

MARS: GOLD IN THE WILD NORTH

A Space 1889 adventure setting by Anders Blixt

The Maariti Gold Rush

Suddenly the rumour is all over Mars: gold has been found in the Trans-Polodaari hills at the sources of the Maariti creek, northeast of the city-state of Polodaar. Adventurous individuals journey to that area to make their fortunes, turning it into an ill-administered and turbulent place for about five years (after which the gold is depleted). This is the background for some adventures involving the PCs' attempts to strike it rich in a lawless land.

The Maariti Area

The Trans-Polodaari hills are low and undulating. Their soil is poor, discouraging farming. Their climate has a distinctly arctic quality, so there is a lot more humidity here than on more southerly latitudes, particular during the warm season when the retreating polar ice caps generate a lot of water. Hardy low plants with occasional thorny shrubberies and copses of trees cover the hills. The fauna is fairly varied. Narrow streams flow in the hills, gradually merging to creeks that finally enter the canal going from the icecap to Polodaar.

The Maariti is one of these creeks, originating about one hundred miles east of the canal. It and some of its tributaries contain auriferous sand, which can be washed from the water by the traditional manual process. The streams are rarely more than two feet deep and six feet wide while the Maariti itself is equally shallow, but up to twenty feet wide.

The Common Gold-washers

Gold offers an irresistible lure for many, especially for the poor who see an opportunity to escape what they see as a dreary life. However, dreams of wealth usually turn out to be just dreams. Very few gold-washers are lucky enough to become wealthy. Most just spend some tough years in the hills and then return home as poor as when they arrived—unless they join the really unlucky ones in shallow graves outside the hill encampments.

The average gold-washer is a sturdy but poor Canal Martian lad. He heard the tales of gold northeast of Polodaar, spent his savings equipping himself and trekked the long way to the Maariti. He arrived a bit naïve but soon learnt the basic skills of his new trade and the need to work long hours in the cold water to avoid starvation. He also learnt of the necessity of cooperation. A lone man has slim chances of survival in a place where there are no effective authorities. The common gold-washers—jokingly calling themselves fishermen, since they work in the streams—band together for mutual benefit, building fortified encampments and jointly maintaining some semblance of law and order. It is important for them to properly delineate land claims and to find methods of settling conflicts without resorting to violence. The fishermen have for those purposes adapted the legal traditions of Polodaar to a set of common law regulations suiting their needs.

There is a sprinkling of non-Canal Martians here, too: rough Red Men of many nationalities and young Hill Martians.

A Typical Encampment

The gold-washers prefer to live in sturdy canvas tents, which are easy to transport from one location to another. An ordinary encampment has a population of 20 to 100. It is encircled by a log palisade to keep scavenging animals and unwanted visitors out. Inside, the encampment is divided into different sections for tents, for cooking, for latrines, and for keeping pack animals. Wagons must be parked outside the palisade. Usually, the only joint facilities in the encampment are the latrines and the stable; both arranged to improve the general hygienic standard.

The Artisans and the Entrepreneurs

The people that really make money out of the gold rush are those that provide the fishermen with vital goods and services—like tools, beer, and women—at exorbitant rates, the pricing being by traditional methods of supply and demand.

In an encampment there is always a steady need for blacksmiths, wainwrights, tent-makers, and tailors to maintain and repair the gold-washers' possessions. Due to the generally inflated price levels, a skilled artisan is able to charge twice or thrice as much as in the cities. However, his costs are equally inflated. Often, an artisan is a part-time gold-washer as

well. Since he provides essential services while usually being a fully integrated member of the gold-washer community, the fishermen generally accept the artisan.

The fishermen are able to provide much of their own food by hunting and cultivating small garden plots inside the encampments. However, the common man's skills are not enough to make some items, such as good drink or spices. (Perhaps the particular services of females fall into this category as well.) The entrepreneurs supplying such merchandise earn well, and are often the subjects of the fishermen's dislike and envy, forcing them to employ bodyguards for protection. Many entrepreneurs are criminals from Thoth or Alclyon, sent here by their bosses to make a quick profit.

The Strongmen

Another group of winners are those individuals who, with the help of their henchmen, exclude others from rich areas and let their underlings exploit their gold with the most sophisticated methods available. Since the corrupt Taarir the Warden leads the only local Polodaari authority, the strongmen are able to run most of their businesses unhindered as long as they grease his palm suitably. However, Taarir does not accept too blatant a criminal behaviour, so even the strongmen have to clothe their activities with fig leaves of legality.

