

# Steam Marines: The Grinding Teeth

*by Darren Grey*

The metal city churned, pistons whirring and gears turning like grinding teeth, as with the power of steam a civilisation prepared itself for ascension. Furnaces and sparks lit up the towering hulks of steel whales, gargantuan spaceships that would carry thousands in their bellies. Colossal rings of copper rose from the landscape, tubes twisting up with mouths agape the sky, ready to accelerate the grey whales into the black beyond.

Beneath the shadows of the shipyards, amidst the noise and chaos, the government offices bustled day and night with the grand preparations. Plush offices, grand courtyards, stately rooms, and all would be left behind when humanity evacuated its homeworld for the depths of space.

General Keirne stared at the woman opposite him in disbelief as she casually poured him a glass of brandy.

‘I thought you’re supposed to be our Military Advocate to the Committee?’

Parsons shrugged her shoulders. ‘I am. And I must think of the best interests for all our members.’

Keirne grunted in disbelief. ‘By shutting down the marines entirely? Helluva way to support us, Parsons.’

Parsons smiled and slid the glass across to the General. ‘I assure you I only have our interests at heart. The military has become stale; it has reached the limits of its use. Many are weary and wish to put down their guns. We are in an unprecedented time of peace and change, General, and we must leave behind the conflicts of the past before we achieve Exodus. Even the Commandant is on board.’

Keirne frowned and looked her up and down. ‘How the hell’d you manage to convince that old bastard?’

‘I encouraged him to reconsider the role of the military with our ascension to a space-borne race. And offered him an appropriate retirement fund.’ Her green eyes glinted. ‘All senior staff would of course receive the same, General Keirne.’

Keirne stopped a moment to mull this over, swirling the brandy in his glass. ‘I suppose there’s some merit there.’ He stared out the window at the star-lit sky. ‘Helluva business, this

Exodus. Never thought I'd live to see us abandon our whole planet. But you really think we'll be safe out there?'

'War is the domain of the earth-bound, General. In space we shall find peace.'

'So they say.' Keirne rested back in his chair and sipped his drink. It added a warm glow to his thoughts. 'Sure would be swell...' He glanced over at the Advocate. 'I hear the hydrofarms will include artificial vineyards. Could be a nice relaxing life, tending those.'

Parsons nodded. 'Certainly a suitable life for a diligent servant of the military, General.'

'Indeed, indeed... Well, this all sounds very compelling, I'll grant you that. But it'll be a hard sell with the troops, even with the Commandant on board.' Keirne shifted in his seat and shook his head. 'Look, I can't just go telling the Committee to scrap the Steam Marines, not in public. The troops would have my head.'

Advocate Parsons leaned back in her chair, a thin smile on her lips. 'Perhaps you could send someone to speak in your stead? Someone fervent in their military support, respected by the troops... Colonel Garrow, perhaps?'

'That drunken warmonger?' Keirne raised his eyebrows. 'I know he's popular with the troops, but he can't be allowed near the Committee! If they hear his bloody war ramblings they'll tear the military apart.' Parsons' green eyes stared into him. They sparkled with an intelligence he hadn't fully appreciated before. 'Oh. I see what you mean. Yes, I suppose Garrow's quite the fit for the job.'

'As I thought. I'll call him in.'

Garrow stared hard at the glass table in front of him. He tried focusing on the reflection of his face, on the grey hair and wrinkled lines, but the effort was hurting his head. He took another long sip from the coffee in his hand, hoping it would clear his thoughts.

'Advocate Parsons will see you now,' called out the receptionist.

He grunted his thanks, stood up and drained the cup of coffee. His vision was beginning to sharpen. He ran a hand over his face, aware of just how bloodshot his eyes must be. This wasn't going to make a good impression...

He strode through to the Advocate's office, where she was seated with General Keirne. Garrow saluted stiffly, ignoring the vague dizziness in his head. He could still do a good salute, at least.

'At ease, Colonel,' said Advocate Parsons with a smile. 'Please, take a seat.'

Garrow sat down clumsily, looking in turn from the Advocate to the General. Both were smiling at him. This couldn't be good.

'Can I offer a drink?' asked the Advocate. She held up a brandy bottle.

