

THE TIME AGENTS

Search for the Leon Key

BOOK ONE OF THE TIME AGENTS SERIES

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CHAPTER ONE

It was a foggy night on the docks of Casablanca in 1939. The soiled air smelled of saltwater, diesel, and fish guts. A dark silhouette emerged from the mist, descending the gangplank of a rusting freighter. As he set foot on the dock, his heavy boots rang sharply against the hollow cement. He lit a cigarette, the tip glowing cherry-red in the gloom, and threw his match into the thick black water at his feet. He was out for some fun tonight. The boardwalk was lined with clapboard stalls at regular intervals, but most of the doors were shut tight at this hour. He spat into the seawater below and kept walking.

The figure stopped under a lonely street lamp to relight his cigarette, which seemed to have gone out in the damp mist. The face that emerged from the fog was a rough, unshaven blend of experience, exhaustion, and youthfulness.

"Nice to see you again, Babu. It's been a while," Jon Howe said to the darkness.

He struck the match once, twice, and the flame ignited. He gave some of it to the tip of his cigarette. It burned like a pack of sawdust. Another figure emerged from the shadows.

"It's Abu, Jonny. Abu!" Abu corrected peevishly.

"Don't call me Jonny," Jon said with a smirk.

"All right, Jon, whatever you like."

Abu's annoyance deepened the wrinkles of exhaustion on his face. His slightly chubby figure seemed more prominent than the last time they met.

Jon said, "Hasn't it occurred to you that it's your reaction that makes me laugh?"

"You are a very bad man—a very bad man," said Abu.

"Whadda-ya-hear, whadda-ya-say, Abu?"

Abu scratched his hair absently.

In a thick Moroccan accent, he asked, "So, how long are you in port for this time, my friend? We have much to catch up on."

Jon sucked on his cigarette, and the tip burned brighter, temporarily lighting up his tanned, leathery face. He looked Abu over and said, "I'm here for good. I haven't been focusing on certain things. First, I thought I'd get my dough, catch up with Max, and maybe see a show."

Abu Bin Salam was a Moroccan Arab. He was a bit shorter than Jon Howe, quite a bit rounder, and always appeared disheveled, just as he intended. Abu was perfectly at home in the shadows of the docks. Besides being an old friend, he was a valuable source of information for Jon.

Abu swallowed hard and said, "As you know, the Nazis are crawling all over North Africa. Since the occupation, things have been more peaceful, but they seem to be up to something. They are working with the local Vichy government on something secret, but I do not know what."

Jon puffed a cloud of smoke into the air, quickly disappearing in the swirling mist.

"They're trouble, Babu—stay away from them," he said firmly.

Abu gave a faint smile. "Don't worry, my friend; I will. Besides, I do not like how they look at me."

"I don't think they like anyone that doesn't look like them," Jon said soberly. "Anything else?"

Abu sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Well, since you are going to Max's Place, you should catch the new dancer. She is very... how should I put it? Different. There's something special about her—I can't quite place it. She's got certain... I do not know what. She's just..." He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "Just see for yourself, and you will understand what I'm talking about."

Jon hoped Abu was going to give a specific hint. But Abu just shook his head again, clearly lost for words.

"Thanks, Babu," Jon finally said with another smirk. "See you at Max's Place later? It's been quite a while since the 'Three Musketeers' caused some trouble."

Abu ignored the nickname and replied with a smile, "Of course, my old friend! I'll come by as soon as I deal with a few things."

Jon shoved his hand into his pocket and dug out a few Francs. He handed them to Abu and tipped his hat as he walked away into the mist.

"Thanks, Jon!" He called quietly after him.

Abu turned the notes back and forth, folded them, and stuffed them into his black baggy trousers. He looked around furtively like someone who had just bought hashish instead of simply catching up with an old friend and disappearing back into the shadows.

Jon Howe moved easily through the fog-shrouded streets. He looked to be in the prime of his life—thirty-something with brown curly hair and a muscular build; he carried himself like a trained athlete.