The Player Characters

Various occupations and pursuits suitable for player characters in this environment, ranging from ordinary gold-washers to artisans providing useful services to mercenary guards. The two latter categories can more easily move around in the Maariti area in search of employment; hence, these may be more preferable pursuits for the PCs.

The Polodaari Presence

Taarir the Warden

Polodaar's ruling prince has taken some measures to monitor the situation at the Maariti and to try to curb the worst disregard for law and order. He has organized the Maariti area as a separate hundred of the East District, appointing Taarir, an officer of the Polodaari army rangers as its warden and judge. Taarir received a company of fifty soldiers to assist him in his less than envious task.

Taarir accepted his mission with dark pleasure in his heart, since he realized that this was good chance to make a small fortune through corruption. Being the only permanent representative of Polodaar in the area, there is nobody to oversee him and discover that he accepts bribes. However, he is not stupid, so he is careful to maintain a surface of respectability and honesty. The best way of satisfying those that bribe him while keeping an aura of credibility is to be elsewhere when something critical happens and to bias the judicial process by an excessive use of petty technicalities to achieve the desired results. Already after one year as warden, Taarir is thoroughly disliked by the fishermen, but they cannot accuse him of any substantial wrongdoings. Most of their complaints against entrepreneurs and strongmen founder on technicalities, while their opponents are far more successful when they bring their cases to the warden's judgement.

The Warden's Soldiers

The Polodaari Army Rangers is a light infantry warband recruited from the rural districts of Polodaar. It has been trained for independent anti-bandit operations in the wilderness. Its soldiers are skilled frontiersmen, which is why they were chosen to accompany Taarir on his mission.

Fifty soldiers cannot keep complete control of several thousand gold-washers scattered in dozens of wilderness encampment. Their main task is to prevent outbreaks of anarchy and banditry, tasks that they so far have managed well. However, they have occasionally been ordered to enforce Taarir's unjust decisions against fishermen. This has caused a lot of resentment among the common gold-washers who no longer fraternize with the soldiers. The two groups become more and more estranged.

The soldiers really dislike going against their countrymen. They think that their main task is to fight bandits and High Martians, not to evict ordinary gold-washers from disputed land. There is therefore a growing disapproval with Taarir's policies.

The Hill Martian Natives

Many local Hill Martians disapprove of the influx of greedy strangers who—intentionally and unintentionally—disrupt their traditional way of life. Some natives also want the gold for themselves since they see themselves as the “property

holders” of the area (even though it was some Red Men that found the auriferous sand). For these reasons there is much Hill Martian banditry and the gold-washers’ encampments face intermittent raids. The newcomers have learned the hard way to always travel in well-armed groups.

On the other hand, a lot of Hill Martians earn money by selling supplies to the gold-washers. There is a steady demand for flour, meat and hides, goods that the natives produce themselves and exchange for gold at a good rate. The precious metal is then used to buy tools and weapons from the city of Polodaar.

Hence there is no united Hill Martian front against the gold-washers. Instead, there has already been strife among the natives when antagonistic groups have tried to settle their conflicts by force. (This is fortunate for the Canal Martians; should the natives unite, the newcomers would not have much chance of surviving in the hills.) So far, few Canal Martians know of these incidents, since there is so little communication between the two ethnic groups.

The Trans-Polodaari High Martians

There are some High Martian tribes stalking the Trans-Polodaari hills. However, their number is small at this time so raids are very rare. The High Martians have a healthy respect for the Hill Martians, whose hunters have displayed an unusual skill in dealing with their raiding parties.

The High Martians have little information on the events in the hills and do not understand why there is such a sudden influx of Canal Martians. Occasionally, a group attacks a fisherman encampment to steal food and weaponry, but there is no organized warfare due to the absence of a strong leader to take command over the squabbling savages.

Searching For Gold

A gold-washer is a stationary person, spending long and boring days sifting sand in the stream where he has staked his claim. He searches for small nuggets that have been eroded out the Trans-Polodaari rock and transported by water downstream. The nuggets are, small weighing just a few grams, and pretty hard to spot unless one possesses the proper experience.

It is suggested that the Gamemaster uses the following simple method to determine how much gold a player character discover during a day in the stream. Since this is a fairly boring task, it should be burdened by too much arithmetic.

The Formula For Success

Roll 1D6. Subtract 3 if the stream is of poor quality, 2 if the stream is a good one. Subtract another 1 if the character has worked less than a month as a gold-washer.

The result is the amount of gold, measured in steps of $1/16^{\text{th}}$ of an troy ounce, that the gold-washer has found. If the final result is zero or negative: too bad, you did not find any gold today.

