

*The Origin  
of*  
**Jack Juggler**

by

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1991



# *The Origin of Jack Juggler*

## *Chapter One: Bad News*

Jonathan Shade buried his face in his hands. If he had been a little younger, he would have cried. But at the age of twenty-two, he went over the terrible performance again and again in his mind. Every time he remembered a mistake, he knew at once what he should have done. But it was too late now. The judges were deciding. The preliminary trials of the International Jugglers' Association festival were over. Soon everybody in the room, including Jonathan, would know the judges' decision.

Finally, the door opened and a young woman came out carrying a sheet of paper. Jonathan and the other twenty six people waiting anxiously with him, stared intently at the new arrival. She had the results.

The woman gave a nervous smile. "First of all, I want to thank all of you for trying out. You probably know that this year the International Jugglers' Association festival had more people entering the competitions than ever before. With so many fine applicants" — here she smiled, and looked around the room — "the judges had a lot of trouble deciding which five of you should compete in the finals on Saturday. You may have wondered why it took so long..."

"*Wondered!*" said one of the contestants with a snort. It was Roy Malloy from Minneapolis. Roy had gone first, so he had been waiting longer than anyone else for the results to be announced. "That's putting it mildly, Cathy. We've been chewing our fingernails in here for two hours since the preliminaries ended. What's the holdup?"

Cathy Reynolds, the woman with the results fastened to her clipboard, started to answer. "Well, surely you must realize that..."

Another contestant, Jacob Sterner from Berlin, interrupted. In a mildly accented voice, he said impatiently, "We know, we know. But could you kindly tell us the results right away? We are all here hungry and tired and wish to know what has been decided."

Cathy looked annoyed at this request. But she shrugged her shoulders, looked down at the list, and read:

"Albert Bussy, Lisa Frinelli, David Lim, Roy Malloy, and Steve Tinder."

At once the room divided into two groups. The ones whose names had been read leaped into the air and shouted in triumph. The others look at each other or at the floor in gloomy silence. A couple of the unsuccessful contestants stood up and congratulated their successful friends.

Slowly everyone got up and left the room. They all seemed to know each other, and they left in groups of two, three or four, talking about the competition as they walked from the room. Jonathan stayed until everyone else had left, then picked up his prop bag and started to head for the door.

"Jonathan... Jonathan Shade?" asked Cathy in a timid voice.

Jonathan looked up. "That's me," he said, still walking toward the door. The room was empty now except for the two of them.

"Just a second," said Cathy, and took a step toward Jonathan. Something, perhaps the sadness in his eyes, made her stop. "Look," she said, "I probably shouldn't be telling you this, since the judges' deliberations are supposed to be secret." She waited for some encouragement from Jonathan. As she looked into his eyes, she seemed unable to speak. When he said nothing, she finally continued, "What I wanted to say is that, well, the judges all felt you're incredibly talented. You're probably the best juggler here. But you..."

"Just had too many drops," Jonathan finished the sentence.



Cathy continued looking into Jonathan's eyes. He realized that he ought to say something nice, like, "Thanks for telling me that." But the pain and disappointment was too heavy on his heart; so Jonathan Shade hitched his prop bag further up on his shoulder, pushed the door open, and left the room without looking back.

The gymnasium where all the juggling action took place was still full of people out on the floor. Balls, clubs, cigar boxes, diabolos and devil sticks were flying and spinning. Two young boys on unicycles were playing tag. A proud new mother held her young baby balanced on one palm. A thin young man wearing a top hat was amazing a small crowd with his skills at flicking playing cards up into the back rows of the bleachers.

Jonathan Shade let his eyes scan the crowd. He saw a few people he recognized, but no one he knew — no surprise there. He was a recluse, and had no friends in either the juggling world or the computer world, where he made his money working for a Silicon Valley software firm.

"Why did I even come here?" he asked himself. "What did I want to prove?" He had taken up juggling as a child. His father had taught him a few basic skills. Jonathan had taught himself more by watching street jugglers in San Francisco, by going out to Golden Gate Park on Sunday afternoons and watching the amateur jugglers, and by studying videotapes of juggling festivals and conventions.

