The Sea of Silt

“The slightest breeze stirs up a silvery pall of dust that clings to the surface like a fog. It becomes impossible to tell where the silt-laden air ends and the dustbed begins. When the wind blows more strongly, as it often does, the Sea of Silt becomes a boiling cloud of dust, the edges tinged with crimson sunlight. On such a day, a traveler near the sea cannot see more than a few feet in any direction. The dust coats his clothes, his face, the inside of his nose, and even his lungs. He cannot see the ground or the sky, and when he walks, his feet drag through inches of thick silt. He grows disoriented, and it becomes an easy matter for him to wander into the sea and disappear forever.”
—The Wanderer’s Journal

The Sea of Silt is a great dust sink that extends for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of miles eastward from the shores of the Tyr Region. Long ago it was a great sea of water, vast and deep, but now the shore slopes down to meet what looks like an endless plain of gray dust. On a calm day, it seems that one could walk out onto the plain as if it were fine sand, but the silt is too light to support a human’s weight and too deep to wade for any distance. The Sea of Silt is an impossible barrier to travel, passable only along its margins by silt skimmers or waders that remain in shallow dust.

In addition to natural hazards, those who brave the sea must contend with the monstrous creatures that dwell in and around the silt. Tentacled silt horrors prowl the deeps, and giants roam the shallows, walking on secret roads only they know. Even the islands in the Sea of Silt offer as much peril as safe haven. Their isolated locations make them ideal hideouts for unscrupulous types who don’t want their activities to be observed, and the austerity of life on the islands turns many inhabitants to savagery.

Like the Ringing Mountains to the west and the Southern Wastes to the south, the Sea of Silt forms one of the borders of the Tyr Region. For most people, the sea effectively marks the end of the world; no traveler has crossed its emptiness and returned to tell the tale. Attempts to circumnavigate the silt are likewise perilous—far to the north, a traveler faces impassable fjords and chains of active volcanoes that bar the way. To the south, the traveler ventures into desolate regions of salt flats and sandy wastes, bereft of life or shelter. In that direction, the sea appears to continue for thousands of miles without narrowing or coming to an end. It is a daunting barrier, to say the least.
Sea of Silt Backgrounds

The Sea of Silt is one of the least hospitable environments known on Athas, yet for some, its harshness is a boon of sorts. Small bands of outlaws and outcasts make their homes along its shores or on islands within the sea, competing with the beasts of the silt for meager resources.

Associated Skills: Acrobat, Nature
Language: Giant

Archipelago: You grew up in one of the tiny villages hidden among the mudflats of the remote coasts. Most Athasians fear silt and won’t venture in deeper than their ankles, but you grew up around the stuff. You balance on stilts as easily as other people balance on sandals, and you have a feel for which silt is safe to wade and which should be avoided. Life in the mudflat villages is simple and primitive compared to life in the Tablelands or the Seven Cities: what do you make of the world beyond your home? Do you hope to return to your village someday?

Silt Pirate: Small, vicious crews of silt pirates lurk along the lonelier coasts, preying on silt skimmers loaded with trade goods. Did you join a pirate crew as a youth, captured by the romance of the notion? Did you win the pirates’ respect by standing up to them? What led you to abandon your crew and strike out on your own?

The Nature of the Silt

The Sea of Silt is a curious phenomenon. Once an ocean, it is now filled with fine gray powder as dry as sun-parched bone. No one can explain why the silt persists instead of blowing away or slowly compacting into a firm gray plain—it’s not natural for dust to behave in such a manner. Many Athasians assume that some dreadful magic transformed the seas to dust long ago, and they’re not far from the mark. The Sea of Silt is a vast elemental intrusion into Athas, a region in which a great elemental power has subtly altered natural law, balancing air, earth, and water in a deviant fashion. In the Sea of Silt, dust coalesces and refuses to compact under its own weight. It remains light enough to rise in a wind-whipped haze that can cover nearby lands with fine gray grit, yet it trickles back down in time to rejoin the larger sea. Even if the silt blows into dust sinks many miles away, it retains these strange properties.

Exploring the Sea of Silt

Much of the Sea of Silt remains unexplored and unknown due to its sheer inaccessibility. Except for a few well-charted shoals, the largest silt skimmer can venture only a mile or two from shore. (Anyone who wants to venture farther out needs a means of flying or levitating.) Worse yet, long voyages up or down the coast offer little profit. Most of the reachable islands and mudflats are largely barren, and as far as anyone knows nothing but blasted wasteland, possibly teeming with flesh-eating monsters, awaits the bolder travelers.

Experienced silt travelers know that the greatest danger of the sea is not monsters, raiders, or drowning—it is the insidious “disease” known as the Gray Death. When the hot, dry sirocco rises, it kicks up the top layer of fine gray powder and holds it aloft in a vast cloud. As creatures breathe this airborne dust, the moisture in their lungs and throat causes the silt to clump; a human can suffocate in a matter of hours. The surest protection against the Gray Death is to cover one’s mouth and nose with a wet piece of silk or similar fine cloth (included in a typical survival day of supplies).