If you roll a 6, roll again and add the result; if you roll another 6, roll again, etc. It is an open-ended series of rolls, making it possible, though extremely unlikely, to find quite big lumps of gold.

Example: The experienced Fred Brown, who has staked a section of poor quality stream, works hard a sunny day; his player rolls 6, and hence rolls again, another 6, and again, 3, giving $15-3$ (poor quality stream) = $12/16^{\text{th}}$ troy oz. Fred Brown really struck it lucky when he found a gold lump weighing about 25 grams.

His buddy Donny Craig in the adjacent stake is less lucky, his player rolling a 2, giving a zero result. No nuggets found today. However, he expects Fred Brown to make a small celebration with his buddies tonight.

The Seven Mercenaries

A Maariti Adventure

Orthaad is a local strongman in the Maariti area, originally being a crime-lord from Alclyon. He claims a large rich area for his henchmen. However, it already contained some fisherman encampments, including one settled exclusively by a group Hill Martians from Cebrenia—and their inhabitants showed no inclination of moving out. The conflict between the fishermen and Orthaad's henchmen gradually escalate. Eventually the boss sends for seven notorious Hill Martian mercenaries (originating in Karkarham) from Alclyon, giving them the task of cleaning the area from its unwanted occupants.

The PCs, living or staying in one of the encampments, face the choice between fighting the injustice or leaving. Their fellow fishermen are tough frontiersmen, but not warriors. The seven mercenaries are competent and merciless and plan to kill or scare away the undesirable fishermen with terror, leaving false clues implicating local Hill Martians as the perpetrators. The mercenaries' presence is initially unknown, but the PCs have the opportunity of uncovering the true story behind the fearsome events. However, putting them permanently out of action will be a major accomplishment.

Timeline

Day 1

The seven mercenaries arrive by foot in the area and establish a small hidden camp in a copse some distance from the disputed area. After sunset, the mercenaries' spokesman walks to Orthaad's camp to discuss the strongman's plans.

Day 2

From dawn till after sunset, the mercenaries scout the area to learn what it looks like and how their adversaries work and live.

Day 3–4

A few hours after sunset, the mercenaries capture two fishermen, who are performing maintenance on their wagons, from the PCs' encampment. The prisoners are brought to a secluded spot by the mercenaries, interrogated brutally and the situation in the encampment and its surroundings and then killed and buried in hidden graves. The kidnapping is executed with no obvious traces, so the victims' friends are unable to find out what has really happened. The culprits are skilled woodsmen and know how to hide their movements. This is a part of the mercenaries' plan to strike terror in the fishermen's hearts, since an unknown foe is always more frightening than a known one.

The disappearances are discovered after a few hours but nobody is able to understand what exactly has happened.

Day 4

During day 4, the mercenaries stalk some fishermen who work alone and kill and rob three, one of which is Kwaliwi the Cebreni. (None of the victims belong to the PCs' encampment.) The Karkarhamis do not leave any genuine clues to who did it. Instead, at one murder site they drop a typical local Hill Martian dagger.

The rumour of the killings spreads like wildfire in the area. The stories become more and more distorted and frightening as they travel by word of mouth. Soon a lot of fishermen are convinced that Hill Martian vampires and other terrible creatures stalk them.

Day 5 Onwards

The mercenaries continue their terror campaign, killing and robbing gold-washers. Since nobody dares working alone, the killers have to deal with groups of two and three adversaries, but that pose no major problems. Fear spreads among the fishermen and many prepare to depart for other areas. The Cebrenis get angry and decide to hole up in their encampment, while trying to find out who killed their friend.

If the PCs do not successfully deal with the mercenaries, the area will after two weeks be empty of gold-washers, apart from the stubborn Cebrenis. Orthaad's henchmen will gradually take over the abandoned encampments, while the mercenaries depart from the area. The crime lord has then achieved his plans.

While all this goes on, the Warden and his men will be on patrol in another part of his area of responsibility. He has been bribed to stay away for at least three weeks.

The NPCs

Orthaad

A few years ago, Orthaad was a minor crime-lord in Alclyon, running smuggling operations. However, the law were eventually to catch up with him. He was tipped off by a contact in the city administration, terminated his operations, and departed with his henchmen from Alclyon before the city guard was able to strike. Orthaad decided that a sojourn in the wilderness could be a good idea. He had heard of the Maariti goldrush and of Taarir the Warden, so he realized that this would be a good opportunity.

