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THE GILDAR RIFT

Sarah Cawkwell

When the ancient warship *Wolf of Fenris* emerges from the warp, Imperial forces find that it has been overrun by the dreaded Red Corsairs. However, this is no mere raiding party – Huron Blackheart and his entire renegade fleet soon follow, intent on conquering the Gildar Rift and tightening their grip on the sector. Lance batteries and torpedo salvos burn fiery contrails through the void, and only Captain Arrun of the Silver Skulls Space Marine Chapter can halt the renegades' advance. The fate of the Rift will not be decided in the heavens but on the surface of Gildar Secundus below.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Cawkwell is a north-east England based freelance writer. Married, with a son (who is the grown up in the house) and two intellectually challenged cats, she's been a determined and prolific writer for many years. Her first novel, *The Gildar Rift*, was published in 2011. When not slaving away over a hot keyboard, Sarah's hobbies include reading everything and anything, running around in fields with swords screaming incomprehensibly and having her soul slowly sucked dry by online games.

The Gildar Rift can be purchased direct from this website and GW mail order, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, and better bookstores.

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HE WAS A creature of the stars, a creature of bloodshed and glory. His long-ago rebirth into a life of war defined him. It was what he had once aspired to become and what he now embodied. This enforced inactivity had been nothing short of torture. Yet his master had decreed he wait until the optimal moment. Taemar had served under his master's command for long enough to know that what he wanted, he got.

At least he was not alone. There were several of his comrades on this forsaken rock with him, all of whom were suffering the same effects of inactivity. For now, they were hidden, kept far away from the promethium refineries that dominated so much of the habitable areas of Gildar Secundus. They had put down on the planet several days before and as of yet, had received nothing to suggest the plan had been put into action.

'What is it that you seek, brother? Up there in the endless dark of night?'

The voice came from over his right shoulder and Taemar turned at the formal words and almost archaic tone. His shaved head bowed in a gesture of deep respect for the other.

'I merely search the stars for a sign, my lord.'

'Do you doubt that our master will signal us when the time is right? Patience is a virtue, Taemar. You of all people should know that. He will not rush a masterpiece that he has spent so long creating. It has only been days. It will be worth waiting for. The Silver Skulls are predictable and foolish, slaves to their precious routines. They insist upon allowing themselves to be governed by the skeins of Fate. Have a little faith in our leader's plans. Never doubt for one moment that he will play them right into our hands.'

Lord Apothecary Garreon of the Red Corsairs smiled. It was a slow, cruel smile that held no humour. He was taller than most of his comrades but with a rangy leanness that would have made him seem thin had he not been a Space Marine. Sharp, angular cheekbones stood out prominently in a scarred face whose most striking feature was the eyes. An impassive, unreadable dark brown, the colour of Garreon's irises were so dark that his pupils were barely visible. His hair was a tawny brown mane that fell to his shoulders, streaked through with grey that hinted at advancing years. It was a face that was filled with great intelligence but was also underlined with obvious cruelty. It told in the play of the quizzical way he tipped his head in a birdlike manner when he spoke. He always seemed to be questioning, even when he was simply conversing. It told also in the way his tongue would run across his thin lips when he was describing an experiment. One of the many battle scars that he bore pulled his expression into a permanent sneer that seemed to suit his manner.

Taemar had seen that face twist in thought and insatiable curiosity as the Lord Apothecary worked on one of his subjects. He knew how keenly intelligent Garreon could be. He was also acutely aware of how cruel he could be.

The Red Corsairs called him 'The Corpsemaster', not because he harboured any desire to see the dead walk, but because he took a pathological interest in the biology of the dying and the dead, both of whom provided him with a harvest of precious gene-seed. He believed, as had many Apothecaries throughout the history of the Adeptus Astartes, that the future of their brotherhood lay in a better understanding of human genetics and xenobiology. He performed regular dissections on enemies and Red Corsairs both – in some cases whilst his subjects were still living. He could keep his victims alive for a phenomenal length of time, reducing them to skeletal, still-living things that begged for a release that was an eternity coming.

