

FRONTIER STORIES

HARVEST

The last vestiges of pre-dawn mist dissipated like a phantom in the early morning light. The red sky on the horizon gave way to blue as Serana's yellow star began its 11 hour journey across the sky. It was late summer and temperature was already touching 23 Celsius in the valley. On the overlook a gentle breeze brought some brief respite to the building heat.

Davie was excited. The harvest would begin tomorrow and today would the see giant harvesters arrive. School had finished and the kids who where old enough were expected to help their families grade and pack their crops.

The month long harvest commenced with a festival in the town square. There would be music and dancing. Hogs would be roasted over hot coals. The grownups would get drunk on their home brewed beer and cider.

Every year the yield was bigger. Davie's father told him the colony was becoming a Stage II world. He did not know *exactly* what it meant, but the grownups were excited at the prospect and it seemed important.

Davie was 10 years old, not far off 11 and like most of the region's kids he looked forward the pre-harvest festivities as much as he did the more traditional holidays.

He ran ahead of his family; his mother carried little Sarah and his father walked alongside them holding a picnic basket.

"Don't go too far ahead, Cricket." His mother called. He turned and waited for them to catch up before running on. The breeze stirred the boy's long fair hair as he deftly ran over the rough worn track. Serana's low gravity meant he was already as tall as his mother and not far behind his father. Like all the planet born kids his limbs were long and thin.

"Hurry up!" he cried. "I don't want to miss the arrival. It's the best bit."

When he grew up Davie wanted to fly one of the giant harvesting machines, following the harvest across the planet, and never resting in one place for more than a few weeks.

Over the years, he had met many of the pilots. They were always friendly, happy and carefree. They never worried about crop failure or market prices.

'Another day, another farm and another girl!' His friend Marius had told him. Davie was unsure about the girls, but the adventurous, nomadic existence appealed far more than raising crops ever could.

This year had been strange. The yield was showing signs of being the best in living memory, but his parents had been worried about something. All the adults he knew were worried. They talked of politics and how bad times were coming.

'Times are changing' was an expression he heard a lot. He did not know what was happening, but he was sure it was a long way from here.

The ground rose more steeply toward Beacher's Rise. The shadows were growing shorter as dawn gave way to morning. The countryside was alive with birds and insects. The wild native grasses were nearly half a metre high. They swayed gently in the breeze.

A crowd had gathered on the ridge line, mostly younger kids. He saw George Simpson from his school. As usual, he was pushing other kids around. Davie was glad his parents were with him. George was one of those kids who could ruin everything.

Davie reached the top and waited for his family. There was plenty of space, but he wanted to secure a good spot.

His father caught up. They walked to the edge of the ridge. Below them the farmland spread out as far as Davie could see. Wheat and Barley were the main crops, but some farms grew maize and sometimes vegetables.

"Can you hear that, Davie?" his dad asked.

Davie strained his ears. He wished the excited people around him would be quiet. Then he heard it: the low pulsing throb of anti-grav drives, coming from beyond the horizon. He peered into the haze between land and sky.

"There they are!" A voice cried, it was George Simpson. Even he sounded excited.

Davie did not take his eyes off the sky, lest he blink and miss something.

A black dot appeared in the far distance, followed by another, then another.

The aircraft grew closer. Soon the sky was full of them, approaching slowly and steadily.

The crowd cheered and clapped as a harvester flew in front of them. It was a bulbous craft with four lifters mounted on stubby wings fore and aft. The pilot sat at the very front encased in a plexiglass bubble.

Davie clapped and jumped with excitement as the ship passed by. The noise grew as the others arrived. They danced and manoeuvred, putting on a show for the assembled townsfolk. Some emitted streams of coloured smoke, others were decorated with flashing strobes. No two were alike. They all had different liveries and configurations. The harvesters were as diverse as their pilots. And oh how they danced!

The display transfixed Davie, his ribs shook, and the ground trembled at the sound of these fantastic machines.

Marius told him it was important to make a good first impression. The pilots displayed their skills and machinery to impress the farmers. The ones who were most memorable always won more contracts at the auctions. Marius Zhu was a long-time friend of his father and had been harvesting the Booth family's corn for as long as Davie could remember. Softly spoken and slightly built, Marius was one of the oldest of the migrant workers. He flew a Massey-Ferguson Magnum III. It was an old machine but still one of the best. It was glossy black with gold pin striping.

There must have been a hundred or more harvesters dancing above the fields, filling the sky air with colour and noise. Davie could see no sign of Marius. He hoped he was coming this year. His dad had told him his friend would retire soon and they would have to go to the auction's like everyone else.

Then Davie saw it. A black and gold machine flew slowly along the ridge line. Red smoke was streaming behind it. Two other harvesters followed one with white smoke, the other blue.

Davie waved and was sure his friend waved back.

He was still waving and laughing when one of the ships trailing Marius exploded in an orange ball of flame. Debris fell into the corn field below and ignited the dry crops.

The crowd hushed. Oily black smoke rose into the air as a secondary explosion echoed over Beacher's Rise.

"Dad?" He turned to his father.

"Come on, Davie... we have to go." His father's voice was hushed and urgent.

Another explosion, then another. Davie covered his ears as his father pulled him away from the edge.

Part of a harvester tumbled out of the sky and smashed into the ground, it was where George and his friends had been standing.

“Dad, what’s happening?” he screamed over the noise.

His father made no reply and dragged him to where the family sat. His mother held little Sarah close to her. Her face was pale, like when she had a fever in the winter.

“Colin, what’s happening?” she echoed Davie’s question.

“I don’t know. Come on, we have to take the children home.”

They ran to the rough track leading to the farm. A black and gold harvester tumbled from the sky and exploded on the ground. Davie knew it was Marius. He tried to break free, to run to the burning craft, but his father held his hand tightly.

“Nothing we can do, Davie. We have to go home.”

A shadow passed over them, moving faster than the harvesters. A blue-black starship screamed over their heads, so low everyone ducked. Its engines emitted a screech that sounded like an animal in pain. It was gone as quickly as it came. A sonic boom ripped the air apart in the ship’s wake. The downdraft knocked the family to the ground.

Davie’s hearing was muffled, like when water got in his ears. More of the strange craft passed over him. Blue lightning danced around spines at the front. They all made the same horrible sound.

Little Sarah was crying, Davie’s eyes were damp, but he was determined not to cry.

He rolled onto his side and stood. His father was holding the baby while his mother struggled to stand. Her nose dripped blood.

Over the sound of explosions and screams another sound washed over him. It was like rolling thunder. He turned to face the origin of the new noise.

A giant starship was moving toward the hill. It was black, lightning danced over its hull. Beneath it a curtain of fire stretched from one horizon to the other.

He stood and paralysed with fear and awe as the terrible sight grew closer. He wanted to run but knew there was no point.

His father took his hand as the world ended.

NOTES

“Harvest” started life as a chapter in the main series book “Wheel of Fire”. The idea behind the chapter was to expand on events in the wider universe.

As the novel developed, this little chapter became orphaned from the main plot. So I thought I would tidy it up and release it to the growing community of Vale Series readers.

The title has a dual meaning, The most obvious is evident from the story. The other is hinted at in Book 3 and will come to fruition later in the series... sorry folks, not telling you any more about it!

Harvest is still a little rough as I have not put it through the same release process as main series books. Think of it like a “deleted scene” on your favourite Blu-Ray!

I hope you like the story. If there’s enough interest I’ll publish some more of similar and longer lengths. There are already two 10,000 stories in development.

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