

TO SOW  
a FALLOW



MICHAEL FRANK RIZZO

ILLUSTRATED BY ALEJANDRO COLUCCI



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*For my family, friends, and dogs. I never would have gathered the  
courage to write these stories without your constant love and support.*

*For Emily, Holly, Keisha, Daisy, Isabella, Angel, Sophia, Gia, Ella,  
Lucy, Lilibeth, Annie, Stella, Bubba, and Otis—my inspiration.*

To Sow a Fallow  
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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Asterra has been a world that I have been creating for over eight years and was born out of my love for fantasy, mythology, history, and adventure. Most importantly, it was my need for a safe haven when my days seemed too difficult that sparked the initial journey to Asterra. It is an ever-growing project that is dear to my heart and one that I am delighted to share with you. The bibliography at the end is a list of sources that served as a source of knowledge and a basis of inspiration for this installment in Asterra's lore. Here, you will find some of my favorite fantasy novels, mythological tales, historical sources, academic materials, dictionaries, and much more. I hope these materials will serve and inspire you in whatever journey you choose in life. And I hope Asterra brings you just as much joy as it brings me.

Kind regards,  
Michael Frank Rizzo

*How far that little candle throws his beams!  
So shines a good deed in a [weary] world.*

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE,

*THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*, ACT 5, SCENE 1, LINES 90–91<sup>1</sup>

## CHAPTER 1

# BEHOLD A FALLOW



**I**t was a fertile plot of land, or so it seemed to John. But the worried look on poor old Helmer's face somberly suggested that nothing here would dare grow. The plants that had once flourished on this pleasant patch of earth in northern Aurora now littered the two-acre plot of land with their dying carcasses, and poor Bernard Helmer's life seemed to wither away with them. For many years, this farm had blessed Bernard and his wife, Almaya, with an abundance of crops that had filled their lives with substance, sustenance, and serenity. Alas, the farmstead was in ruins, and the Helmers' salvation now seemed to rest solely with the small ten-year-old John Hortensis.

John gently patted the dust from his rough-cut pants as he held up the weight of his posture upon the uneven terrain. His diminutive shadow was but a negligible speck on the mysterious plagued earth before him. His first step forward was uneasy upon the crumbling undulations of soil; his shoulders were heavy and his legs stiff. He was no farmer, not even a seasoned farmhand, and the rotten smell of the dying harvest before him was a potent reminder that this task would not be as easy as helping his parents gather herbs and vegetables from the family garden for baking. But John momentarily eased his burdened shoulders and continued forward.

He saw Bernard nervously sorting through his crops across the farm. John looked away painfully. He needn't remind himself that Bernard and Almaya were the kindest people he knew; it was simple fact. His parents, Marcus and Elizabeth, had known the Helmers for nearly twenty years, and John considered Bernard and

Almaya his honorary grandparents. Their generosity was always bountiful, especially with the vegetables and fruits they provided to the Hortensius bakery.

Alas, time had made each harvest season a bit more difficult for the older couple. Bernard wasn't getting any younger. Almaya was four years his senior, and they had no kids to help with their farm. A few good townsfolk and Bernard's brother occasionally assisted with duties around the farmstead, but help was scarce for the Helmers. John had come to anticipate their call for aid through the occasional letter sent to his family. But the Helmers' most recent message could barely describe the rotten harvest John now witnessed before him.

Thankfully, John always brought with him his loyal dog, Argus, whom he had trained to help him and his family out around their garden. Through the years, Argus had become extremely competent in identifying and completing various tasks, and John couldn't help but place a fair amount of hope in his companion to help him with sorting out the cause behind the Helmers' plight.

John ran his hand along Argus's scruffy terrier coat, and Argus responded with a calm wagging of his tail. "What do you think here, boy?" John said. Argus simply stared at John. He might not have understood a word John said, but Argus was smart and loyal, and he held much love and great passion within his small yet strong canine heart. Argus walked attentively through the fields, and John followed along patiently. The friable earth continued to give way under John's laborious steps, cushioning his path as he trudged through the farmland and picked through the dying crops, hoping to salvage whatever good harvest was still left among the festering rot that littered the earth.

John grabbed a handful of soil. The crumbling dirt poured from his grip as a dying late-summer wind swirled dust in the air.<sup>2</sup> It felt, smelled, and unexpectedly tasted like regular soil in any fertile garden in Aurora, which was heralded for being the most fertile realm in the continent of Asterra. John may not have had Bernard's expertise when it came to farming, but he knew enough to tell that the soil here was still good enough to grow crops for now.

But he was surrounded by a surfeit of rancid carrots and tomatoes that told a different tale. They seemed to tenuously hold on to a hint of life, signaling that whatever had caused this harvest to wither had only just occurred. John wondered if Bernard had noticed this discovery, but old Mr. Helmer was still occupied with compulsively checking a few of the good crops that he had pulled aside earlier. When Bernard picked his head up from his burdensome sorting, he looked surprised but happy to see John.

