

Heaven's Reach

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About this story

This is the story about brutal slavery in the Empire, and how one man coped and was eventually rescued. It is the story of Steven Keyes' ship, "Heaven's Reach". In my opinion, this is one of the best Frontier Elite Universe short stories, and I hope you enjoy reading it. The story is written by Brad Chacos, who also wrote the excellent Wolfsheart adventures, following an Imperial officer's adventure.

--Dylan Smith, July 2001

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thirdlittlepig@aol.com

Heaven's Reach

When....you have succeeded in dehumanizing the Negro; when you have put him down and made it forever impossible for him to be but as the beasts of the fields; when you have extinguished his soul and placed him where the ray of hope is blown out in darkness like that which broods over the spirits of the damned, are you quite sure that the demon you have roused will not turn and rend you?

-- Abraham Lincoln, Speech at Edwardsville, Illinois September 11, 1858

With a look intense concentration, hand to his chin and brow furrowed, the child carefully considered his options. Finally, still not looking very decisive, he reached out and tapped the man's gnarled left hand.

Grinning crookedly, Stephen Keyes slowly opened the indicated hand, revealing a small chocolate, to the delight of the child, who leaped up and down enthusiastically clapping his hands.

He tossed the sweet up in the air, and the kid caught it deftly. It disappeared quickly, and the tyke looked up at his uncle. "More!"

Stephen chuckled, and the familiar pain shot up his body, beginning at his arches. It was getting worse, but at least he could still work, still function, still contribute to the well being of the Family and the Ship.

Heaven's Reach was a behemoth of a ship – Panther class, stocked with the latest auto–repair technology and over a hundred shields, two twenty 'watters and a five 'watter, and still held room for over five hundred tonnes of cargo, twelve Family members, and a particularly rascally mutt named Rast. Yes, this was a true Family ship, the third of its name; the first, a Imperial Courier, was lost in a freak accident involving the collapse of its hyperspace drive, and the second, a Boa, in a pirate raid that was all too recent for Stephen. . .

"Mama?" Stephen asked as he hurried, pulled urgently by the arm. Behind him, Stephen pulled Mr. Binky, his teddy bear, along in kind. Strange, wailing sounds (his Grampa hold told him that they were made by something called a lahm sissem) shattered the former peacefulness of Heaven's Reach.

"Shush dear. You'll have to pick those legs up faster, hon, can you do that for mama?" Mama's voice had a odd sound to it, like she was scared of something. Maybe lahm sissem are monsters, Stephen thought.

"Sure, mama!" Stephen declared. He began to pump his legs furiously, actually pulling ahead of Mama by a bit, and causing poor Mr. Binky to make a scratching sound as he slid along the ground. "Mama, why are we running? I already did my excise this morning, mama."

Mama let out a nervous titter. "I'm sure you did, hon, but this is more important than that. Bad men are trying to hurt the ship, hon, and if they get in and we aren't somewhere safe, they will probably try to hurt us, too."

Stephen took this in thoughtfully – ahead, the large metal doors that opened into the infirmary loomed. Mama's grip on his hand tightened. It all became clear to him – lahm sissem weren't monsters, they were only bad men! For some reason, that didn't help Stephen any.

They came up to the doors, the odd little trio, the wails still filling the air. Letting out a sigh of relief, Mama let go of Stephen's hand and pushed the button that released the doors. There was a little hiss, and something popped in Stephen's ears, then the door began to lift very slowly. It was dark on the other side.

"It will be alright now, hon," Mama said gently. She raised a hand and began to stroke his hair. "The men will make the bad men go away, and even if the bad men get through—" She was cut off as a loud boom shook the small hallway, and the wailing of the lahm sissem cut off abruptly. Behind her, the metal of the hallway buckled, small, angry holes appearing in the duralium, and it began to scream, and little Stephen had never heard a worse sound before, the metal was screaming! Then the ceiling began to glow red, and a large piece dropped, and Mama wasn't able to move fast enough...

"Grampa?"

Stephen blinked. "What, Graham?"

"What were you looking at?"