He was at home in 1939 Morocco. He had become quite accustomed to living in this time, which was not, in fact, his own. Jon was a time traveler. His era, 2454, was, by comparison, much more highly developed than this barely industrialized colonial port city on the outskirts of a bitter war. But Jon liked it here, which was good because the trip across the centuries was often one-way.

The human race expanded throughout its home star sector in the coming centuries. After successfully stabilizing the Alcubierre FTL drive, which contracts space in front of a vessel and expands space behind it, humans colonized much of the western spiral arm of the Milky Way galaxy.

Jon's trip to 1939 was made possible by the Mallett Effect. Dr. Ron Mallett, of the early 21st century, was an astrophysicist who had dedicated much of his adult life to the idea that time travel was possible. Further development centuries later perfected the effect, thus creating a viable method of time travel. The technique worked—usually.

To report, he had prearranged a drop location with his superiors. The location of the message was predetermined before he left. The message would be recovered in 2454, as the site was monitored at all times.

Jon Howe had come to the past to solve a mystery. His mission was to follow a plan created by the leaders of his own time. The project was developed after studies using quantum instrumentation, which scanned time and space with equal facility. It showed that something or someone was trying to open a rift between an alternate universe and our own. That something had repeatedly attempted and failed to open a rift for more than a few seconds. The rifts were located somewhere in Casablanca, Morocco, in 1939.

The assignment entailed finding a particular device described in a book published in 1930 that referred to a group of ancient alchemists

and astronomers. Surviving fragments of the book indicated that the item was able to open and close a rift between worlds. Even in Jon's day, how the authors obtained the knowledge to write the book with such detailed information remained a mystery.

He had been sent to Casablanca to find the original legendary book and wait for a sign that a rift was opening. He was instructed not to interfere with this timeline but just focus on the rift. Despite knowing he was on the cusp of one of the most significant conflicts in history, he couldn't inform anyone about what was coming in the next few months in Europe. It was a little frustrating as it was hard to ignore Nazis in action.

The street was wet, and the evening fog was getting even thicker. As he walked down the road, he spied two German officers just as they noticed him.

"You there! Come here," snapped the first officer.

Jon stopped and looked around.

He said, "Who, me? Yes, sir, right away."

Jon walked quickly over to the officers and stood waiting. He was looking down, doing his best to project compliance.

"Your papers," demanded the second officer.

Without a word, Jon took out his billfold, pulled out his perfectly crafted ID papers, and handed them over.

He waited patiently while they scrutinized the documents he knew were as authentic as 25th-century technology could make them. After what seemed like hours, the Germans returned his papers. Jon looked at the men with a humble smile and started to walk away.

"Wait! What are you doing out at this time of night, eh?" said the first officer, still suspicious.

"Why, I'm going to Max's Place to see some friends," said Jon.

The two policemen looked at each other.

"All right, go on. But I don't want to catch you drunk in the streets later."

"Thank you, sir," Jon said. "You won't."

Nazi jerks.

He arrived in front of the billboard at Max's Place and looked over a poster of an exotic dark-haired woman. She was beautiful. *Is this the new dancer?* Jon hoped he would have a chance to meet her. He stared at the billboard for a while, wondering who this woman was. But then he snapped out of his daydreaming. Not wanting to miss the fun, he walked inside.

In the club were chairs and tables arranged around a low stage. A polished wooden dance floor was at the center of the room. Customers sat around it, watching the dancers as Middle Eastern music played. Soft orange lights made the scene more sensual, mainly illuminating the center of the room. The burning ends could only see customers in the dark corners of their cigarettes.

Standing at the entrance, Jon observed the whole space and sauntered in.