And by practicing. Jonathan wasn't a fanatic juggler. But he was persistent. Throughout junior high, high school, and college he had spent all of his spare time mastering the props and working up more and more complicated maneuvers. Since he had no friends, very few people realized how good he was. He had often thought about going to an International Jugglers' Association

festival and entering the competitions. But every year, something always came up to prevent him from going.

Now he was here. And for what?

On one side of the gym there was a row of mirrors for athletes to be able to study their own moves. Jonathan had never juggled in front of a mirror; but now he looked at himself, his prop bag still slung over his shoulder.

Jonathan Shade had no reason to be displeased with what he saw. He was well over six feet tall, lean, with long dark brown hair combed straight back. His clothes were neat but not flashy. Though he was good-looking, no one might give him a second look if it weren't for his eyes.

One eye was brown, the other was green. And when he became excited about something, the green eye flashed and twinkled like an emerald in candlelight. For years, girls and women had tried to catch his interest just so they could spend time watching those eyes. Whoever he spoke to was invariably spellbound for at least a few moments by the strange fascination of the mismatched pupils.

Standing there in front of the gym mirror, Jonathan smiled faintly as he recalled one incident when he was twelve years old. A school bully named Nicholod had called him out after class one day. Jonathan started to walk home, when the bully snarled, put his hand on Jonathan's shoulder, and spun him around. Jonathan didn't even think about his reaction. He simply grabbed Nicholod's wrists and thrust his head within a few inches of the other boy's. Jonathan closed his eyes for a second, then opened them wide, and let his thought pour through the green and brown lenses and into the other boy's eyes. The thought that Jonathan Shade sent streaming through his eyes and into the other boy's mind was this:

*"I am immensely powerful and dangerous. My eyes tell you this. If I wish, I can burn a hole through your brain with my thoughts. You fear me — you have never been so afraid as you are now.*

*"RUN!"*

Nicholod tore away from Jonathan's grasp, and ran screaming down the street. From that time on, whenever he caught sight of Jonathan Shade, Nicholod slunk away like a beaten dog. Several other boys had witnessed the scene, and no one ever bothered Jonathan again.

As he was looking in the mirror and thinking, Jonathan became aware of a prickling sensation on the back of his neck. He had felt it before. The sensation always meant that someone was watching him from behind. Jonathan had wondered sometimes how he could tell he was being watched. He never came up with a satisfactory answer; but the sensation was never wrong.

Without turning around, Jonathan Shade looked into the mirror for someone who might be staring at him. He saw nothing — only jugglers tossing and spinning out on the main floor. Slowly he turned around and searched the room. Still nothing. He let his eyes roam up into the bleachers.

Someone at the very top of the stands was looking at him.

He was far away, and the seats were dimly lit up at the top of the stadium, so Jonathan couldn't get a good look at whoever was staring at him. He looked around to see if it might be someone else. It wasn't.

When he looked back up, the figure was gone.

Normally, such a strong sensation of being watched would have disturbed Jonathan. He disliked being stared at, and would sometimes use the power of his eyes to discourage any gawkers, male or female, who looked too long or hard at him. But just now, the waves of discouragement were still flowing over his spirit.

Jonathan Shade walked out into the warm night of Saint Louis in July. When he reached his van in the parking lot, he once again experienced that peculiar prickling sensation on the back of his neck. He looked around cautiously — a mugger? The parking lot was only about half full at this time of night. Someone could easily be concealed behind a parked car. Jonathan listened and looked for several seconds. Nothing. He unlocked the back of his van and stepped inside.

Nothing had been touched here, he saw at once. Jonathan took a great deal of pride and delight in the way he had outfitted his van. On the outside, it was an ordinary gunmetal grey van, well kept-up, but nothing special to look at. That was just the way Jonathan wanted it to look — unnoticeable.

But the back “room” of the van was a completely different story.