Stephen caught himself before he blurted out the truth. His grandson's eyes were so wide, so trusting, so full of innocence that Stephen found it impossible to speak of the grim truths of life to him yet, not when he would discover the truth for himself before too much longer. "Well," Stephen said slowly, a twinkle coming to his eye, "I was thinking if I might have some chocolate hidden somewhere on my body. You did ask for more, right?"

"Yeah!" Graham said eagerly. "More!"

"Ah, life would be so boring if not for the unabashed selfishness of youth."

"Huh?" Graham asked, pushing a blond lock of hair back from his eyes. "Does that mean I get more candy?"

"Why, yes," Stephen smirked. "Yes it does." Ignoring the protests of his body, he leaned forward and magically plucked a chocolate from behind his grandson's ear. Graham squealed in delight, and Stephen patted him on the head. "Now don't tell your mother I'm spoiling your dinner, son," he whispered in a conspiratory tone. "She's meaner than a giant Verrix when she gets mad."

Stephen wiped beads of sweat from his forehead, and gave a look of hatred up at the hot sun of Olcanze. The ozone on Gonzalez's Colony was a good one, especially compared to the thin ones of some of the mining planets Stephen had worked on, but during the dog days of the summer, the temperature still reached upwards of a hundred and twenty degrees fahrenheit, and the sombreros that Miss Sampson supplied her slaves sure shaded the head well, but didn't help the heat any.

Miss Sampson was nice enough a lady, Stephen supposed, when she "blessed" you with the "honor" of being her butler or cook or doorman; she allowed the most productive field workers of the month those positions. Stephen himself had been doorman once and butler three times, and the Lady had surely been the epitomy of her upper-class, aristocrat upbringing – head held high, chillingly polite, and well spoken, never raising a hand in anger. Not a person he would sit in a bar with (if he had his freedom), but better than most of the aristocracy in the system, hell, in the Empire. Stephen had been passed around a lot in the Olcanze system (the amount of slaves one owns was a sign of respect among the nobles here), and he would dare say she treated her slaves the best of any noble.

The Imp was another matter altogether. The Imp (his real name was not known among the slaves) was a nasty little man, who matched his nickname in both looks and temperament. Short and fat, he was the one who ran the fields for Miss Sampson, and he had none of the good graces that she did. Every morning, he waddles out to the fields where the slaves waited obediently in a line, cracking his cat-o'-nine-tails over the backs of random victims and taunting all. "What'sa matter, ink-face? Want a raise?" was a particular favorite of the Imp's – ink-face was a common and derogatory term for slaves, who in Olcanze had a large teardrop

tattooed underneath their left eye for identification purposes. The workers had soon learned to play to the man's ego and tremble when he came along, however, all the while hiding sneers.

But life goes on, Stephen reflected as he began digging again (no need to let the Imp see him standing idle). The bruises faded and the cuts healed, becoming scars, and all seemed right again, or as right as an enslaved man could hope for. He had even began to spend time with a woman. Joann was a fellow slave, her hair blond and eyes blue, and her body finely shaped and muscular from working endlessly in the fields. Stephen considered himself lucky. On most worlds she would have become some rich old man's sex toy long ago.

Stephen pushed the thoughts from his mind, and began to pace his digging; the Imp had told him to dig a ditch five feet deep and ten feet long, and he didn't want the emotions related with his thoughts to make him dig faster – these long tasks were done best at a steady pace. Eventually he tuned out the world, humming softly as his body went about its business as if it was an automation. Hours passed.

The sound of the screaming Imp brought him back to the present. He looked up quickly, the sombrero flapping around foolishly on his head, knowing, somehow, that this tirade would be worst than most.

About fifty yards to Stephen's left, he saw the squat figure of the Imp standing over someone, the muscles one could see under his fat were taut. He was shouting something incoherent (Stephen thought he caught the word stupid), every once in a while punctuating his words with a vicious crack of his whip. The slave was doing an admirable job of keeping his mouth shut, taking his beating like a man.

Stephen sighed and went back to his work. It was none of his business.

An especially hard crack of the whip finally made the slave finally scream. Stephen froze.