From a distance, he spotted Max at the bar. They had been friends and occasional lovers for several years, since shortly after his arrival. His eyes met hers through the smoke. Her hands had been fondling one of her customer's asses. It was one of the reasons she was so popular. The corners of her mouth crinkled into a wide grin. She withdrew her hand immediately like a wife caught red-handed cheating. Her grin grew wider as she got off the chair and walked in his direction.

Maxine Heywood was a shapely 35-year-old who had grown up in Chicago—a world away from the rundown streets of Casablanca. She

wore a long red gown that displayed her curves to her advantage. She had small downturned eyes and long red hair and could mesmerize any man. Jon was always caught in her charms, and her longing for him was mutual. But Jon was in it more for the sex than the emotional connection. He felt no attachment except for a deep friendship and respect. Perhaps it was what Max wanted as well. Jon hoped so, at any rate.

"Jonny, baby!" she called as she approached him.

"Don't call me Jonny," he said with a grin.

Jon put out his cigarette, barely an inch remaining, and stretched his arms out to receive her. But as she approached, she slapped him gently across the face.

"Are you going to leave again without saying goodbye?"

"Goodbye."

Jon sighed, gazing into her eyes as they glinted in the orange lights. She gave a coquettish smile and hugged him, then sneakily slid her hand down to his crotch. Jon intercepted her hand in a gentle but firm grip.

"Whoa, slow down, girl," he said.

Max replied, "What for?"

She withdrew. Her face creased into a slight frown. But then it relaxed a bit as she remembered that they were, after all, in public.

"All right, what's yer poison, baby?"

Jon's eyes had wandered to the girl dancing on the rostrum. But then they fell back on Max. He lit another cigarette and took a long drag.

"I'd like something to help me forget the last six months," Jon said as he exhaled a long cloud of smoke. "Got anything behind the bar for that?"

Max smiled again.

She said, "Got just the thing! Be right back, honey."

As the lights went down, Max went to get his drink. Jon scanned the club again. He dropped his cigarette on the floor, crushing it beneath his foot, and watched the dancer leave the stage. A new song graced the air from the gramophone, and a small spotlight hit the red curtains on the dingy stage.

As the curtains drew back, a new woman emerged. She had dark almond eyes that were deeply penetrating. Her raven black hair flowed freely down her back like a waterfall. In her outfit, daring for 1930s Morocco, her body was something for the eyes. And her moves were graceful, athletic, and precise. Jon was transfixed as she slid from one end of the stage to the other.

As Max returned with a pair of drinks, she noticed how Jon was ogling the woman on stage.

Max said, "No, Jon, that one is different. I don't trust her."

"You put her on the poster out front," he said. "How bad can she be?"

Max just shook her head and offered him a glass of Vino Casablanca. But he didn't take it. He ignored her and headed toward the woman on stage.

"Where are you going?" Max snapped. "That woman might be the weight that sinks your ship permanently!"

Jon turned sharply to Max but said nothing. He turned back to watch the dance, determined to find out about this woman. Her dance was over all too soon. Afterward, she tried to disappear backstage

quickly, but Jon rushed forward and grabbed hold of her hand. All he felt was soft, warm skin—a bit sweaty. Even so, he felt a tingle journey down his back.

"Wait," said Jon.

The woman turned sharply toward him. Her light brown eyes clearly showed she wasn't comfortable with his touch. Jon let her go at once. Her aura was enthralling—John could feel it. And when he looked into those eyes, there was something profound about them... and something strange.

"My apologies. I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your performance. I've never seen anyone dance like that," he said.

"Thank you, but I must go," she replied.

As she took a step, Jon had a jaunty smile on his bearded face.

"My name is Jon Howe. What's yours?"

The woman was reluctant for a moment—her eyes fluttered like a butterfly's wings.

"I am Shoshanna. Now, if you'll please...."

Jon interrupted, "Shoshanna, that's a pretty name. What's the rush? We're just starting to get to know each other. Let me buy you a—"

"No!" she insisted. "I told you I must leave. Now just leave me alone!"