*Oh hell yes*, he thought. But drinking with superiors would be inappropriate. He hesitated and licked his lips.

'Don't worry about protocol, Colonel,' said General Keirne. 'We're all friends here. Please, have a drink.'

The Advocate poured him a generous measure and he took the glass graciously. He closed his eyes as he drank, the fluid seeping into him like a reunited love.

'We've called you here for an important reason, Colonel.' The General was looking at him seriously now. 'The Committee is meeting tomorrow to discuss the resources for the Exodus Fleet. As you know there are many who would happily see military spending diverted elsewhere. Those voices are gaining traction, and I'm led to believe even the Commandant is ready to cede to them.'

Garrow growled, anger coming quickly to his mind. 'Damned penny pinchers have taken enough from us already!' he barked. 'They won't be happy till we've got nothing but empty pipes to fight with! Well I'd damned well show them if they did. I'd stick those pipes so far up their blind behinds they'd-'

'Yes, yes, I understand your point, Colonel. Thankfully they've given us one chance to defend our budget. I'm due to speak before the Committee in the morning, but the Advocate has suggested something better - we'd like you to speak to them instead.'

Garrow frowned, confused at this sudden responsibility. He hadn't been given any real responsibility in years, treated like a relic no one wanted to touch.

'We think you can represent the troops' interests best,' chimed in the Advocate. 'You have been in the marines longer than anyone else, one of the few survivors of the Last War. Everyone will respect your voice.'

'That's kind of you, ma'am, but I ain't suited to public speaking. People don't take so well to everything I got to say. My valves don't stay half-closed, if you get my drift.'

'Your, ah, honesty is perhaps what they need. The Committee are steeped in politics; a fresh voice may well persuade them.'

Garrow took a long drink from his glass. Damned Committee... He always thought they were like bats, hovering out of touch from society, but swooping down to leech their blood

whenever they wanted. Did they really want him being straight with them? The idea was terrifying, but he guessed they must be desperate.

The Advocate topped up his glass with a smile. 'It's obviously a great responsibility,' she began. But he wasn't paying so much attention now, sipping his drink as he looked into her eyes. *Too green*, he thought. He'd never trusted her, but then he always had a distrust of authority.

At least the brandy was good.

Garrow woke with a ringing headache.

The hell had happened last night? He growled to himself, rubbing his eyes with the palms of his hands. He had to be awake, but he couldn't remember why.

*Responsibility*, he remembered. *We have a responsibility to protect and to serve.*

Damn, that was it - the Committee. He was supposed to go to those pompous clogs and stick a piston up their shafts.

He got ready in a hurry, realising he was running late. *Why did I drink so much last night?* He shook his head. Regrets could come later. They always did.

The Committee were already in session as he arrived. Commandant Braynor was chairing, a middle-aged man with dark, leathery skin. Next to him was Surgeon-General Neir, staring sternly at him through her thick spectacles.

'Ah, Colonel Garrow, we weren't sure you would make it,' said the Commandant. Derision dripped from his every word.

Garrow saluted stiffly, mumbling an apology. He was aware of the whole room staring at him. Advocate Parsons and General Keirne were in the audience behind, nodding at him as he took his seat.

'As you know, Colonel, we haven't had a land war in over two hundred years; not a wet or dry navy war in one hundred. War, it would seem, has become out of fashion. You are one of the few still alive who has seen battle. What justification can you give for the continued spending on the military?'

Garrow licked his lips. His throat was dry and his palms were sweating. The weight of everyone's stares was bearing down on him. *Damn, I could do with a drink.*

'Well, sir, we've got us a mighty proud history, as you know. Going back, uh, going back a long time...' He hesitated, trying to gather his thoughts. How could he articulate this, how could

he put into words something that was so core to his being? 'We've got ancestors, and traditions, I mean it's part our heritage, y'see.'

The Surgeon-General was shaking her head. 'This is a new age, Colonel. What relevance can the marines have when we go to space? Your steam weapons are outdated. There's more firepower in a modern medical lab and that's where the technology and credits should stay.'