Orthaad and his henchmen arrived to the Maariti about a year ago, claiming a potentially rewarding area and building an encampment there. He quickly discovered Taarir's corruption and started to bribe the Warden to further his interest. The strongman covets the neighbours' claims and tries to find ways of expelling the local fishermen. However, mainly due to the stubborn Cebrenis, Orthaad's plans have not progressed. To remedy that, he has sent for some assistance from Alclyon, thinking that what he cannot get by bribes and threats he can get by brute force.

The Seven Mercenaries

The notorious seven come from the Karkarham area. Today, no Hill Martian tribe there would admit that they once belonged to it, so they must have been banished for some unusually heinous reason. The seven are skilled frontiersmen, with lots of experience of killing High Martians and beasts.

They have lived for some time in Alclyon, earning their living as muscle for hire in the local underworld. The city authorities know that they are crooks, but have had a hard time pinning anything on them, since those that are about to witness against them in court usually disappear without a trace. The seven are a competent bunch of people, who rarely act rashly.

Now the mercenaries have come to Maariti on Orthaad's invitation to terrorize certain settlements and scare off their inhabitants. The Karkarhamis arrived in secrecy, establishing a small camouflaged camp in the wilderness. Their spokesman visited Orthaad's settlement during a night to get instructions and receive part of their wages. Then they initiated their terror campaign.

If outsiders discover the camp, the Karkarhamis will kill them if that seems to be a good option. Otherwise, they will pretend to be newly arrived goldwashers, who are looking for a good place to start working. They have been very careful to not leave any clues that point towards their camp.

The PCs' Fellow Fishermen

There are 31 NPCs sharing encampment with the players. It is not possible to provide information for all of them, but they all share some basic traits: stubbornness, professional competence, rugged physiques, honesty to each other, and well equipped. However, none of the NPCs are experienced warriors.

The Cebreni Hill Martians

There are a group of Cebreni Hill Martians gold-washers in the disputed area: twelve close friends and relatives—Bowiriw, Khowiriw, Thowiriw, Kwaliwi, Nowi, Dowi, Giwil, Tiwil, Zimiwil, Bawil, Lawil, and Ruwiri—who all belong to the Therto tribe and are very proud of their clan. They are all young adventurous adults. When they heard of the gold in the Maariti, they decided that a visit there would be a rewarding experience. Their chieftain was not too keen on the idea, but eventually let the youngsters go.

The Cebrenis have built their own encampment, actually a stone house they built themselves, at a stream that they have staked out as their own. The neighbouring fishermen were originally a bit suspicious of the Cebrenis, but quickly realized that the newcomers were honourable and hard-working individuals. The Cebrenis used their skills to select a good area to exploit; their gold-washing operation has been unusually successful so far.

The Cebrenis get along well with the neighbours, since they have been treated well by them. On the other hand, they are very angry with Orthaad who offered them what they considered to be a trifling sum to move elsewhere in the region. Unknowingly, Orthaad insulted the Cebrenis and they have vowed not to give in to his demands even though they may have to fight to defend their claim.

Notable Places in the Adventure

The Disputed Area

Orthaad wishes to assume control over an area of approximately ten by five miles with two converging creeks: the Maariti and a tributary. His encampment is located at its northern edge. The area contains five other encampments, one of which belonging to the Cebreni gold-washers, located at or near a stream.

The PCs' Home Encampment

The characters live in a small encampment with 31 members. It consists of eight huts and hovels, four canvas tents, three storage shacks, and a palisade. Its gold-washers get along fairly well together (a troublemaker would soon discover that he had no buddies and quickly depart). Their claims are spread over a large area with the most distant about two miles away. Some of the fishermen work in small teams while other and loners that prefer the solitude of the wilderness.

Orthaad's Encampment

Orthaad is a man who likes everything well organized and his henchmen know that. They have built a small village, fortified by a well-designed earthen wall and dry moat with an unusually military look. That is not so remarkable, since the designer and construction boss was Vladimir Kratsch, a former Russian officer who was dishonourably discharged for misdemeanours and recruited by Orthaad. He is now responsible for the encampment's security and defence.

The crime lord was smart enough to bring a lot of cash and useful supplies with his expedition, so he has had no problems keeping his men in a good mood. The local prostitutes have agreed to visit to the encampment regularly. Orthaad also has an arrangement in which his underlings pay him a significant part of the gold they find in return for food, lodgings, and protection. The henchmen are loyal, though a bit bored. Orthaad's plans of gradually taking over all of the Maariti and strike it really rich fill them with anticipation. They believe that this is their greatest opportunity ever to make big money.