Shoshanna's voice was tinged with rage and something a little sad. He had the impression that she was considering punching him in the face.

But instead, she pushed his arm away and quickly disappeared backstage.

Max came up to Jon from behind with the drinks still in her hands, watching the drama unfolding from her vantage point.

“You see, I told you... don’t bother. There’s something strange about her. She sure brings in the customers, but she’s a cold fish. Come on, let’s get reacquainted. Forget about her.”

If that was meant to get Jon’s attention away from Shoshanna, it partially worked because he now had his eyes on Max with a smile.

She smiled back at him and took him by the hand. After tossing back their drinks, they wove through the crowds and ascended the stairs to her room.

It was a small space with a full-sized bed on a platform frame. There was a mini wine cabinet beside the bed, beside which was a small table.

Max pulled Jon into the room and shut the door behind them. She pushed him against the wall, and their lips locked in a torrid kiss. Before long, they found themselves naked on the bed—their usual way of getting reacquainted.

But even during their romp in bed, Jon’s thoughts were on Shoshanna. The questions seemed never-ending. *Who was she? Where did she come from? Why was there something otherworldly about her?* He had a highly developed sense of intuition and the best psychological training the 25th century could provide. There was something different about Shoshanna; of that, Jon was sure. He just couldn’t figure out what.

The sun shone brightly as they lay in each other's arms. Jon idly stared out the window. He enjoyed sleeping with Max, but afterward, he always felt a touch of sadness. The night had now long gone. No words were exchanged as he got up to leave.

He made his way out to the street with another cigarette hanging from his mouth. He took out the lighter in his pocket, which he’d

borrowed from Max, and clicked it. The flame lit up the cigarette, and he sucked on it immediately. The tip of the cigarette burned and smoked. Jon let out the cloud in thin wisps. He knew, of course, that cigarettes were terrible for him. Nobody smoked in the 25th century. He'd adopted the habit and liked it too much while trying to fit in. Adjusting his leather jacket, he started to walk down the street.

After a briefly sunny morning, the fog had returned with a vengeance, somehow worse than it was the night before. The streets were now enveloped not only in the mist but in quiescence—even a mosquito buzzing could be heard loud and clear. The locals were just now welcoming the morning.

Casablanca, a city in northwestern Morocco, was a sleepy port town surrounded by a large harbor and docks. There were vessels of all kinds moored there, which seemed unimaginably primitive to Jon. The silent, clean energy sources that powered the future vehicles were a distant dream here.

Jon walked down the road. His thoughts flowed back to his own time. He was reminded of things that transpired there. His orders indicated that if he could, he should cross over to the other universe and find out what was happening. The quantum scans had revealed something serious was happening, but years of investigation hadn't turned up anything. He sighed and continued walking along the streets of Casablanca until he reached his caravan. Sleep came quickly.

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Later that night, as Jon walked along the open sandy road toward Max's Place, he heard an odd clanking sound from an alley some distance behind the club. He looked but saw no one. Jon decided to investigate. The sound did not come from his path. Always curious, he changed course immediately.

He arrived at the alley but found nothing.

"Who's there?" he called out.

There was no response. He looked around warily.

As he looked around, he saw a shadowy figure in a long hooded robe emerge between two pillars and quickly disappear around a corner.

Well, that's not suspicious or anything, he thought sarcastically.

Jon dropped his cigarette on the ground and stepped on it. He pulled up his collar and followed the figure. He got to the corner just in time to see the dark figure turn into the next alley. He followed immediately, making sure not to lose sight of them.

He turned into the dark alley, but the figure was suddenly gone. Scanning the path, he saw there was no other exit except the one he had come from. There was a mysterious blue fog at the alley's dead end, different from the gray mist that blanketed the city. As he walked closer, the azure fog gradually faded away.

He wondered who the dark figure was and what that blue fog meant. There was certainly nothing in the 1930s that could generate it. *Could it be from the other universe?* He suddenly felt chagrined that he hadn't had his mind on his mission lately. He thought he had wasted too much time.