It was Joann. He found himself running towards her, hearing her better with each step.

"Stop? You want me to stop, do you, ink-face?" the Imp sneered, snapping down the whip. Stephen's blood boiled, and he ran a bit faster. "If you wanted me to stop, you never would have dropped those radishes!" Down came the whip. "In fact, I!" –crack– "bet!" –crack– "that!" –crack– "you like it! You dropped those radishes on purpose, didn't you?" –crack– "Well, you sure got my atte.."

He was cut off by Stephen's choked roar. The Imp even managed to whirl around and get a final look at his killer before Stephen slammed the shovel into his forehead with a snarl.

Stephen was sitting quietly in the cafe, playing with his food. Thinking of Joann had made him lose his appetite. He got up carefully, leaning heavily on his cane, and disposed of his food in the trash receptacle. The constant whine of the hyperspace engine was giving him a headache, and he set off towards the infirmary for some aspirin, feeling his age with every step.

In the infirmary, he found his daughter-in-law, Rebecca, already digging around the medical supplies.

"Hello, dear," Stephen said simply.

Rebecca spun around with a gasp and clutched something to her chest. "Why, uh, hello, Father," she replied hesitantly. "What brings you here? It's past your usual dinner time."

"Why, yes, it is," Stephen agreed amiably. He shook his ancient head, who responded to such rough treatment with a new jab of pain to remind him why he was searching for pills in the first place. "I can't sleep.

The hyperspace drive is especially irritating tonight, and my head's killing me. Came to find some aspirin. Did you happen to see any?"

"Ah, actually, I did." She turned back to the cabinet (she never let go of her white-knuckle grasp of whatever she was holding, Stephen noticed with a weary grin) and a minute later produced a small bottle of Dumatronol. "Recommended by nine out of ten doctors!" the cheery packaging claimed, and Stephen found himself wondering if the other doctor with a beat-up old fart with a penchant for headaches like himself. He fiddled with the cap for a moment, then shot Rebecca a pleading look.

"Would you please...?" he asked.

"Oh, sure!" she declared, looking embarrassed. "I'm sorry you had to ask."

"Oh, that's fine," he said, holding out the bottle. After she took it, he held up his hand, fingers gnarled into a grotesque claw. "I've had arthritis for longer than you've been alive, dear, and I lost my pride a long time ago. If I ever had any."

"That's horrible." She twisted the cap off and dug out two small blue pills, handed them to her father. "You still have plenty to be proud about though. Ah, those blue eyes of yours could melt a woman. If I hadn't met your son..."

Stephen smiled. "I'm sure it would've up with us having rampant bunny sex and unleashing our horde of love-children upon the Allied worlds." Rebecca guffawed, an odd sound coming from a lady, or so Stephen thought. "What brings the fairest of all the Family down to the infirmary?"

"Nothing, just doing inventory," she said a bit too quickly. Stephen raised a shaggy eyebrow. She blushed and slowly opened her hand to reveal a pregnancy test.

Stephen stood there looking at her for a moment; she stood there looking back. Finally, he asked "Why didn't you tell us earlier, Daughter?"

She held her head low for a moment before she answered. "We... Joseph and I didn't know how the rest of you would respond. I mean, the ship's already full, babies are a pain, and I...we....Joseph..."

She was sobbing. Stephen hobbled over and embraced her, held her close. "There, there, Daughter," he said, stroking her hair gently. "You know we'll always love you and Joseph – you're Family. If you can't trust on Family, who can you trust? Sure, Heaven's Reach already has twelve Keyes on her, not to mention that damn dog, but so what? That's only the required crew. There are plenty of upgrades you can buy so that she can support more people than that: extra oxygen cannisters, food supplies, we could always build another cabin or two." He held her out to arm's length and beamed. "Anyways, if this child is half the pleasure Graham is, he could still pass for Jesus reborn."

"Heh. I suppose you're right. I'm no Virgin though." She laughed at her own joke; the shiny wake of a tear glistened on her face. "Thank you so much, Father. You don't know what this means to me."

Stephen flashed his rotten teeth. "I think I have a pretty good idea."