Bernard slowly walked over. His neatly kept clothes rippled in the wind, covering his lanky frame. His old leather jerkin concealed the slightest of back hunches. He smiled faintly as he fixed the remaining strands of his graciously white hair with his hand. He was eighty-one, but he didn't let that stop him. Sure, he was slower now than he had been at eighty, and a mile slower than he had been at seventy-nine, but he navigated his fields with determination despite his slightly weathered state.

The stench of his dying crops brought a renewed grimace to his gentle, sagacious face, but his bitterness abated when he looked at John. "John, my boy, what do you reckon? I checked through the fields earlier this morning and yesterday. I tried my best to salvage what I could, but what I've gathered is barely enough to survive."<sup>3</sup>

John stood up and rubbed some of the dirt off his hands. "Mr. Helmer, there are still a few good carrots and tomatoes left here among this lot, but most of them seem awfully bad. The soil here seems decent, though, I reckon."<sup>3</sup>

Bernard stammered, producing a confused and concerned look. "I know what they're probably saying around town. I know my faculties aren't what they used to be, but I've always taken care of this land like it was my own son."

"It ain't important what the people in town think," John replied. Bernard smiled faintly. "I suppose you're right. I know you'll always be by my side anyhow, my boy."

John looked away. He couldn't help but acknowledge the townsfolk's opinion in his mind for a moment. Bernard was forgetful in

his old age, and John couldn't shun the possibility that Bernard had inadvertently forgotten to tend to his crops for the fall harvest. John surveyed the fields and then focused his attention back on Bernard. "Where's Almaya?"

Old Bernard suddenly appeared overwhelmed. He looked again at his crops, taking some time to get his composure together to answer. "She's been sick over the last few days—been terribly tired, John." Bernard pointed over to the adjacent field, at which he had been staring. "I've been taking care of her berries over the last week or so, and her heart will break once she gets over her sickness and comes outside to see them in such an awful state."

The summer sun was beating down on them both. John wiped the sweat from his forehead and took a moment to run his hands through his messy light-brown hair. "Are your brother and sister-in-law in town at all?"

Bernard shook his head. "Norman and Elma left about a week ago and aren't due back for some time. He helped me a bit right up until he packed up his personals in the carriage and left for business."

John sighed. Bernard was doing the best he could, but he couldn't take care of his crops by his lonesome anymore—not in his state.

John walked closer to Bernard, who still appeared to be in a mild state of confusion. "Is there anyone around town that can come and take care of you and Almaya until your brother returns?"

Bernard stood at attention. There appeared to be a struggle visible on his face, as if he dared not concede that he was too old to do what he loved. "No, no, John, I'm fine. I can manage—I tell you. In fact, just the morning before yesterday, I was out here checking on these here crops and watering them. They looked fine, John. I haven't ever seen anything like this before in all my years on this here farm. It's almost as if someone took the life right out of 'em. I know it's hard to think about, but something foul has stirred up here and caused my harvest to wither and die."

John didn't know what else to say. He just nodded and looked around for any more good crops to salvage. But Argus, the ever-cu-

rious explorer, left John's side and sniffed around the farm with the energy of a newborn puppy, despite being the ripe age of five.

Argus's midsize terrier frame and grayish-brown coat blended into the surrounding landscape as he continued to wander around the farmstead. John would've well lost him, but Argus growled and stood at attention in the southernmost part of the farm, which contained Bernard's pumpkin patch.

John remembered visiting the Helmers' farmstead with his parents every autumn to pick pumpkins to make pumpkin pie and decorate the family house. He'd even select a special pumpkin just for his room. He walked over to Argus. His pace became more cautious with every step forward, and soon the happy memory retreated into the past.

John looked at the farmland in front of him. Every single one of the pumpkins was dead. The soil was scarred, as if an animal had viciously torn through the earth. The ground was soft, but the soil barely crumbled under John's footsteps. He saw strange markings of decomposition and decay on the pumpkins, and an accompanying stench masked even that of the rotting crops. John quickly covered his nose with his hand. Maybe Bernard was telling a bit of truth, but it was a stretch at best. The foul stench could have attracted any number of beasts, but to dig up a farm in such a way surely was an odd thing even for a rabid wild animal.

Argus continued to growl lowly. John's heart raced, and his nerves wished to still every joint and muscle in his body. Yet, ignoring every instinct, he crept closer to the mangled plot of earth. "Mr. Helmer, did you happen to notice this earlier?"

Bernard slowly walked over and looked on in confusion. "No, I can't remember if I did." He paused to think. "It might have been there yesterday, or maybe the day before, but I can't be sure. You think maybe something wild got into my garden and caused all this here devastation?"

John shook his head. "I don't know, Mr. Helmer. I wish I did, but it's best we tend to the rest of the crops that we can save for now." Argus continued to growl until John called him over to help sniff around the rest of the farmstead.

After a few hours, John had done as much as he could to help Bernard, and the old man was beyond grateful. Alas, John's best was not nearly enough to help the Helmers in time for the harvest season. Whatever act had caused such decay, it had sinfully cursed two poor, innocent old souls with a wicked plight. John would have to bear the bad news to his parents. He would have to tell them he was concerned for Bernard and Almaya and that he wished he knew how to make their life whole again. For now, though, John had to carry the burden of the fallows, and with such weight on his shoulders, he, too, felt an emptiness as he headed home with Argus by his side.