The walls were covered with orange and silver leather rolled and tucked into beautiful pleats, and edged with silver braiding. There was a chair at the far end, comfortably stuffed and covered with a soft orange fabric. It could be shifted into a reclining position so that he could take a nap in the chair if he wanted. There was an electric lamp for reading mounted to the wall in back of the chair. On both sides were rows of his favorite books, held in place by glass covers. At the bottom of one shelf was a small refrigerator within easy reach of the chair. At the back of the van, near the rear door, were two padded bench seats, also covered in orange and silver leather, whose tops could be removed for storing juggling props and tools. In the center of the room was a redwood table covered with carvings of elves, dwarves, and other fantasy creatures that frolicked and juggled in the midst of carved trees and vines. Jonathan had ordered this table, at great expense and an eight-month wait, from a master craftsman in Switzerland. A row of six silver buttons lined the edge of the table near the chair.

The van room was a world of its own, a world into which Jonathan could escape any time.

Without turning on the light, Jonathan sank down into his chair. The room was dark, lit only by the moonlight streaming in thinly through the one-way glass of the windows. He reached forward, pushed the second button on the table, then sat back with his eyes closed to relax as he listened as the CD player sent the soft sounds of a Mozart string quartet through the speakers mounted in the walls and ceiling.

“It’s like taking a shower in music,” he thought when he first installed the eight-speaker system in the van. The speakers were small but powerful, and were hidden artfully behind the orange and silver leather. Now he was grateful for the soothing sounds of the music as he tried to think about something other than the disastrous performance at the competition earlier that day.

At the end of the first movement, there was a knock at his van door.

Jolted out of the mood created by the music, Jonathan sat up straight in an instant. He was sure that whoever was knocking out there was the same person who had been watching him in the gym. He reached forward and switched off the music. The knock came again — not loud, but firm.

“Who is it?” asked Jonathan, placing his finger over the sixth button on the table panel. If he pushed that button, an earsplitting siren would go off, bringing the campus police to the scene in a hurry. Jonathan could handle himself in a fight if necessary. But he would rather let the siren do its job.

A low, smooth voice outside the van said, “You do not know me yet, Jonathan Shade. But if you want to be a master juggler, you will know me.”



## *Chapter Two: The Stranger Smith*

Not taking his finger from the button, Jonathan looked through the one-way glass at the back of the van. The night was too dark for him to get a good view of the stranger outside.

“I suppose if he wanted to rob me, he wouldn’t have knocked on the door first,” Jonathan reasoned. But it was mostly curiosity that made Jonathan reach for the remote door control device. “Stand back,” Jonathan called out. “The doors open out.” He pressed the button, and a small motor began to whirl. The door slowly opened outward.

Jonathan turned on an overhead light in the van. The light cast its beams on the stranger standing just outside the door

The first thing that Jonathan thought was, “I bet I’ll look like that in forty years.” The man was as tall as Jonathan, with the same lean build and skin the same shade of tan. But instead of Jonathan’s dark brown hair, the man’s hair was silver streaked with white, and he wore it combed short and neat against his head. His beard and moustache were the same color, and were both neatly trimmed. Though the weather was warm and muggy, he wore a long, pale grey overcoat buttoned to the throat and reaching down to his dark grey shoes, which seemed to be made of soft grey leather.

But Jonathan scarcely noticed these features. What he noticed first was that the man wore dark glasses — very dark. They seemed to be prescription glasses, since the lenses were thick, and held in place by a grey steel frame that wrapped around the side of his face in such a way that a viewer could not get a glimpse of his eyes.

The glasses seemed to be made for hiding the eyes as well as protecting them.

After a few moments of silence, the man smiled slightly and asked, “May I come in? Or do you try to stare down all your guests this way? You do have remarkable eyes, Jonathan Shade.”

Jonathan suddenly became aware that he was being rude. “Strange,” he thought, “that so many times I’ve gotten irritated with people looking at my eyes. And here I am staring at this man like he was a freak.”

