the Eidolon in the ring-world's physical structure make it easier to use Powers on living matter and more difficult to use the same on inanimate objects or the environment. Uses of Powers which target living (or undead) creatures can be performed in half the usual time, with half the usual effort. Uses of Powers which require a contest of Attributes between the user and the target are not affected and behave as normal. Uses of Powers which target inanimate objects or the environment take twice the usual time, with twice the usual effort.

## How to Use Ring of Fire

- Ring of Fire is a world of frontier survival, moral challenges, and the horror of an ever-encroaching doom. The people of this world are constantly called upon to make tough choices and terrible sacrifices, so even if the player characters do not share the same fate as the masses they should be allowed to see the pain of the less fortunate and empathize with the horrors of their world-on-the-edge.
- Several valuable ancient scrolls were once squirreled away by a Gossamer Lord in a humble cabin out in the middle of the big grassy nowhere of the Sweetgrass Territory. That cache is in danger, as the Bright Scourging approaches and cabin will soon be burnt to cinders. The characters are tasked with rescuing the texts, which seems simple enough, but when they arrive at the cabin they discover that a gunslinger happened upon the cabin and took the strange works, thinking they held clues to stopping the apocalypse. Now the characters must pursue the scrolls across the frontier, weaving their way through hordes of pilgrims and more.
- It is true that the Man with Red Hands has orchestrated this entire apocalypse in order to torment one soul – Annie Parsons, who was once upon a time a victim of the

Nightmare Kingdom. While her friends died in the Kingdom's horrific dreamscape, Annie survived and escaped against all odds, fleeing to this gossamer reality with a spark of power which rendered her ageless. Thinking she'd been given a second chance, Annie made a life for herself in a nice little cottage on the wild prairie, but the Man with Red Hands arrived to make good on old vendettas. His aim is to torment her to the point she loses all morality and sanity, returning to the Nightmare Kingdom to serve as its thrall (or ruler). Annie has the potential to become a great Gossamer Lord, but only if she survives this ordeal with her soul intact. Can the characters find her and help her?

- The Man with Red Hands is a villain worth stopping. Once the characters hear of the atrocities being committed on this world, can they stay away? Perhaps an associate implores them to act where others have failed. The Door which leads directly to Heaven's Shade is thought to be impossibly far away – can they reach it? Travel to the ring-world's surface is simple enough, but getting from the surface up to the shade ring could be difficult. Let them try and save the day.

