

The Smoke of Memory

By Josiah Wass

Clayton Irving Jones surveyed the city through the slits in his itchy mask. He hated this place. He hated how the high-borns treated the slum-dwellers. He hated how the city despised all Chemancers. He hated how he had been cast out for being a Chemancer. But most of all, he hated people who took advantage of the impoverished state of others.

His eyes narrowed through his burlap mask as he turned his surly gaze towards the warehouse, its long shadow falling over the wharf. Then, suddenly, he dropped the act. Being mad at everything was so hard! He hated that more than anything else. Why couldn't everyone just get along? Languidly, he dragged his thoughts back towards the warehouse where he knew at this very moment, one of the largest gangs in the area was buying drugs for resale.

He made sure that his bowler hat was secure on his head and leapt. His revolver held in one hand, a smoke pellet held in the other, he hurtled towards one of the high windows of the warehouse. His leap carried him all the way through the window, which burst into millions of tiny crystal shards, falling to the floor with an almost musical quality. As Clayton neared the ground, he threw a pellet at the floor, which burst and filled the room with smoke. He landed, the smoke absorbed through his skin supporting his bones, so that they did not break. One of the many perks of Chemancy, which allowed one to absorb gaseous chemical compounds into the body.

As soon as he landed, his cloak billowing around him, he leaped towards the nearest person, firing his gun. Bang! His aim was exact as ever and the man collapsed to the ground. Clay then tried to pull another revolver from his jacket, rudely interrupted when a bullet cracked against the stone wall near his head, sending chips of stone raining down onto his head. He raised both guns this time, and just managed to pick out an indistinct shape through the smoke. He fired again, and a cry announced that his trusty, no-frills guns had done their job once again.

Clay dashed through the fog, staying low so as to avoid presenting himself as a visible

target, firing his guns at anything that moved. More often than not, he met his mark. Excellent. Now to move on to phase two of his plan. He tucked one revolver into his jacket and pulled out a homemade firebomb. But before he could throw it, he was slammed to the ground. It hurt! A lot! He raised his head, just in time to see a meaty fist come sailing towards his head again. With the enhanced reflexes provided by the smoke it was almost too easy to catch the man's hand and spin him to the floor with a dull thud. A brass knuckled punch to the jaw made sure that he stayed down for good.

But the noise made by the encounter proved to be nearly deadly, as a hail of bullets rained down on the spot where Clay had been standing moments before. A bullet clipped his shoulder, announcing itself with a burst of white-hot pain. Clay gritted his teeth against the pain and cursed softly from behind a stack of crates that he had taken cover behind. They were better financed than he had anticipated.

The rapid tattoo of a steam-enhanced gatling gun echoed, and Clay was forced to switch cover again as the bullets tore into the crates, rendering them useless. He wove between shelves, constantly moving as gunshots clipped boxes and shattered stone.

The gunner was obviously shooting at anything that moved. Finally, he thought that he would be able to pinpoint the location of the gunner and threw another smoke pellet across the room with his uninjured arm. The noise and sudden explosion of gas caught the attention of the gunner and he filled the air with a hailstorm of bullets. Realizing that he hadn't hit anyone, the gunner returned to scanning the room, sweat beginning to bead on his brow beneath a grimy and dirt-stained hat.

Suddenly, Clay tore out of the smoke and decked the man full in the face with his brass knuckles. Across the room, he saw the crates of what was obviously the drugs. He readied his firebomb, rolling it across the floor at the crates. He had just enough time to leap out of a window as warm, hungry flames licked the edges of his cloak.

Clay tore off his mask, revealing a youthful, dark-haired face and hungrily gulped fresh, clean air. He had never known that his breath had smelled that bad. He threw the mask aside onto his small threadbare cot. The large, unused church bells loomed overhead. He looked

around at his home. It was not much, but at least it was safe. It was quite evident that no one had been in the church for many years. Downstairs, the boarded up stained-glass windows let a tiny bit of light in on the statues of the Mechanical Father. Clay had never believed in the national church. It had always seemed like a large, elaborate propaganda piece to him.

Downstairs was broken and neglected, but the belltower was a little better. Clay had used this place to get away from home and the constant shouting of his parents. His father had been a drunk in the local gang and had violently cast Clay out when he realized that he was a Chemancer.

Pushing these thoughts from his head, Clay focused on more important matters, such as the gunshot wound to his shoulder. Now that he had lost contact with the smoke and the adrenalin of the fight had worn off, it hurt more than ever. He gritted his teeth and leaned closer to examine the wound.

Thankfully, it was only a deep graze. He would not have to remove a bullet. Clay remembered the first time he had to remove a bullet. It had hurt a thousand times worse than the time he had been beaten up for his Chemancy.

He clenched his fists in anger at the memory and proceeded to clean the wound and bind it with an old shirt, following the directions of a book that he had taken from a library and *forgotten* to return. Deed done, Clay leaned back against the wall and watched the sun rise, slowly turning the sky an iridescent orange and purple.