“Sorry,” said Jonathan, “Come on in. Watch your head, and take a seat on one of those benches if you like. I really don’t have furniture here for guests.”

The man entered. Jonathan clicked the remote control, and the doors swung shut.

As the stranger took a seat, Jonathan quietly pushed button number one, which activated a tape recorder inside the table. Then he said, “You seem to know my name already, so I won’t bother to introduce myself. So let’s start with a couple of questions: Who are you, and what can I do for you?”

The stranger was looking around the room, pausing for several moments when his gaze rested on the carved table. Still not answering, he continued to scan the room — “Almost like he’s looking for something,” Jonathan thought.

Finally, the stranger faced Jonathan. “My name. Yes. Well, later you may find another name for me. But for now, call me Doctor Smith.” He smiled to himself, as if enjoying a private joke. “Smith is actually just the name for me,

since I am a forger of sorts.” When Jonathan’s eyebrows raised, the man said, “No, no, not a forger of counterfeit money. But something like a blacksmith: a forger of useful things. I am a maker of skills — a maker and a teacher of skills.”

The stranger named Smith leaned forward in his chair and seemed to stare into Jonathan’s eyes — “seemed,” because, with the dark glasses, Jonathan could not tell where the man was actually looking.

“As for your second question: it’s not what you can do for me, Jonathan — though we’ll come to that point later. The real issue is what I can do for you.”

Jonathan stared for several moments at the stranger. Finally he asked, “And just what can you do for me, Doctor Smith? And, since free gifts have way of becoming expensive, you might as well tell me up front how much you’re charging for whatever it is you’re selling.”

The man’s gaze returned to the table. “This is a wonderful piece of woodwork,” he said, running his fingers over the surface. “Swiss?”

Jonathan was impressed. “Right. It was made for me by...”

“By Johann Krebs of Basel,” said the stranger, his eyes still scanning the table. “I know his work well.” He reached into his coat pocket and took out a wooden ball 2 1/2 inches in diameter. With a flick of his wrist, he rolled it from the palm of his hand onto the backs of his three middle fingers. Then he rolled it up over the tops of the tips of his fingers and tossed it to Jonathan. The whole movement took less than a second; but it was one of the smoothest moves Jonathan had seen in quite a while.

Jonathan made a fork of his own three middle fingers, glided them under the ball, and lowered them gently to rest on his lap. He then picked up the ball and looked. He turned it slowly, letting his eyes pick out the intricately carved detail on the sphere’s surface. The figures on the ball seemed to be arranged in

a sequence. The story started in one place, then spiraled down to a point exactly opposite. It showed, in tiny, perfect detail, a man juggling balls on a forest path. Miniature dragons swooped down and seized the balls. The juggler reached into his bag, spun something that looked like a twirling rope, and lassoed one of the dragons. He rode it through the wooden sky to a mountaintop, where he found his juggling balls in a nest. In the last scene, the man stood atop the mountain, holding four balls in each hand over his head. Jonathan peered closer. The eight balls seemed to be made not of wood, but tiny, tiny diamonds. He touched the balls with his fingers, and discovered that the clear stones had indeed been set into the wood so that they barely stood out from the surface. Jonathan then held the ball out and looked at it whole. The wood was a rich, dark brown with swirls of blond running throughout.

"This is the most beautiful piece of work I've ever seen," Jonathan said in a quiet voice. He would give almost anything for that ball! "Is this what you're selling?" he asked. Jonathan was afraid the man would say "yes," then demand an exorbitant price. But the stranger surprised him.

"Not for sale," he said. "I'm sure you understand. But I have other props even more remarkable than this. And you haven't even seen the Dragon Mountain Ball in action. Here!" The stranger held out his hand, signaling Jonathan to throw it back.

Jonathan hesitated. He did not want a ball of such perfect beauty to be dropped and damaged.

The stranger laughed. "Throw it, Jonathan Shade. I promise you I shall catch it."

