

eclectic characters share adventurous romps through paintings to intersecting worlds.

Welcome to the Ahwahnee

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Chapter One

In 1934 America, crime didn't pay. Infamous bank robbers Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker died in a shower of police bullets near Shreveport, Louisiana. The F.B.I nabbed John Dillinger, and the government transformed Alcatraz into a federal penitentiary.

In Germany, provided Adolph Hitler sanctioned it, crime flourished.

On Karl Schlesinger's dairy farm outside Bamberg in southwest Germany, April 11, 1934, witnessed the initial introduction of participants in a trinity yet to unfold. The day also ushered in a clear sky threatening nothing more than another dry spring day.

After the morning milking, Karl walked the ten-acre field behind his barn. What he found increased his coarse brows' normal furrow. New blades of grass, his cow's lifeblood, struggled to survive against the glaring sun and a light breeze bending the fragile tops. The pasture's wind-whistle pleas for moisture failed to receive an answer for the thirty-fifth straight day.

Halting at the field's midpoint, Karl's mind drifted from his grass to a more pressing problem, how to save his livelihood from the Nazis, the madmen devouring Germany's freedoms. The local Nazi party, needing an indoctrination camp for young boys, had announced plans to expropriate Karl's home. The party offered no compensation. They demanded Karl surrender the farm and walk away. Unable to avoid the Nazis' jackboots, life in Germany spiraled towards tyranny.

Considering his alternatives, positive he stared into a bleak future, the sounds of a man interrupted Karl's thoughts. The voice, a

deep baritone, spoke in garbled tones. Turning, Karl Schlesinger came face-to-face with Karl Schlesinger, or at least an excellent semitransparent rendering.

Karl's mind leaped from the near future to the present.

"Who are you?" Karl heard from a phantom character gaining substance. Within moments, Karl's view of his barn, once visible through the ghost, stood blocked from his vision by the visitor's developed body.

Concerned but unafraid, Karl inspected his visitor. The stranger reflected a mirror image of Karl. His height extended over six feet, his weight near two hundred, and his jutting jaw, similar to Karl's, contained a deep cleft.

"I asked you a simple question," Karl heard the outsider say. "Who are you and what are you doing in my field?"

The stranger's tone, now carrying an implied threat, caused Karl to react. "I'll ask the questions. Who are you? You're trespassing on my land."

"I'm Karl Schlesinger."

Shocked, Karl didn't hesitate. He crossed the few feet separating the two men. "You – whoever you are, are not Karl Schlesinger. Get the hell off my farm!"

The stranger pointed an extended index finger towards Karl. "Your farm? Who the hell are you?"

"The owner – at least until those bastard Nazis evict me."

"You defame my party, you piece of dog shit. Heinrich Geist, my brother-in-law will enjoy ripping your heart out. His Brown Shirts will eat it raw."

"Geist, Hitler's Nazi bastard is your brother-in-law? You aren't Karl Schlesinger. I have no brother-in-law."

"Enough!" He charged towards Karl with his open hands extended, aimed at Karl's exposed neck.

Caught by surprise, Karl failed to react before the stranger's hands encircled his throat. The force of the impact sent both men hurtling towards the ground. The visitor's fingers, still clutching Karl, dug deeper after the two men crashed into the soft earth.

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Struggling for his life, Karl clawed at the stranger's fingers. Unable to loosen the man's grip and knowing death awaited him in the next few seconds, Karl found his attacker's eye sockets with his thumbs. Without hesitation, Karl pressed up with all his dwindling strength.

The sounds escaping the stranger's lips reminded Karl of a wild animal the moment a hunter's trap snapped shut on one of its legs. He released his grip on Karl's throat and reached for his eyes.

Karl seized the opportunity and pushed the attacker off. He arose to his feet.

Blood seeping from his eyes and drifting down his hands to his wrists, the unwelcome visitor also arose. "Heinrich will..." His words and his image faded into the beyond. Karl's mouth hung slack jawed for a full ten seconds until, "...Kill you." the returning stranger said.

Bewildered but refusing to retreat, "Hitler purged your precious Brown Shirts last month. He strung Heinrich up with the rest of them. Good riddance!"

"I will..." Before he completed his sentence, the stranger's form again dissolved into the morning sky. It didn't return. Searching all directions, Karl found himself alone except for the grass, the breeze, and the farm's background noise.

Rubbing his damaged throat, Karl said a silent prayer.

Chapter Two

After a few moments grappling with the unreal event, Karl started for the barn. He continued to massage his neck. *Did I imagine it?* Karl's sore throat voted against any imaginary battle.

Fifty feet from the barn, two images invaded Karl's senses. The first, regardless of physical evidence to the contrary, germinated from a mental determination to classify the episode as a stress-induced dream, his only explanation for the visitor. The second image, another twin peeking around the barn's corner, canceled the first.

Karl stopped and stared at the stranger staring back. The man, a triplet addition to Karl and the twin from the field, displayed a substance far beyond the first visitor. He also displayed hair containing more than a few flecks of gray.

Karl decided to take direct action. He resumed his stride towards the barn. "Another one, are you another one?"

Hearing no response, "Are there more of you?"

Stepping from the barn's corner, the man said nothing.

"I asked a simple question," Karl said. His older double remained silent. Karl neared the barn. "Are there more of you? Answer me!"

The unwanted visitor said nothing until Karl approached within ten feet. "Millions more."

Stopping five feet from the man, a streak of white mixed with the sounds of moving air caught Karl's attention. Glancing up, he saw an enormous and brilliant white bard owl land on the ledge of the hayloft. The owl turned, tucked in its wings and stared at the two

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men. Its eyes reflected a swirling variation of alternating oranges, reds, and yellows.

Pulling his gaze from the owl and the hayloft, Karl saw yet another man step from the barn's corner. Karl, thankful the uninvited guest failed to extend the triplets to quadruplets, ignored the owl. In a voice approaching a plea the new arrival grabbed Karl's attention. "We've come to warn you." The man spoke German with an unfamiliar accent.

"Warn me about what, more unwelcome ghosts invading my farm?"

"We're not ghosts, Karl," the older twin responded.

Startled at the familiar use of his name by a stranger, a growing fear crept into Karl's voice. "How do you know my name? Who are you?"

"I know more than your name but that's not important. You must heed our warning."

"Warning? What warning? I already know I'm losing my farm to those Nazi bastards."

"Losing your farm is minor. This involves a worse loss, much worse."

"What could be worse?"

"There's another world war coming, Karl. This war will nearly destroy Germany. You and Frieda need to flee to America. If you remain here—you won't survive the next ten years."

With a growing sense of concern, "Who are you? How do you know my wife, Frieda, and how do you know what will happen in the next ten years?"

The second visitor said, "Ask Wilfried. He'll tell you."

Opening his mouth to ask the two visitors how they knew Wilfried, his father-in-law—they vanished. The visitor in the field blended into the cloud-covered sky. These strangers did not. They compressed themselves into points of light no more than a millimeter in diameter and winked out. Spinning to his right, Karl searched for the bard owl.

The bird had vanished.

R. E. STARR

Later, lying in bed unable to sleep, Karl's mind searched for a believable explanation to the day's events. Discovering a void where rational thought resided, Karl buried the experience. He vowed to remain silent. The incident would follow him to the grave.

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