He needed to find that device before it was too late.

CHAPTER TWO

There were signs of life when Jon arrived at Meir's place. The town was alive with life's daily hustle and bustle—shop owners, taxi drivers, fishermen, market women—everyone in pursuit of their daily bread. As always, Jon felt a little guilty about his knowledge. He could change anyone's life with a few well-chosen words. Unfortunately, he knew he shouldn't.

"Jon boy! It's been a while since we've seen you," said Meir cheerfully.

Meir Ben David was a man in his early 70s. He lived in an A-frame cabin across the street from Max's Place, where he had been a regular customer before he met Jon. Once, Jon had found him staggering back from the establishment, blind drunk. It was raining. He led Meir back to his house and warmed him up. Jon had promised the man that if he didn't stop drinking again, he would not stop checking up on him until his last breath.

And miraculously, Meir did stop drinking. He didn't drink even when Jon had breached the agreement many times due to his travels. But this time, Jon decided to visit him.

"It's been a while indeed, Meir. How are you?"

Meir sat on a bench at the foot of an oak tree in front of his house, a pipe in his hand. Jon sat on a chair that creaked beneath his weight.

“I’m fine. How long have you been here, Jon?”

“Three days.”

Meir reclined against the tree behind him.

“I’m happy you’ve stopped drinking. And trust me, you look a lot better now, Meir.”

They sat in amiable silence for a moment. Then Jon rubbed his chin and cleared his throat awkwardly.

“I wanted to ask you about something, Meir.”

Meir sighed and pushed away from the tree.

“What is it?”

Jon was silent for a moment, considering his words carefully.

He said, “I told you some time ago about something that would happen. I think it’s going to happen soon. And if we don’t do anything, the entire world might be in danger.”

Meir's face was emotionless.

“Nazis?” he asked.

“Worse,” Jon admitted. “Just listen. This may sound crazy, but I’m deadly serious and need your help. It’s about another world.”

Meir looked thoughtfully at him. “You’ve never lied to me before, Jon.”

“You know I’ve been looking for a particular book. This book might contain a clue to where to find an apparatus that will enable me to travel to that other world and stop whatever is going to happen.”

“Go on... I’m listening,” said Meir.

Jon was taken aback by Meir's nonchalant reception of this news.

"I realize this is hard to swallow, but you must believe me. Where I'm from, our scientists have proven that there is more than one world—more than one Earth."

"I thought you were from America," Meir said with a faint smile.

"Yes and no," admitted Jon. "Listen... the device is the only means I can travel to the other world. I discovered that the device's last known whereabouts were here in Casablanca. The book I've been looking for describes it. You worked at the museum for years; I thought you might know what I'm talking about and where to find the book."

Meir's wrinkles grew more pronounced. He didn't say a word—instead, he seemed to think hard.

"Did you hear what I said, Meir?"

Meir's eyes blinked rapidly, and he exhaled.

"Yes, Jon, I heard you. And I believe you because I think I know of this book. I'll tell you all I know, but I want you to know that this may sound just as incredible as your story.

"A rumor spread about a year ago among the other museum workers. The rumor was about a book about a magical key called the Leon Key. A key that could open a portal to another world. You know me... I don't listen to baseless rumors. But I was curious anyway. I wanted to know what key the book was referring to," said Meir.

"I don't believe in magic," said Jon.

Meir nodded and sniffed sharply.

"Be that as it may. As I was saying, I wanted to know more about it. So, I asked my colleagues what they knew about this book. One of them, Gregory, told me that the book was, in fact, in our library until it was stolen. Before that, Gregory had read it and told me all he could remember.

"The device was supposedly created by a cabal of astronomers and alchemists—men of goodwill who came together to construct a device to travel to other worlds. This was during the Renaissance. If it's true, how they did it is a mystery. But over the years, the key was lost. It was last reported somewhere in England. I think Gregory said at Saint Paul's Cathedral in London. Maybe you should look for it there," explained Meir.