Taemar resumed staring up into the star-studded skies of Gildar Secundus. Huron Blackheart's plans were often impossible to fathom, but that was part of what made him so brilliant. Insane, certainly – but only when viewed from a certain perspective. 'If I might ask, Lord Apothecary, what is your particular interest in these deluded weaklings?'

'The Silver Skulls... hmm.' Garreon ran a long finger over his jaw in a thoughtful gesture. 'Predominately, their psykers. The particular genetic strain seems to grant them an uncanny ability to perceive the future. Whether it's a genuine precognition, a true link to the Emperor's will or simply clever sleight-of-hand and trickery on their part remains to be proven... but history would suggest that they are either well advised, or exceptionally lucky.'

His lips curled upwards into a smile. Taemar, still staring upwards, did not see it. 'Also, they are dying out. Their numbers grow ever smaller. They are a forgotten, far-flung, distant Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. You don't recall the Astral Claws, do you Taemar? You were not one of my brothers when things changed irrevocably.'

Taemar made a grunt of affirmation. His roots had not been with the Astral Claws. Once, a lifetime ago, he had belonged to another Chapter. But the less he thought about his own betrayal, the less it bothered him. He'd fought and murdered his way through the Red Corsairs to the lofty position of one of Blackheart's champions. History suggested that this was no coveted position – death was his only reward and well he knew it.

'The Silver Skulls are stalwart warriors. They are fierce and savage in battle. I believe they should be...' Garreon tailed off, considering how best to end the sentence. 'I believe forming some sort of accord with them would be a beneficial arrangement.'

'You seek to turn them to our cause?' Finally, the Apothecary had Taemar's attention. He looked around. 'You think there is even the remotest of chances that they will do that?'

'They are arrogant. Proud. Yes, I believe there is a chance.' Garreon joined Taemar in seeking the stars above. 'There always is. Mark well the Silver Skulls, Taemar. You and your men seek to create death and destruction. But they will revisit such behaviour on us in kind. I ask that you try your best to bring me some live ones. I suspect that there is much they can teach us.'

'As you wish, my lord.'

ANOTHER SHIP SAILED the empyrean, its destination fixed and certain.

His personal chambers were always gloomy without so much as a lumen-globe to light the way. He preferred to spend his private hours in the shadows and the darkness.

The messenger, a grovelling, wretched slave by the name of Lem who had lost the drawing of straws, stood in the pitch darkness, trying to stem the quivering in his spine. Despite the fact that he had been sent down to deliver good news, they had still lost a ship. This would undoubtedly incur the master's displeasure.

It was silent in the chamber. But it was a loaded silence; the calm before the storm. The hesitation right before the explosive discharge from a bolt pistol detonated. The stillness of the air before a torrential thunderstorm. His master's discontent was a thing denied a voice.

Something brushed past Lem's cheek in the darkness and he flinched. His imagination. It was just his imagination. He squeezed his eyes closed and tried to control the trembling walls of his bladder.

All the while, the noise. A rhythmic drumming. The ring of metal on stone. *One... two... three... four. One... two... three... four...* Denied vision and thus unable to relate anything to the noise, Lem found it disconcerting.

After several long, agonising moments, he forced his eyes open again. He could barely make out the shape seated opposite him, nothing more than a bulky outline in the darkness, but now it seemed to move. The sound of scraping ceramite and the buzz and hiss of servos and hydraulics compensating confirmed his suspicion. The master was moving into a

different position. He had remained silent during the delivery of the news and Lem had dared to hope that he might leave with his life intact.

'Excellent. A confirmation that all is as it should be. All our forces are gathered, everything is in order. We will take this ship.' The master's voice, a low, predatory growl, was thick with saliva, coming as it did through metal teeth that had long since replaced anything natural that had ever grown in his jaw.

They were only a few words, but Lem could feel the sheer menace implicit in them. He nodded – a futile gesture in this darkness – and backed towards the door. As it slid open on old, grinding gears, a sliver of light from the corridor beyond sliced through the room. It fell on the impossibly huge metal power claw of the leader of the Red Corsairs as he drummed it against the arm of his command throne. Lem caught a glimpse of glinting, razor-sharp teeth as though the master's mouth bared in a parody of a grin.

Then the door ground closed and left Huron Blackheart alone in his own darkness.