'They're outdated for a reason,' joined in the Commandant. 'We have no use for them anymore. War is and will ever be in our past. We have won. You should be happy, Colonel, it's about time you accepted retirement.'

Garrow clenched his jaw, trying not to let his anger rise. *In the grinding teeth*, he thought.

'Not while there's still steam in my veins, sir. And with all due respect my men and women would surprise you with just what they can do with their "outdated" weapons. We're still a force to be reckoned with.'

There was an uncomfortable glance between the Committee members. 'That's one element we fear, Colonel,' said the Surgeon-General in a condescending tone. 'Weapons have only one use, and I don't trust heavily armed marines aboard civilian spacecraft. What will they do when they get bored with simply shooting practice targets?'

'You dare question the morals of my troops?' barked Garrow. The anger was pushing through now, overcoming the headache and the nausea. *Through the blazing air*. 'My marines will damn well serve to their best and they go through fire and fury to do their duty. They'll take whatever you throw at them and keep on going!'

The stares he got back were cold; the whole atmosphere of the room was turning against him. But he was burning now, he couldn't hold it back. 'They've given their whole lives to be Steam Marines. Every man and woman is proud of their service. They don't want to pack that in just because you think it's no longer a priority. We've given ourselves to the Marines for centuries and asked nothing in return, and now you just want to shut us down? I say no! Stick us in cryos if you're so damned scared of us, but don't kill us off. We'll be ready, we'll be waiting, 'cause when a threat comes along we're the ones who'll save your cogless asses.'

*Past the metal storm.*

Garrow took a deep breath, holding back a further tirade.

'Cryos, you say?' enquired the Surgeon-General with an arched eyebrow. She leaned across to the Commandant and whispered something. He looked up inquisitively, staring into the audience behind Garrow. Garrow turned to see the Advocate staring back with a brief shake of her head.

*The hell's going on?*

The Commandant cleared his throat, bringing back his attention. 'It's, uh, it's still not clear there is a pressing need.'

'Nevertheless we request our continued presence in-fleet. In cryosleep if necessary.' He wasn't going to give up now.

'But what for? What is the threat?'

Garrow wracked his brains. He didn't want to mention the threat of the government itself caving in. What would convince them? '...Pirates. Sir.'

The Commandant didn't look persuaded, but he saw the Surgeon-General was still mulling something over.

'If your troops were in cryo,' she began, 'would they object to certain medical tests on the long-term effects?'

Garrow growled. 'What sort of tests?'

She gave a light shrug. 'There is much we may need to know post-Exodus about the effects of space travel on the body. With a large pool of test subjects we could do valuable research that would benefit everyone.'

Every muscle in his body stiffened. This was barbaric, far short of the respect he was demanding. But was this the only way? He saw the Commandant glance into the audience again, and quickly interjected. 'Yes! They'll volunteer, I'm sure of it. If that's what it takes... our troops will do what they must.' He sunk into his chair as the Surgeon-General smiled. This was degrading.

'I think we can agree under these terms. Commandant?'

'I, well...' He glanced into the audience. 'I suppose we can agree to that. Base troops only though, all officers will be switched to desk duty.' He looked directly at Garrow, anger in his eyes. 'And you'll follow the terms of the Merope Convention. Ballistics only. Four marines per squad. Fleet chain of command protocols.'

Garrow sat up as he heard that, his despondent mood displaced by a sudden fury. 'Ballistics? Are you mad? They'll blow the sides of the cogging ship off!'

'I would hope they won't be blowing anything off. There will be no need for the marines, Colonel. Well done, you've just sentenced all your troops to eternal freezing.'

'Better than throwing their whole careers out to space, you traitorous scum! All you damned weasels can do is sit here chatting, messing people's lives up, without a scrap of thought for our future.'

'You're out of line, Colonel.'

'Up your shaft, *sir*. We swore a responsibility to protect and serve, and all I can see is you playing games, you ignorant shit.'

'This issue is settled. Guards, remove the Colonel immediately.'

Garrow stood up, his voice rising to a roar. 'In the grinding teeth, through the blazing air, past the metal storm, beyond all despair. Our blood boiled to vapour, our flesh steeled to machines, we will protect and we will serve, we are the Steam Marines!'