"I'm sure this key is based on science. Any significantly advanced science would appear as magic to lesser civilizations," Jon explained. "It sounds like this key you're talking about might be what I'm looking for."

"Possibly," agreed Meir.

Jon exhaled and pulled on his jacket. Indeed, he could see the possibility of this key being the one he was looking for. At last, after years of fruitless searching, a lead.

"Why didn't you tell me this in the first place when I asked you about the book?" said Jon.

"Because I fear for your safety if you dig too deeply. Heed my words, Jon; this situation is fraught with danger for you," said Meir.

"Believe me; I know it all too well. But this is bigger than me, and I need to find this book to ensure the key is at Saint Paul's Cathedral."

"How do you intend to use this key if you find it? You can't possibly travel to another world alone," asked Meir.

"I think, for now, I should be more concerned with getting it. I will make further plans after that," Jon said.

"You must watch your back. Rumor has it that the Nazis are searching for something. They might also be looking for the same thing as you," Meir said.

That feeling of excitement on Jon's face eroded at once. It was replaced with confusion and concern.

"The Nazis? Why would they want the book?" Jon asked.

Meir snorted and interlocked his fingers.

"Some time ago, I heard two of them talking about a device they claimed was a great treasure passed down to them by their ancestors. They believe that there was a German among the men that formed the device. And so, by natural order, the object belongs to them."

"That's bullshit. Ha! Nazis during the Renaissance?" said Jon.

But even as he said it, his mind went back to his history lessons—how the rise of German nationalism in the 19th century had grasped onto several ancient and medieval traditions to give the nascent land cultural legitimacy. He did not doubt that the Nazis would see anything of value created by a German in the 16th century as theirs.

"Call it whatever you like, but I think it would be wise for you to watch your back. With how they were talking, they seemed ready to fight aggressively for it," said Meir.

Jon was silent, contemplating Meir's warning. It was not hard to conclude that it would be best not to interfere with the Nazis and their interests.

"All right, Meir," said Jon. "Thank you for the advice. I will keep it in mind. For now, I have to go. I'll see you again soon."

He stood up and shoved his hands in his pockets. Meir smiled and puffed on his pipe.

"You take care of yourself. Try and stay safe, all right?" Meir said.

"I will. Thank you," said Jon.

Jon turned away and walked along the fence leading out of Meir's yard. The thought that the Nazis may want the device just because they believed it was their right to have it still lingered in his mind.

"Those sick bastards!" he muttered to himself.

He huffed, annoyed because he didn't think he would have to compete with anyone for the obscure key. Until now. Something as crucial as this was necessary for the continued existence of all humanity. He didn't want to fight with the Nazis to get it.

"Do they just want to keep it as a souvenir, or do they know what it can do and intend to use it for their purposes?" he wondered. Bad enough if they just wanted to put it in a museum in Munich. World-hopping Nazis would be infinitely worse.

Jon soon arrived at Max's Place. He entered the club and walked up to Abu.

"Don't you have anywhere else to go?" said Jon.

Abu looked up at Jon and frowned.

"You seem drawn to this place as well," Abu said.

"Touché, my friend, nothing gets past you. Listen, I've got to go to England. Will you come with me? I'd like you to dig around in London, reach out to your contacts there and see if anyone is asking about this so-called Leon Key," said Jon.

"Of course, you can count on me," said Abu proudly. He occasionally made visits abroad, visiting a vast network of shadowy acquaintances. It would be great to make such a trip on Jon's dime.

Jon fished several Francs from his pocket and handed them to Abu.

"Take this and get us some tickets for the ferry to Barcelona. From there, we'll try to catch a seaplane to London. Meet me on the ferry in one hour. Got it?" Jon said.

"Ok, Jon, see you there," said Abu.

With that, Jon left Max's and headed home to pack. He wondered if he was already too late.