The henchmen are mostly rogues and robbers from Alclyon. Some have joined the gang after it came to the Maariti, hearing of the crime lord and believing that they would be better off joining his rough but well-run operation. When the adventure starts, Orthaad has 41 henchmen plus his lieutenants Kratsch and Foortheeg, the latter serving as an unusually brutal chief enforcer.

The PCs and the Adventure

The PCs enter the adventure when they learn of the disappearance of two men from their camp the night between day 3 and 4. They should be encouraged to look into the matter.

The PCs mostly have to rely on their wits. After the murder of Kwaliwi, the Cebrenis are prepared to offer whatever help they can to avenge their kinsman. The PCs' main hazard is the seven mercenaries. They are formidable opponents and will kill without compunction. If the PCs continue the dispute with Orthaad, they will encounter other of his henchmen as well.

The PCs can keep what they can take from the seven mercenaries (such as armour and weapons of reasonably good quality) and other foes. If the Cebrenis are presented with clear evidence that the seven mercenaries are responsible for Kwaliwi's death and that he has been avenged, they reward the PCs with a heavy bag of gold sand.

Finding the Murderers

The PCs have to act on their own initiative to find out what is going on and to neutralize the perpetrators. The Gamemaster must let their actions influence the progress of the adventure and for that reason it is difficult to state exactly how events will develop. The PCs have some obvious strategies.

One is to closely investigate of the murder sites to track the coming and going of the murderers. A very skilled tracker may be able to find some clue proving that the perpetrators were in fact not Hill Martian. For instance, he may discover boot-print that definitely not originated from the sandal-using natives.

It is also possibly to try to find the two fishermen who disappeared during the evening of day 3. If the PCs find their graves and exhume the corpses, they will see that the men were tortured before they died.

The most dangerous but also potentially most rewarding strategy is "counter-stalking", when the PCs monitor the fishermen' gold-washing, perhaps using one of their number as a "bait", looking for suspect activities. The PC stalkers

must be very skilled to be able to surprise any of the Karkarhamis, but if they succeed, they will have revealed the true culprits.

Even if the PCs succeed in identifying the murderers, they cannot immediately find out why they are here or who hired them. A captured mercenary will not break easily and talk. Someone who has lived in Alclyon may recognize a prisoner, but to investigate that further, the characters need to travel thither. Orthaad's lieutenant Foortheeg went to Alclyon two months ago to hire the mercenaries. In that city there are some witnesses at the Black Wind inn who saw the notorious criminals meet for a discussion.

In the Maariti area, there is only one event that connects the mercenaries to Orthaad: the visit by the Karkarhamis' spokesman to his encampment late day 1. His arrival was witnessed by several of Orthaad's henchmen. They do not know why he came or that he had his friends nearby. However, they know who he is, since he is a well-known man in the Alclyon underworld. However, to find out about this, the PCs have to make one of Orthaad's henchmen talk, which is not easy. Capture and interrogation is a crude method that may cause retribution, so more subtle approaches could avoid attracting Orthaad's ire.

If they realize that their cover has been blown, they will immediately abort their operation and depart from the area. Orthaad has hired them to kill people, but they will not recklessly risk their own lives for gold.

Talking to the Cebrenis

The Cebrenis are willing to discuss Kwaliwi's death with the PCs, if convinced that this is a serious effort to solve the murder. They will speak openly of their general situation and, if asked, explain their bad relations to Orthaad. However, they have very little information on the Kwaliwi's death apart from the obvious: where he was found, how he had died (a deep gash in the neck), and what had been stolen from him (his gold purse). They have no knowledge of the Karkarhamis.

The Cebrenis have not been deterred from gold-washing by their kinsman's death. However, now they work in groups of four and are well armed. This has made the Karkarhamis reluctant to attack them, preferring instead the less formidable Mannish fishermen.

If the PCs decide that they need some armed might as support in an expected confrontation, the Cebrenis are willing, even insistent, to help. This could prove an essential reinforcement since the eleven are competent and well-equipped fighters.

Ending Orthaad's Operation

If the PCs gather very good evidence of Orthaad's conspiracy, they may try to take the matter to Taarir for a due legal procedure. The Warden is reluctant to reveal his corruption by ignoring information obviously incriminating Orthaad. However, before the matter has been dealt with legally, the PCs may encounter even more trouble with Orthaad's other henchmen, since the crime lord does not back down easily.

The best method of defeating the strongman may perhaps be an attack on his camp by a united force of gold-washers; after all, Taarir and his men are elsewhere for three weeks. Orthaad is not willing to risk his life to pursue his greedy plot.

Copyright © Anders Blixt 2003