The God in the Dust

The Sea of Silt is home to a dormant beast of great elemental power known as the Dust Kraken, Ul-Athra, or the Mouths of Thirst. It is said that the fearsome silt horrors that hunt in the sea are the spawn of Ul-Athra. Did the creature come to Athas during the Red Age and turn the original sea to dust? Was it a native of the sea, changed along with the water by defiling magic? No one knows.

Over the centuries, a number of elemental cults have arisen to worship the Dust Kraken, seeking to rouse the beast from its slumber and use its power against their enemies. These cults perform strange rites in the name of their god. Sometimes, those especially favored by Ul-Athra’s dreaming awareness are rewarded with secrets of powerful elemental magic or vile rituals that summon and bind lesser avatars of the Dust Kraken.

Lake Island

Most islands in the Sea of Silt are little more than jumbled boulders that fight a losing battle against the abrasive winds. Larger, more protected islands can withstand erosion and might sustain life. Lake Island is among the bigger landmasses in the sea. A mountainous spine forms a wall that shields against the storms blowing out of the deep silt: the largest peak is a dormant volcano. A large, clear lake lies within the caldera, and steam curls up from its pristine waters, warmed by the volcano’s fiery spirits.

Trickling streams from the caldera nourish the thriving flora that blankets Lake Island’s western slopes. In the lowlands, a traveler can find wild kanks, erdlus, and other herd animals. In addition, small settlements cluster around oases; Lake Island is home to warring giant clans, thri-kreen, dwarves, and others. Minotaur traders help sustain the few outposts, and gith raiders emerge from below the mountains to drag prisoners to an unknown fate in stinking subterranean grottos.
The Mountains of the Sun
Standing like a line of tired sentinels a few hundred miles east of the isle of Waverly, the Mountains of the Sun are almost buried in silt. The range is very old and no longer has the jagged edges and sheer cliffs of younger ranges such as the Ringing Mountains. Deep passes of silt separate the individual peaks; each rises a few hundred to a few thousand feet above the dust. From the highest mountains in the center of the range, a traveler can see an endless ash storm far to the east in the middle of the Sea of Silt.

The Mountains of the Sun have few sources of water. Some of the older peaks support a few acres of sparse scrub along their leeward sides, but most are barren. Thousands of years of isolation from the mainland, coupled with the lack of water, have weeded out all but the hardiest inhabitants. The small number of peaks that can support life attract powerful flying monsters such as wyverns or rocs. Resilient goats and erdlus survive on some of the larger mountains. In the caves that crisscross the oldest peaks lurk degenerate tribes of hejkins and colonies of monstrous spiders.

The Road of Fire
The place’s name is a misnomer, since no actual roads span this chain of volcanic islands in the Sea of Silt. Some sages believe the Road of Fire to be a mighty arm of the Ringing Mountains flung out into the sea, but others think the volcanic islands are a new range, rising slowly out of the silt. Although several dozen smaller peaks are counted among the Road of Fire, the bulk of the archipelago consists of three islands: Dhuurgaz, Avegdaaar, and Morghaz.

Dhuurgaz: The largest island in the Road of Fire, Dhuurgaz is a broad plateau of volcanic rock that is mostly flat except for a range of steep, rocky cliffs along the southern shore. The center of the island is a deep pit, from which emanates the hellish red glow of magma far below. This volcano connects to the Elemental Chaos, and elemental beings (especially firelizards, rockfire dreadnoughts, and fire archons) emerge from the depths, seeking to burn anything they can find. Beast giants of the Khal-Ish-Thaas tribe dwell in the southern highlands of Dhuurgaz, traveling a slow, nomadic circuit up and down the coast.

Avegdaaar: Smaller and more mountainous than Dhuurgaz, Avegdaaar is home to nomadic bands of stone giants and half-giants. The clans of Avegdaaar raid out of necessity, since their island cannot support even the meager herds raised by the giants of Dhuurgaz. Avegdaaar is also home to a large population of fire drakes. These creatures attack the raiding clans, but only when their own hunting is particularly bad—even fire drakes can’t stand up to a dozen angry giants.

Morghaz: Unlike its sister islands, Morghaz has no active volcanoes and is surprisingly verdant. Scrub brush covers much of the land, and here and there stand small copes of forest. A small tribe could live here easily, yet the island is uninhabited. The Khal-Ish-Thaas tribe and the clans of Avegdaaar avoid Morghaz, believing it to be haunted, and they are correct. A shattered keep on the southeastern tip of the island was the home of an ancient order of preservers. The former leader of the order, a powerful ghost named Haakar, still lingers in the ruins.

Roqom
Rising out of the dust like the shattered fang of an enormous beast, Roqom appears only at the peak of midday on the hottest days of the year. This sharp, jagged spire of basalt lies in the wilderness beyond the Beastbarrens, but according to legend, it appears wherever its master can work the greatest mischief. The master of Roqom is Fajjayad, a great rakshasa prince, and he occasionally uses magical sendings to lure silt sailors and travelers to his black palace—especially travelers who have a desperate need of some sort. Fajjayad claims to be able to provide for any such needs in exchange for services to be rendered within 1,001 days.