He shrugged off the burly hands that grabbed him and spun to leave the room. As he marched out he saw Advocate Parsons and General Keirne in the audience, whispering to each other with smiling faces.

*They've played me*, he thought. *The bastards have played me*.

Garrow slunk over his desk, staring at the glass of whiskey in front of him. In his hand was a steam-augmented revolver, its chunky barrel touching the side of the glass. He'd been staring at the whiskey for the last hour but hadn't brought himself to drink any.

*Too depressed to even drink*, he thought. *This is a new low for me*.

He ran a finger over the revolver. It was old and crusty, just like him. *A relic. No use to anyone*.

There was a knock on the door and he sat up, shoving the gun into his desk drawer.

'Come in.'

The door opened and in walked a young woman in navy overalls. She saluted.

'Drinking again, sir?' she asked.

'You're being insolent again, Jones,' he warned.

'I guess we both have our vices then. I came to say well done, sir. I heard you managed to keep the marines together.'

'Huh. I've consigned us to being frozen lab rats. Ain't exactly something to be grateful over.'

'We all know the Committee wanted rid of us entirely. This keeps the Steam Marines going, at least those of us that'll go in cryo, and who knows what'll happen from there. The troops think you're a hero, sir.'

'Well excuse me if I don't share their sentiment, Corporal. I've messed up bad this time. I should've done more for us, but instead my stupid mouth got us into worse trouble. And now there's nothing I can do but watch as we get taken apart.'

He stared despondently at the desk in silence, expecting a reproach, but Jones said nothing back. *Not like her to keep her trap shut*, he thought. He turned to look at her.

Jones' hand slapped heavily into the side of his face, the force shuddering through his skull.

'The hell was that?!' he shouted as he rose to his feet. 'Have you completely lost your mind, Corporal? I should have you chained to the external hull when we shoot into orbit, you insubordinate, crank-brained slip of a pipe-monger!'

The woman stood to attention, holding back a grin. 'Sorry, Colonel. Just checking the old you is still in there.'

'Damn right I'm still in here! And aggravating me right now is about as dangerous as hot-priming a boiler.'

'That's the spirit, sir. You know, a hero once taught me that excess steam should be bottled up and then directed at the most appropriate outlet.'

'Yeah? Well whoever taught you that is a shit.'

'Best shit I know, sir.' Her eyes gleamed.

Garrow grunted, rubbing the side of his face. 'All right, so you're saying we make the best of this? Well get onto the barracks and tell them to start training on post-cryo combat. I want our boys and girls up and shooting within twenty seconds of defreeze. And get procurement to find us the best mag-boots they can. If we end up blowing off the side of the ship in a firefight I want our marines to at least stay standing.'

'Sir!'

'And Corporal, if you damned well hit me again I swear I'm going to have to give you a warning about your insolent behaviour.'

'Sir, yes, sir!'

'Now get out of here and let me finish my drink.'

Jones rolled her eyes and marched out the room, leaving Garrow in silence.

He stared at the whiskey for a moment, but it wasn't appealing to him. He opened up the desk drawer and light glinted across the steel revolver.

*Most appropriate outlet*, he thought. *That damned Advocate...*



The great rings towered above the government offices, lit up against the deep night sky. Steam-powered accelerators were still being constructed along their length, vast enough to power the giant ships into the wide expanse beyond. *The future*, thought Garrow, *whether we want it or not*.

He walked into the empty offices, his gun concealed beneath his overcoat. There were few people here at this time, but he'd seen the Advocate's office lit up from outside.

Garrow wasn't sure what he'd do. Threaten her? Shoot her? It all seemed crazy. But she was up to something, he could feel it. She was moving people around like pieces on an invisible board.

*I'll talk with her, see what she says. And if that doesn't work out... well, we'll find out.*

Maybe the whiskey would have helped his nerves, but he focused instead on the rage and let that power his limbs. *Like directed steam*.

The corridor was empty as he came near her office. He heard a faint sound, like static, that got louder as he approached. When he was a few steps away the sound stopped and the door opened.