The next days passed in a blur. Clay spent the time that his shoulder needed to heal cleaning his guns and weapons and following instructions from another library book to create more chemical compounds. This one he had saved from a bonfire dedicated to burning Chemancy books. He shuddered at the thought of the porcelain masked Protectors shoving people out of the way and forcing everyone to throw their books in the fire. He still remembered the firelit, smiling masks leering at him out of the orange-tinged smoke.

Almost two weeks after his warehouse raid, he heard loud voices coming from outside of the church, in the middle of the overgrown square. “We are gathered here today to witness the purging from our ranks of the unfaithful, the disloyal and the demonic. This is the first step to

purging Chemancers from our society. Forever!”

Clay peered out of his bell tower. He saw a crowd gathered in front of the church. A man in dark robes stood behind a row of people with burlap sacks on their heads, kneeling before masked Protectors. A jolt of panic shot through Clay. He was frozen as he heard the black clad man shout “Fire!” A gunshot. A yell. The thud of a body falling to the ground. These sounds cut Clay to the core. He was frozen in shock. Images of the Protector’s smiling masks peered at him through the fog of memory. He confined the memory to his head, ignoring what had been and concentrating on what was. He did not think, he acted.

He snatched up his cleaned, loaded guns, and grabbed a handful of smoke pellets. Then he leapt from the top of the tower. He fell, his hair whipping around his face so that he could barely see where he was falling. It began to rain, the water droplets falling with Clay towards the ground far below. Through the narrowed slits that were his eyes, he saw the ground approaching faster and faster. He threw a smoke pellet, filling the area with smoke. Somehow, he landed feet first and spun around, locating his targets.

He fired a shot at one of the Protectors, sending him to the ground. He fired again. And again. And again. Each shot was a person that this corrupt government had hurt. Each shot was a life taken; a life ruined. This was fair, this was justice. Dully, from the back of his mind, Clay heard a click. Both of his guns were out of ammunition. He did not care. He threw himself at the last opponent, the hooded and robed monk. Only to find that it was not the hooded and robed monk Clay had thought that it was. It was now a grotesque and deformed monster. Clay had heard rumors about monsters like this, created in the inner sanctum of the Church of the Mechanical Father, but he had passed them off as just that; rumors. He was contradicted however by the *thing* that had just appeared before his very own eyes.

Equal parts man, machine and monster, and beast stood before him, wreathed in all its grotesque glory. It looked down on him, robes cast aside, twisted, and malformed. It swung an arm encased in bony spines, slamming Clay to the ground. It advanced and with his smoke-enhanced reflexes, Clay rolled out of the way just as the beast struck again. People were screaming now. The crowd had begun to turn tail and run as Clay was bashed once again. This time, he felt an extreme excruciating pain and tasted blood in his mouth. He knew enough to realize that he was mortally wounded. He lay on the hard, cold ground and the monster cackled, standing over its prey, triumphant.

Then, something changed. It was as if Clay had transformed. He slowly pulled himself to his feet, channeling a deep power he never knew he had. The pain melted away and he felt stronger than he had ever felt in his life. He looked down at his hands and saw that smoke was pooling around them. Once again, Clay leaped. But this time it was not downward, this time it was upward. Straight at the beast. His fist bashed it straight in the head with the force of a train. The priest creature flew across the square, smashed into the church and was still. Clay hung in the air, like a marionet on strings. A deep, bone numbing exhaustion filled him and he fell to the ground, landed, and knew no more.

Clay awoke in the middle of an ancient, golden forest. The leaves of the trees cast a pale golden glow over everything, but Clay's eyes were focused on something else entirely. Three golden beings made entirely of light hovered before him. The first being spoke with a resonant, musical voice.

"Welcome Clayton Irving Jones."

"We are the keepers of The Next," the second being said.

"And you are dead," added the third. Clay looked beyond the Keepers and saw what he instinctively knew to be a paradise. He wanted to go there; his whole being longed for the light that he saw beyond the Keepers. But something held him back. He thought of the people back in the city, their squalor and misery, and knew that he could never be at peace with himself if he had not helped them as much as he could.

"I, I can't go," spoke Clay.

"Why not?" questioned the first being.

"The world hates you; it hates you to its core," declared the second Keeper. But Clay felt something surprising, an emotion he never thought that he would feel for the city.

"But I love it back," he said quietly, more to himself than anything.

"Very well. Very few make this choice, but so be it," said the third being with an inclining of its head. The three beings surrounded Clay and began to chant in an ancient language that recalled hints of hissing smoke. Clay's vision became less and less focused, until he saw only gold-white light. Then blackness.

Clay's eyes snapped open. He felt a cobble digging uncomfortably into his back and felt freezing rain pelting his face like a thousand tiny icicles. Clay smiled. He was alive. He pulled himself to his feet and stood for a minute, looking at the grimy familiarity around him. Despite himself, he smiled again. He knew what he had to do. He was finished with doing this on his own. It was time to start a revolution.