

Contingency Jones: The Complete Season One

Sample Chapter

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Episode 0 – Truth and Consequences

1

I knew it was going to be a bad day, because it started with a noise that could only have been the bastard offspring of an air raid klaxon and the mating call of a pubescent water buffalo in heat. It was the third time I'd heard that noise, and I had no reason to think things would go any better this time. I reached out, picked up the device and hurled it at my bedroom wall. The device fell to the floor with a clatter. It knew it was unharmed. The thing looked like a smartphone, but was damned near indestructible. It made sense, since people in my line of work were hard on equipment. If you're going to give someone like that one of the most powerful computers ever created, you're going to make it tough. That also meant it continued making that appalling noise and would continue making it until I looked at it or the neighbors raised a fuss.

I rolled out of bed and tried to rub the fatigue out of my eyes. I hadn't been back at the apartment for more than a few hours. I was still wearing the blood soaked clothes I'd been wearing when I stumbled in, too tired for words, after one of the most brutal missions I'd ever been on. A lot of people died. I'd accomplished my mission, but the point of it, the necessity of all the bloodshed, was lost on me. Command moved in mysterious ways, I guess. I shambled over to the device and picked it up. As I straightened, I saw that the wall had a dent in it. Awesome. It seemed drywall wasn't made to withstand impacts from hurled objects. I looked down at the device, trying to focus on it, and punched in a code. Sweet silence descended on the room. I dropped the device on the bed without looking at it and peeled myself out of the ruined clothes. I'd have to dispose of them in some discrete dumpster. There was just no getting dried brain out of cotton. I looked at the bed and sighed. I'd also have to burn the sheets.

I dug through a dresser and selected clothes at random. I needed a shower. Not just to wash off the stink of death, but to try to wake up. There was only bad news on the device. There was only *ever* bad news on the device. Trying to face it half-conscious would have been counterproductive. Even with the water turned to a blistering heat, though, my mind remained sluggish and my body felt like I moved it by remote control. Every response was delayed. Every

thought was murky. I was in no condition to work. I wasn't even fit to be showering. I needed rest, but whatever set the device off wasn't going to give me the opportunity. There was a good chance I'd kill someone, just for damnable inconvenience of it all.

"Serve them right," I mumbled around a face full of towel.

Cleaner, if no less groggy, I retrieved the device. I took a moment to muster all of my focus, then I looked at the screen. It took me the better part of a minute to draw the connection the device had made with its near-constant analysis of news and social media feeds. Inexplicable things were happening, which wasn't a cause for alarm in and of itself. The universe has a weird sense of humor. Still, it was enough to give me pause. The more inexplicable an event, the less likely it had a natural cause. When a number of those highly inexplicable events clustered in a small geographic area, it almost always meant magic was at play. Of course, it wasn't my job to stop magic. It was my job to stop magic from being used to rewrite history. The reason for the alarm finally scrolled across the screen and my heart nearly stopped. The blurb read:

"The FBI continues to be stymied in its investigation into the theft of the Edwin Smith Papyrus..."

It was that damned Smith papyrus, again. The stupid thing haunted me. These fools thought it was an Egyptian medical text. It wasn't. I should know. I was there when they wrote it. I hadn't understood the code at the time, mostly because there had been no reason to suspect there even was a code. By the time I figured it out, the damage was done and the papyrus was beyond my reach. I'd been banished to the temporal backwater of 21st Century America because of that failure. The priceless, apparently innocent, piece of ancient writing was a spell to summon Apep, the personification of evil. Someone was using it, and I had a sinking feeling about who.

2

By rights, I should have sent a message to Command as soon as I figured out what was happening. I didn't. I found myself sitting on the couch and staring at the wall, as I tried to flog my sleep deprived mind into functionality with caffeine. I needed to think through how much to say about my suspicions. I was already out of favor with the brass and hurling an accusation based only on my intuitions wouldn't win me any friends. No one in a command position wants to hear that someone in the organization has gone rogue, but that was the most likely explanation. I'd studied up enough to know that the Egyptologists at my current temporal location weren't savvy enough to have recognized, let alone cracked, the code on that papyrus. That meant it was either someone very, very old, or it was someone from my time that knew the details of my failed mission.

While the former option was a possibility, it wasn't a very good one. There were a handful of quasi-immortals running around who called the lower Nile home in the not-so-good old days. I'd

bumped into a few along the way. As far as I could tell, though, none of them had a vested interest in summoning Apep. That dark old god would probably destroy them on principle. I've been given to understand that gods take a dim view of human beings that achieve even imperfect immortality. Something about putting on airs. That only left the latter option. Another Agent was fucking around with the natural order and that pissed me off. We took an oath the day we graduated from training to stand in the gulf and hold the line against chaos. While an Agent going rogue wasn't unheard of, it happened so rarely that they could be counted on one hand.