The rakshasa is unfailingly polite and candid. If asked, he freely admits that the task he sets is likely to be difficult, even deadly, and that his “clients” might die while attempting it. However, Fajjayad assures them that “the laws” (a term he does not define) forbid him from setting a task that is impossible or whose outcome is certain death. For his magic to work, the task must have an element of chance and uncertainty. Still, if any group has ever profited from Fajjayad’s bargain, its tale is not known.

Shault
The Isle of Shault lies east of Lake Island, far out in the Sea of Silt. Frequently hidden by blowing dust and virtually inaccessible by silt skimmer, Shault holds a secret: a thriving lowland forest. Except for a range of small mountains along the southern edge, the entire island is thickly forested with bizarre, exotic, and sometimes dangerous trees, the likes of which have been forgotten by the rest of Athas. Shault’s fertility stems partially from its geography (the forest is protected on three sides by tall cliffs that block the searing winds from the silt, and numerous springs feed up from below the surface) and partially from the primal magic of the half-giant druid Mearedes, who protects the island.
If visitors can persuade Mearedes that they mean no harm, she and her three apprentices tolerate the intruders. However, the druids’ hospitality comes at a price. The goliath is determined to ensure that knowledge of Shault’s existence and location does not spread, lest unscrupulous types plunder the island. She insists that all visitors be subject to a ritual that compels them never to speak of the isle. Mearedes and her apprentices attack all who refuse, with full intent to kill; she does not revel in violence, but she considers the preservation of Shault more important than any individual life. In addition to her apprentices, Mearedes can call on some forty giants of varying kinds at need, all of them fiercely loyal to the druid.

In the heart of Shault’s jungle, far from Mearedes and the homesteads of the giants, an ancient city has been ravaged by the march of time. The press of the jungle has torn down chunks of the walls and collapsed buildings as the greenery grows over the stone. Neither Mearedes nor the giants of Shault know who built the city or why; the murals and carvings that survive display script in an unknown language. Since the island receives few visitors and the druids avoid the ruins, its vaults and tombs remain undisturbed. Mearedes doesn’t mind if adventurers explore the city—assuming that they prove cooperative enough for her to tolerate their presence at all—but she warns them that dangerous beasts lair within the ruins.

### The Silt Archipelago

Far to the southeast of the Estuary of the Forked Tongue lies the Silt Archipelago, an unusual region of shallow silt and mudflats. Much of the sediment here is shallow enough to be crisscrossed by “giants’ roads”—pathways where the tall creatures can wade. The islets of the archipelago are home to many of the same deadly creatures that haunt smaller mudflats and shallows throughout the Sea of Silt, as well as a number of tiny villages. Life on the islets is hard, but it is also free. The residents believe themselves beyond the reach of the sorcerer-kings, and they do not practice slavery. Raider tribes from the mainland and slavers from Balic attack the villages from time to time, but the archipelago’s human and dwarf warriors are fierce and determined, and if they cannot turn away an attack, several giant tribes in the area are willing to lend a hand.

A few merchant houses based in Balic send caravans to the Silt Archipelago to trade for staple goods such as food, wood, hemp, and giant hair. In return, the traders obtain mekillot hide and bone, kank nectar, and manufactured goods of glass and worked stone that are beyond the villagers’ ability to make.

### Vanishing Lake

One of the largest bodies of water in the Tyr Region, Vanishing Lake is a vast mudflat south and east of the Estuary of the Forked Tongue. It stretches more than twenty miles in length and five in width. The precise size is difficult to judge, for the silty muck that surrounds the lake is easily mistaken for more of the mudflat. Extended periods of drought cause the lake to evaporate, which means that during the months of High Sun there is less water and more mud. Eventually the open water disappears entirely, and the lake seems to vanish, leaving behind a thin, watery mire. When the sun beats less fiercely during the months of Sun Descending, the water’s source wells up once more, and the lake becomes obvious to the eye again. Old silt sailors claim that the periods of open water grow shorter and farther apart as the years pass. Someday the lake might disappear and never return.

Vanishing Lake is home to one or more aggressive water drakes, and silt runners, floating mantles, chathrans, and other dangerous creatures live in the surrounding mudflat. The area is protected by a powerful, ancient druid known as the Old One. Most folk never encounter him, although occasionally a lost traveler, half dead from thirst and sun sickness, claims to have been set on the right path and given a waterskin by a mysterious old druid who disappeared into the silt.

### The Verdant Isle

Stories shared in taverns from Tyr to Cromlin tell of a lush island in the middle of the Sea of Silt. According to the tales, the island is home to a secret city-state ruled by a benevolent monarch and ringed by wide lakes of cool, pristine water. Supposedly, this city is a paradise, and if a traveler is lucky enough (or has the right map, which many hucksters just happen to have for sale), he or she can find the Verdant Isle and live in idle luxury. Sages speculate that the rumor might refer to the island of Ebe, a wealthy and prosperous kingdom during the Green Age. Others dismiss the Verdant Isle as a mirage that lures the foolhardy far out into the sea, where they drown in silt. The wildest tales maintain that the city, a mighty citadel concealed in a valley of dust and fire, is the hidden retreat of the Dragon.