Stephen grunted, lifting the large basket of ore up over his head. Life was hard here in the Imperial Ore Extraction Mines on Bigg's Hollow, certainly more so than the years he had spent in the fields on Gonzalez's Colony in Olcanze. Oh, how he longed for those days again; he didn't realize how good he had it then. The Imp was a cruel man who embraced his darkness and grew drunk on it, and the taskmasters here were almost

the complete opposite of him, cold and uncaring, almost never whipping the slaves, but oh, oh, how much better it was in Olcanze nonetheless. Stephen remembered it almost fondly now – returning from a hard day's work in the field to the barracks, slipping out of his sombrero and poncho and into his grungy robes to lay down with a good book. Or, for that short, wonderful while, with Joann. That had ended along with the Imp's life, however. As Stephen stood over the dwarf, watched his lifeblood drain from its wound oh so slowly, the slave had felt his freedom draining along with it.

He had been sold; no one ever kills a slave when one could profit from it, even a murderous one. Stephen soon found himself the possession of the Emperor himself, as all state slaves were, and hauling ore out of the putrid stinkholes that ran deep into the earth of Bigg's Hollow, a far cry for the weeks as Miss Sampson's butler. To make matters worse, Stephen had been classified a killer/romantic in the Imperial computer system. The rest of his life, even if for some reason he was bought back into private use, he would probably never see a living, breathing woman. He sure as hell would be under constant supervision. Once the dog bites, you put him on a shorter chain.

He stumbled on a rock and fell down with a yelp. He could hear the ore in the basket roll to the ground around him, and forced himself to his knees to start to collect the metals; the guards here didn't whip much, but they didn't look kindly on spilt goods, either. A minute later, all the ore was back safely nestled into his basket, and he slowly stood. The pain in his back was getting worse, and his feet were nothing but large pus receptacles a long time ago. The typical earmarks of a slave. Grimacing, he noticed the guard noticing him, and began to put one foot in front of the other, making himself walk. Life, if you could call it that, went on. Unless you were the Imp or Mama.

That night, in the barracks, he was awakened by a sharp poke in the ribs. "Tomorrow, right before lunch, at the cave entrance," a slithery voice whispered. Kinnison? "Bring your pick. We are going to win our freedom." Then the man, whoever he was, was gone, on to deliver the message to others. Stephen sighed and went to sleep.

The next morning they were prodded awake by the guards even earlier than usual. The slaves were lined up and made to march out into the cold Vequess morn in their pajamas.

Outside, crucified on a wooden cross, Jim Rojas's body greeted them silently. His tongue had been ripped out, and his gaping mouth was stuffed with his genitalia. His dead eyes stared accusingly, and his fingers, already suffering the onset of rigor, were thrust upward into the sky.

Reaching for heaven, *Stephen thought sadly.* So it wasn't Kinnison.

Humming softly to himself, Stephen looked out into the darkness of space, picking out various objects, giving them silly names (even if they had names already), and generally enjoying himself. This was what he truly loved about space – the space.

He was sitting in the topmost turret of *Heaven's Reach*. It was the most isolated place on the ship, the small turret; the Keyes were a Family of Traders, only fighting when absolutely unavoidable, and even then they tended to rely on sophisticated auto-aim guidance systems rather than human skill for the turrets. It simply worked better that way.

Quietly, he looked out of the small viewscreen and glimpsed the small planet called Bradley's Legacy by the folks around here. Stephen decided he would call it Hamburger Run. The Family was headed for the small colony called Newtown (*I'll call that Utopia*), bringing a lot of water, luxury goods, and fruits and vegetables with them. Grant Base (*Saddle Point*) would have been a better place to go if the Keyes simply wanted to drop off their goods, get their money, and go, as was the original plan, but with Rebecca's

pregnancy (it was confirmed now), Stephen wanted to go to Newtown and its better doctors.

Stephen passed the hours this way, reflecting on his lot and his life, naming asteroids, scratching Rast, the family dog, behind the ears. Finally, a full thirty–nine hours after he had awakened the previous morning, Stephen began to feel the first hints of drowsiness hit him.