Some little part of me knew that I wasn't contacting Command because I didn't want a brother or sister-in-arms to have turned traitor to the mission. An even smaller and more honest part of me whispered the real reason in the shadowed recesses of my mind. If someone had gone rogue, violated our oath and the law, I didn't want that person arrested. I wanted that person dead. More to the point, I wanted to be the one who drew the curtain on the miserable son of bitch. The innate ignobility of that sentiment no doubt accounts for why it was only whispered in the back of my head. If I did put down whoever it was, I didn't want to have to dance around my motivations during an inquiry. Even if I didn't share all the details, I needed to file some kind of report or there absolutely would be an inquiry into why I failed to do so. If it turned out to be who I thought it was, I'd need all the cover I could get. No one applauds the person who destroys a legend. Hell, people have been murdered for less. I sighed and picked up the device. It was my connection to my own time. I opened an application and started speaking. I detailed the facts, but kept my suppositions to myself. After all, I reasoned, it wasn't like I had any proof.

Command was unusually prompt in their response. I was ordered to investigate. According to history as we knew it, Apep did not manifest at this time and place. If someone did raise him, it would cause unspeakable damage to the timeline, if not time itself. If someone was trying to raise him, I was to stop the activity *at all costs*. I felt better about my decision to keep quiet. "At all costs" meant that I had the cover I wanted. I just needed to track the magical disturbances back to their source, preferably before an Egyptian god turned up, and survive a confrontation with someone I was pretty sure could kick my ass in ten different ways. I really wished I'd had more time to sleep. If I was going to fight a badass, I'd never choose to do it exhausted. On the other hand, there were billions upon billions of future lives in the balance.

I shook my head and pushed myself off the couch. "Sack up, Nancy. Sleep wasn't in the job description."

One of the pitfalls of operating in the past was that anything you did could, potentially, corrupt the timeline. Enough experience had taught us that minor disruptions would tend to self-correct, no doubt a defensive action on the part of time itself, but it was tough to gauge what was safe and what was dangerous. Asking a clerk where to find something in a store was probably safe.

Basic purchases of widely available products, also probably safe. Beyond those limited interactions, though, there just wasn't a good way to tell. All of that meant that Agents had to go out of their way to minimize the changes they created. Rarely had I loathed that rule so much as I did when I got stuck in gridlock. The device could have smoothed the way for me by adjusting traffic signals, but at what cost? How many minor changes in the timeline would that create? Since I couldn't know what all those changes would add up to, I had to sit there, killing time as the evening rush hour traffic crawled along at two miles per hour.

I might have been less frustrated, but I'd already spent most of the day driving around. For all its incredible power, the device has its limitations. It could analyze the shit out of just about any kind of data, but magic was fundamentally irrational. It operated outside the order of natural law. Just because a manhole cover was mysteriously missing, and a child fell into the hole, and that child somehow survived without a scratch, it didn't mean that magic was happening nearby. Proximity, I'd learned, was a poor barometer for judging where magic was happening. That truth became more and more relevant the bigger the magic being attempted. Raising a god was about as big as it got, which meant that the probability altering effects of the magic would be spread out over a much larger geographic area. The only way to find the place where it was happening was to circle through the city, over and over again, and let the device gather a hundred kinds of data about subtle disruptions to weather, gravity, electromagnetic patterns and things I didn't even pretend to understand.

It was a slow, grueling process, made worse by the unusual heat of the day. I'd bought my car specifically because it was bland and innocuous. I hadn't considered things like whether the air conditioner worked. I'd left it off when I was able to keep the car moving. In the slow hell of gridlock, I turned it on. For twenty minutes, it spluttered and threw semi-cool, swampy smelling air at me. Then it died. As the heat rose in the car, my frayed patience and temper snapped. I punched the roof the car.

"Stupid piece of shit car! I don't ask that much from you! The one time I need the damn air condition and you punk out on me!"

I'd have bet I looked like I'd lost my mind. Then again, I doubted I was the only one hurling obscenities at malfunctioning air conditioners that day. So, in principle, I was actually doing a good job of fitting in and not altering the timeline. Yeah, sure I was. After a short geologic age, the gridlock started to thin out. I stopped at a gas station to gas up and buy a bottle of cold water, along with a huge cup of coffee. The clerk stammered at me like a petrified bunny rabbit while he rang me up. I couldn't figure out what his problem was until I turned to leave and caught my own reflection in the door. I looked haggard, furious, and dangerous. The effect was in no way mitigated by the long black coat I wore. It wasn't leather, but it looked like leather. The coat, like the device, was a tool. They also served as the closest thing to a uniform that Agents wore. They were our version of body armor. They were bulletproof, but that was just a nifty side-effect of their true purpose. The coats shed the shear forces that potent magic generated. Walk into the

wrong room at the wrong time and those forces could tear a human being limb from limb. I'd seen it happen. In many ways, my job would be impossible without the coat.

