

# Alternate Earth Tales

By Antaeus

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## The Zipperman

### Chapter 1

I burned her body after I shot her. I do things like that now because I'm environmentally conscious.

She wasn't the first one I had slain. I had killed before to satisfy my needs. However, that was in a different place. There I had always left the bodies lying where they had fallen, letting the scavengers clean up what was left. It is different here.

Living here on Ionia has changed me. I've learned that flexibility is the key to survival. Adapt and change as they say. I guess I've become more civilized. Now I clean up after myself, and I burn what I'm not going to eat. Then I use the ashes as fertilizer. That's the environmental part.

The wind shifted a little and the smoke blew in my direction making my eyes tear. The smell of her burning flesh reminded me of the bacon burgers I sometimes order down at Charlie's Tavern. My mouth began to water, and I felt a little guilty about that, but only a little.

I found that if I add a few branches from the Fondue Tree, the fire burns almost as hot as a furnace. Even with that, as fat as Gertrude is, it's going to take a while for her to burn completely. I think after the fire cools, I'll spread her ashes in the garden to fertilize the flowers. She always did like to be around the flowers. It'd be kind of poetic that way.

Thinking about her ashes reminded me that I had forgotten to say the prayer my mother had taught me. If she were here, my mother would likely pull me by the ear and say, "Bayman Stone, how many times do I have to tell you this? Whenever one of God's creations goes in the ground, you say those words that I taught you."

I remember saying the words when I put my mother in the ground. Just like today, there was no one there but me. She was the last one; all of her friends had gone before her. When it was over, I left for Ionia.

Technically, I wasn't putting Gertrude *in* the ground, but I said the words over the fire anyway. That was the least I could do for her. "*In the hope of the resurrection to eternal life, I commit the body of Gertrude to the ground; earth to earth; ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*"

There is something cleansing about fire. It burns away the shell that we can see and reveals what's hiding on the inside. Even that is gone after a while. What's left is only so much carbon, good for use as fertilizer.

Once you mix the carbon with dirt, it becomes dust when the wind blows. People and animals breathe in the dust, and it becomes a part of us.

With all of the people I have killed over the years, I wonder how many I've inhaled as dust. When I turn to dust, does that mean whoever inhales my dust gets all of those people too? I laughed to myself at the irony of it all. "*Stop it Bayman, you'll go insane if you don't watch it.*"

I guess that prophet, Genesis, from long ago had it right when he said, ". . . for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

I turned away from the funeral pyre and walked toward the house. My heart felt lighter now that I had done the deed. It was time to write that letter to my cousin, Don, that I had been putting off for a while. Maybe I could get him to make the trip to Ionia. There were some things between us that I needed to put to rest. So to speak that is.

## Chapter 2

Hi Don,

I hope everything is going well with you over there on the other side of the ocean. You're probably thinking it's about time your cousin, Bayman, got around to answering your letter. I know we've had our differences in the past and that your letter was in essence a peace offering. I want you to know that I am just as anxious as you are to end our conflict. In fact, I would consider it an honor if you would pay a visit to Ionia so that I can bury the hatchet.

I regret that it has taken me so long to respond to your letters, but I had a difficult task to attend to before I was ready to write to you.

My breeding pig, Gertrude, got incurably sick and she couldn't be cured. I had to put her down and burn her body. It was not an easy thing for me to do. I know you're probably thinking, *"What's the big deal, Bayman, you killed plenty of people in the war, killing a pig should be easy for you."*

It wasn't, actually. She was sick and in pain, but that didn't make it any easier. Killing in war is one thing, that's an act of self-defense. In war you kill the enemy, leave the body where it has fallen, and move on. There is no connection and no emotion. After a while, you don't even think of them as people anymore.

Killing something that you raised from birth is quite another thing. You can't just walk away. You have to deal with the aftermath of your actions. Ending a life that you have been a part of is not an easy thing to do. Gertrude was like family to me. I don't mind admitting that I cried like a baby when I did it. Anyway, back to your letter.

The truth is two days ago I received all the letters you wrote me these past months. I know by the postmark dates that you mailed some of them as long as six months ago, but the mail takes a long time to reach us on this side of the big blue pond.

Ionia is not an easy place to find, what with ship's compasses going crazy twenty miles offshore and the permanent fog bank surrounding us. In fact, if you haven't been here before, it's easy to go right by and not notice us at all. On top of that, the mail service here in Pomegranate Town is iffy at best. There is only one king's postmaster here and he's a slow moving drunk.

The postmaster's name is Raspberry Moonpie, and he spends most of his time over at Charlie's Tavern drinking himself under the table. Some of the boys wait until he's passed-out drunk, which happens about once a month, and then they take his keys and distribute the mail. Of course, me living out in the boonies and all, I have to wait until someone heads out this way to deliver mine.

Speaking of Charlie's, I paid another visit there the other day. Do you remember me telling you about Charlie's Tavern? That's the bar and restaurant located on the main road that runs through the middle of Pomegranate Town.

Charlie claims to serve the best cheesesteak on the continent. If you ask any of the regulars, they would agree. Although that's not saying much, considering Pomegranate Town is the only city on the continent of Ionia.

Charlie cooks the cheesesteak to order, and places it on a bed of grilled onions and peppers. It all goes into a long freshly baked potato roll and is topped off with Charlie's secret recipe sauce. It's the best cheesesteak I ever tasted, which isn't saying much considering it's the only cheesesteak I've ever tasted.

I ran into old Green Oakleif while I was waiting in line to place my order. Green is the local woodland ranger appointed by the king to make sure no one ruins the forest. He is the only forest warden around and is responsible for everything surrounding Pomegranate Town.

Green lives in a cabin up on Charlotte Rouse Mountain, and comes into town twice a month to buy supplies and to visit Charlie's Tavern. Green is a stand-up guy, but he has this strange idea that there are duplicate realities. He says that there is a duplicate of everything and everyone in an alternate universe, and things that happen here may or may not happen there. Strange idea that, but I've heard worse.

Personally, I think that Green spends too much of his time up on Charlotte Rouse Mountain talking to the haggis. That's another strange idea that he has. He says that the haggis understand him when he thinks at them.

Yeah, I know what you're thinking. I think that's a little on the loony side myself. Green is a good man though. He will give you the shirt off his back if you ask him. The way I figure it that entitles him to be loopy occasionally. Heck, if I were stuck up there on the mountain all alone for all those months, who knows what kind of things I'd be saying or thinking.

Like me, Green has the pioneer spirit and doesn't mind doing without a lot of modern conveniences. He won't kill any animal unless he needs it to feed himself, or to keep it from killing him. I think that is why we became such good friends, us being kindred spirits and all.

We grabbed our trays when our orders came up and headed for an empty table. Most of the regulars were there, and we were saying our "hellos" as we walked by. That's how I almost tripped over Charlie's pet ladyfinger, Lask. I saw him at the last minute and managed to stay on my feet. Green and I managed to find a table where we could sit together and talk.

About halfway through our meal, we got to reminiscing about the first time we ran into each other four years ago. That reminds me, I never did tell you about my first visit to Charlie's Tavern. I'll never forget that day as long as I live.

I came close to dying that day, and what happened to a fella nicknamed The Zipperman was so gory that I still have nightmares about it to this day.