He stretched and yawned loudly, feeling muscles pop after hours of disuse, feeling the old pain slip back into place. Rast, who had fell asleep on Stephen's lap long ago, was jostled awake and stretched himself, his mouth opening in that little dog yawn. Stephen chuckled, and the mutt barked at him plaintively.

"Sorry boy, Grampa Steve has to go to bed," Stephen said, gently picking up the dog and placing him on the floor. Wagging his tail indignantly and barking a final time, Rast leaped down the hatch that led to the lower decks, making Stephen jump. He'd never get used to that damn crazy mutt.

Using his cane for leverage, he lifted himself out of the seat after switching off the viewscreen. Slowly, daggers stabbing the arches of his feet with every step, he began to walk towards the same hatch that Rast had mere seconds ago so carelessly leaped down.

He was thrown to the ground as the ship shook and rumbled, twisting his ankle awkwardly. Overhead, the computer calmly announced "Warning. Ship is under attack."

Stephen sat huddled in the corner of the Imperial Trader Birthright's cargo hold, between a crate of moldy cheese and a small, undernourished boy. He glanced down at his ancient hands, once so strong and tanned, a mark of pride for Stephen, now lined and gnarled with arthritis. He had just hit sixty five years old, at least going by the standard galactic calendar; using the rotation cycle of Vequess, where he had spent that last forty–plus galactic years of his life, he was well over a hundred.

Stephen sighed and looked up to examine his fellow livestock, the slaves that carried the Empire's economy on their backs. Most of them were his age, though there were the few odd young 'uns of the sickly and sunken–chested variety. The mines were no place for the sick or the elderly, and now the slaves on the ship had menial, easy jobs to look forward to for the rest of their lives. They were headed to Achenar, where they would be poked and prodded, tested and evaluated. Some would then be reassigned to the palace as gardenworkers, some to Topaz as messengers, some to Cemeiss as jewel appraisers. Some would even stay in the medical center, to be put to task poking and prodding future arrivals.

Stephen sighed. Maybe now he'd get a cane and wouldn't have to hobble around holding people's shoulders.

The time passed slowly. Some people tried to tell stories about the Underground Railroad, a slave–rescuing organization that was named after a similar organization in the pre–space days, but these few attempts at raising morale quickly stopped. It was fine to tell fairy tales about the Underground with the ground under your feet and a pick in your hands, there it felt as if you were actually working and doing something good for the world, but it just seemed different when you were stuffed into an oversized sardine can with fifty other dirty, suffering souls and made to dance when some idiot told you to dance. It reminded you that you were a slave.

The journey went on without incident. Stephen slept fitfully. Once a lurching sensation woke him, but he kept his eyes closed. It was only a hyperspace leap, nothing to worry about. He slept...

...And was wakened by screaming. Sirens were blaring, echoing throughout the hold, and two or three people were puking. What was happening? The boy next to him left out a frightful whimper.

The ship rumbled ominously, and outside the door to the cargo bay someone let out a hoarse yell. Something wet—sounding fell. "Whatthehellwasthat?!!!" an old lady across the bay yelled. The cargo bay doors slid slowly open in response, a harsh, grinding sound. The boy next to Stephen nuzzled up against the old slave, and received a reassuring pat on the head.

Light came forth, blinding the slaves, dizzying them. A few puked again. When they could see again, what they saw amazed them, striking fear in the hearts of some, hope in the hearts of others.

A man stood there, one foot casually rested on the still—warm body of a person dressed in Imperial garb. The man was wearing a tight, black jumpsuit, the arms of which had flowing dragons painted in orange artistically. On his breast was a small orange representaion of a what looked to be a ladder, and his head was concealed in a large helmet, one with a reflective visor on it and looking very much like the ancient earth motorcycle helmets.

The room was silent, staring, and hoping for the best. The man, quickly realizing why the slaves were looking at him with their mouths open, pulled off his helmet, revealing a dark—skinned man with a high top fade and a large gap in his teeth.

"Well, folks," he exclaimed triumphantly, crooked grin on his face, "I hope ya'll packed enough food for a long trip, 'cause ya'll are taking a detour on the Underground Express."