I tried to put on a less murderous expression and looked at the clerk. "Thanks."

The clerk went pallid and started to tremble. Unintentional terrorizing – 1, me – 0. Sometimes, you just can't fix things. I pushed out the door and resumed my ceaseless circling of the city. It occurred to me later that I was lucky I needed to cover so much ground. If I'd zeroed into a specific neighborhood early on, the presence of my car on a loop would probably have caused some concern or drawn police attention. At the time, I was just too tired to think of those things. The sun was down and the traffic was comparatively non-existent by the time the device finally pinned down a location. I stared down at the address and map the device provided. Of course it was going down in the warehouse district. Lots of convenient, empty places to set up shop and do the work uninterrupted. I aimed my car in the right direction. Even as I drove, I hoped I was wrong about who I'd find there. It wouldn't change what I had to do, but it'd be a hell of a lot easier to do if I found a stranger.

4

I stopped the car about two hundred yards away from the warehouse the device had identified. There was nothing remarkable about it at first glance. A big, squat, two-story building, it was identical to dozens of others nearby. I wondered why it was that particular building, as opposed to any of the others. Was there some significance, or was it chosen at random because it was empty? I doubted I'd ever know for sure. The reasoning behind dark magic often eluded my grasp. Still, the device was sure that it was the place. It had never led me wrong before, so I got out of the car and walked toward the building. I felt telltale pressure on the coat as the fringes of the magic altered the fabric of reality. I stood outside the small door used by people entering the building, rather than the huge metal doors that opened for truck deliveries, and took a steadying breath. I didn't know what to expect inside, but I didn't imagine it would be anything good. I drew back a foot and kicked the door open.

I gasped a little as wave after a wave of dark power washed over me. The coat did its job, though, shedding the worst of it and leaving me mobile. I pushed forward and pulled out a fine piece of 20th century tech: a Smith & Wesson, Model 27 revolver. Sure, it wasn't regulation, but practicality matters. The shear forces intensified the closer I got, making it harder to walk, and the material of the coat grew hot. It was a little frightening. How much power was swirling around in that warehouse? Enough to summon a god? I couldn't even guess. No one had ever successfully used the spell to my knowledge, so information on what its use entailed was pure speculation. Still, the level of power staggered me. I'd never felt so much in one place, with one exception. For one mad moment, I thought about summoning *her*, but that prospect frightened me even more than the chaotic energies clashing around me. Also, once I looked around the

room, I knew I couldn't. My worst fears were realized, but that made it family business. We clean up our own messes.

He stood there, body cloaked in a coat like mine, with the Smith papyrus in hand. He heard or sensed my approach and looked up. There was no shock on his face, or any other discernible expression. He was control embodied. I suppose that was why he was the legend and I was, well, infamous. Control wasn't my strongest suit. We faced each other across the empty floor of the warehouse, two men out of our time, and both of us blood-soaked killers. I expect that anyone who saw us facing off would have pegged me as the bad guy. I hadn't shaved in days and there were purple pouches beneath my eyes. Still, appearances mean very little in the grand scheme. The most beautiful woman I'd ever met had a dead stone where her soul should have been.

An expression of slight bemusement cracked through the rigid control on his face. "Contingency Jones. So, they really did send you here."

"Endgame Smith. You're two centuries out of your zone," I answered, pointing the revolver at his right eye. "Also, you're breaking the law. Summoning of deities is strictly forbidden. You know that."

"Oh please, you're not going to shoot me."

"No?"

"You've never had the stomach for that kind of bloodshed. Shoot a man in the head, in cold blood, it's too calculated for you."

I blinked at him. It seemed that Smith wasn't up on current events. He looked back down at the papyrus, seeming to dismiss me from his universe. The part of me that had hoped I was wrong seethed in righteous fury. He'd betrayed us, our cause, and that couldn't stand. I knew what I had to do, what I was required to do, but I hesitated. He was Endgame Smith. No Agent was more celebrated or more trusted. I supposed that was why he'd been able to get this far. Who would question it if Smith said he needed to go somewhere. If I'd been less tired or less emotionally raw from my last mission, maybe I'd have asked some questions. Maybe I'd have made a different choice. I'll never know.

5

I spoke into the device, reciting temporal and geographic coordinates by rote. "I need an extraction team."

I fired off the message. A few seconds later, I received a confirmation. *En route*. I reached out and plucked the papyrus from Endgame's hand. I reached into a pocket and pulled out a lighter. The ancient papyrus caught fire as soon as it came in contact with a flame. I dropped the

priceless relic to the warehouse floor and watched it burn, simultaneously closing the book on my greatest failure.

The firelight danced in Endgame's pristine, left eye.

~End Sample Chapter

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