'Ah, Colonel Garrow, how lovely of you to visit.' Advocate Parsons stood in the doorway, an open smile on her face. Her green eyes stared intensely, looking him up and down. 'Your visit is very timely, in fact. Do come in.' She moved aside, giving him space to enter.

Garrow felt unnerved by her confidence, but tried not to show it as he walked into the room. He kept his eyes on her as he moved into an open space. The Advocate closed the door and turned to face him.

'You seem a little nervous. Can I get you a drink? Something to help you relax?'

He shook his head. 'No, no drink. I want to talk. I want to know what you're up to.'

She smiled and walked towards him. 'How very direct. Come, take a seat and we can chat.' She touched his hand to pull him towards the chairs, but he shrugged her off and took a step back.

'No games,' he said. 'I want answers and I want them now. Why are you trying to shut down the Steam Marines?'

Her smile was fixed, her green eyes staring at him intently. 'Because I don't want them interfering with our plans, of course. Military opposition would make the harvest far more difficult.'

Garrow shook his head, his thoughts spinning. 'Harvest? What are you on about?'

He retreated as the woman stepped closer, running a finger over her lips. 'So many wars on this planet have been fought over resources, over ideas of power and territory and ownership. So primitive. One day a species must learn that ultimately only one thing matters - food. Packed into metal cans, fired into space without any defences, this is surely the most perfect harvest of all.'

Nausea gripped him and he grabbed at his stomach. 'You want to eat... people?' The room was spinning and his lungs tightened. 'Wuss happen?'

'Just a little sedative.' The woman's voice sounded faint.

Garrow looked at where she had touched his hand and a green blister had formed. He struggled to keep upright as his knees sagged to the ground. 'No,' he tried to call out, but his mouth wouldn't move. A shadow came over him, and he saw two bright green eyes above a gleaming smile.

Anger flooded through him like a jet of steam and he forced himself to concentrate. With his left hand he yanked out his pistol, pointed up and fired. There was a splat of green and he fell over, the gun tumbling from his grip.

'Oh dear,' came the woman's voice. He turned his head towards the source and saw the Advocate with half her face missing, a slimy green mess visible underneath. Tendrils emerged dripping ochre blood and a bulbous green eye swivelled towards him.

'The hell...' he mumbled as everything blurred from sight.

Queuzilxe sighed as she stared down at the blood dripping over herself. What a mess. She hadn't expected the human to be able to fire its weapon whilst poisoned. Quite impressive really - she would have to inform her superiors about these creatures' physical capabilities under pressure.

But first, she needed to resume her message with the pathetic automatons.

She booted the holoprojector back up, waiting for the signal to go through. After a moment the glowing metal form of the robot dignitary appeared. His triangular sensor array swivelled as it scanned her.

'You have been injured,' it crackled in its scratchy voice.

'Very mildly,' she replied. 'Thankfully my disguise flesh took most of the damage. But it will need some patching up.'

'No witnesses?'

She turned to look at the twitching Colonel on the floor. 'None. And no evidence will be left behind. As I was saying before our interruption, we've been methodically careful in our operations.'

'What of their military? They have not entirely disarmed.'

'No, but they have crippled themselves heavily. If any pockets of resistance appear they will present a minimal challenge. I've told you countless times, this is a perfect situation for us. How often do we get a whole species voluntarily leaving their gravity well? And defenceless too.'

'You had best be correct. We are operating the front line attack.'

Qeuzilxe sighed. 'We settled on this a long time ago. You take the front line, whilst we hold the back-up and administration. Both of us will get our share from this.'

'As agreed?' There was a red glow of distrust in its sensors.

'As agreed. You the metal and we the flesh. We all shall harvest to our content.' Robots were so easy to lie to.

'Very well. We shall contact again closer to their launch time.'

The image disappeared and Qeuzilxe was left on her own, with the human still twitching on the floor. He let out a soft moan as she turned to him.

'Ah, do not worry, I have not forgotten you.' She looked him up and down with her green eyes. 'Now, you asked about the harvest before. Perhaps a demonstration would work best...' She knelt down to the body, running her hands over it. The man groaned and convulsed, exciting her appetite further.

Qeuzilxe peeled back her jaw, releasing her full three rows of teeth, and dug them grinding into the soft human flesh.