Heaven's Reach shook violently as a laser bit into its shields. Someone in the cockpit (wasn't it Joseph's watch?) made a tight turn, throwing Stephen to the other side of the little turret and causing him to smack his head into a large bank of computers. "Warning," the computer said in that damnable calm voice, "Auto—target system for the main turret has been disabled."

Stephen spat a few choice curses as he used the chair in the room to pull himself to his feet, his ankle shouting protests.

"Warning, shields at fifty seven percent," the computer informed him coldly.

"I know that, god dammit," Stephen muttered as he switched on the viewscreen again. Swiveling his chair, he found the offending ships in a loose left echelon formation, a large ship in the lead followed by two smaller fighters.

"Computer, identify those ships," Stephen commanded. He began to warm up the laser – it hadn't been used in a while.

"The large ship you see is a Imperial Courier, armed with a twenty megawatt beam laser. The two smaller ships are Ospery X Attack fighters, probably armed with one megawatt beam lasers." One of the Ospreys took a pot shot at *Heaven's Reach* then, a bright red lance of energy, confirming the computer's projections.

"Computer, target one of those Ospreys."

"Yes, sir." A green square appeared around one of the two smaller fighters. It was coming in on a straight course, heading right for the bridge. Stephen had no problems locking on; the Osprey disappeared in a large cloud of fire and debris.

"Take that, bastard!" Stephen said grimly. He was already swinging the turret around to face the other Osprey, who had broken formation with the destruction of the first. Visions of the Imp danced across

Stephen's vision as the small targeting square appeared over the second Osprey. These ships were probably slave raiders – only a slaver or a Demon would be so daring to attack a fully-stocked Panther in protected space, and this wasn't anywhere near the Demon's turf. He slowly began to lock onto the Osprey. The pains were forgotten now.

A bright light flashed in the corner of his vision. "Warning, shields are now at forty-six percent," the computer announced.

"Joseph, you had better take care of that Courier soon," Stephen whispered. He pulled the trigger and whispered a brief prayer for the dead as Osprey number two exploded.

A grey streak flashed across his viewscreen. He must've had his engine upgraded Stephen thought, swaying in his seat, No normal Courier goes that fast.

He ordered the computer to open a communications link to the bridge. "Joseph, get a lock on that ship already," he commanded sternly. The Courier had disappeared to the below the ship, and the computer was squawking about shields again.

"I'm trying, Father!" came the response. Joseph sounded ready to blow, Stephen thought. "The thing's too damn fast for me to keep locked on with the main lasers, and the lower turret has been disabled."

"This one is too, it's a good thing I was up here." He didn't mention that it was his head that caused the upper turret's auto-aim feature to break. "If you can't keep your cannons on him, maneuver so that the Courier is always above the ship. I can get him."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure! Now quit acting like a baby and get that Courier in my range!"

"Okay." Joseph sounded sullen. "Bridge out."

The world tilted as the Panther suddenly changed directions, temporarily throwing off Stephens equilibrium. He swayed, almost falling out of his seat, before the ship straightened out again, this time with the Courier square in the middle of Stephen's sights. He smiled ferally. No slavers were going to get him again.

He fired.

The pilot of the Courier saw it coming at the last second. He tried to pull up, and actually avoided the worst of the laser, but not all of it. Twenty megawatts of pure, destructive energy crashed into the left thruster of the ship, vaporizing most of it instantly. The main body of the ship continued forward, however, proof that inertia exists.

Stephen didn't see that, however. He had slumped back in his seat and began crying when he saw the bright explosion, thinking the Courier's pilot dead, and feeling a wave of pity for the pilot and a wave of revulsion at himself. He had promised long ago never to kill another man, he thought as he sobbed into his hands, and these damn slavers had made him break that promise.

As a result, Stephen never even saw the Courier bearing down on the turret. He was killed instantly.

Heaven's Reach

Stephen blinked, looking around at the shocked faces of his fellow slaves. Free men, rather. The trauma of the past few days had gotten to a few of them, and they sat there stoic and bug-eyed. Some had begun to smile again, though.

They were free.

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