Jonathan tossed it carefully. The stranger cupped his hand to catch the ball. Then, quick as lightning, he spun a curve around the sphere as it began to fall, flicked three fingers out, down, and up in a strange gesture, then raised his

other hand. Now all ten fingers were pointing at the ball, which was six inches away from landing on the table.

The ball froze in mid-air.

Jonathan gaped in wonder. What was holding the ball up?

The stranger's left hand then rose, fingers still extended, until the left hand fingers were poised directly over the ball, and the right hand fingers pointed up underneath it. He then made a twisting motion with his left hand. The ball began to grow larger and larger, until it was the size of a basketball. Then he quickly twisted the fingers of his right hand, made a palm outward gesture, then snapped the fingers against the thumb. A brown haze seemed to glow out from the ball as it shrank down, down, back to its original size, then smaller, smaller.

There was a snap like the crack of a bullwhip.

The ball was gone.

Jonathan sat amazed for several second more, then applauded. "Bravo, Doctor Smith," he said. "That was quite a magic trick."

The stranger produced the ball, apparently unchanged, from his pocket and began to roll it from his palm to the back of his fingers and back to the palm again.

"My friend," said the stranger, "that is not magic. That is juggling. That is higher order juggling. What you have just witnessed is a trick. But it is not an illusion. It is the result of manipulation of matter, space, and time. We must now discuss serious matters. Do you think you could turn down the light in here? My eyes are unaccustomed to bright light for long."

Jonathan was surprised at the request. The interior ceiling light of the van was not very strong. But he picked up the remote control and dimmed the light until the stranger said, "Fine. Thank you."

The low light gave the stranger, with his grey clothes and hair, an almost ghostly appearance. For several moments, the man did not speak. Jonathan could hear the faint sounds of automobiles on the freeway several blocks from the campus. In the silence and low light, Jonathan had the feeling that he was about to enter another world — or that, with the stranger in front of him, with his Dragon Mountain sphere and impenetrable dark glasses, they were both already partly inside a world or dimension utterly different from the world of everyday experience. Finally the stranger spoke.

“Let me get right to the point. I saw your tryout for the artistic competition today. You have a great deal of skill, and an excellent imagination. But you lack inner concentration. This failing causes you to miss catches when you perform in public — catches that you make easily when you juggle by yourself.

“Tomorrow is the numbers competition. I can help you win that prize, if you wish. I can teach you the method right now that will lead to victory. But...”

Here the stranger paused. Jonathan completed the sentence for him. “But there is a price.”

The stranger smiled. “Everything has a price. But I am going to tell you the price before you buy, and will not demand payment until after my method has proved itself.”

Jonathan did not smile. “Go on,” he said, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair.

“If you will permit, I want to tell you a story. The story has a point — several points, actually, and will serve to tell you not only the price, but why I ask the price that I do. When I have finished, you be the judge as to whether the product is worth your payment.”



## *Chapter Three: The Master Juggler*

“As you know, jugglers have been around, in all times and in every country, for thousands of years. There were jugglers in ancient Egypt, in the old dynasties of China, the kingdoms of India, and the courts of Europe. As always, some jugglers were amateurs, some professionals. Some were only modestly skilled, some were great virtuosos.

“But this is the key issue, Jonathan,” said the stranger, leaning forward and raising his index finger. “At every time, there was a single supreme Master Juggler who kept the tradition alive. This Master Juggler had many names, and lived in many countries. But in all places and times, the Master Juggler is chosen by **The Gravity Wizard**. When the Master Juggler dies or loses his or her skill, the title and the responsibility are passed on to the most gifted young juggler of the age.

“The Master Juggler had, and still has, three responsibilities. They may be called Truth, Beauty, and Justice.

“The Master Juggler must teach others how to juggle so that they may learn with their own hands and bodies about the mastery of gravity. Juggling is a discipline. It is rhythm. It is the effort to create harmony with our muscles and mind, the objects we juggle, and the forces of gravity. This is the Truth juggling seeks to teach.”

“But jugglers drop,” Jonathan objected. “The act of juggling can’t be all harmony and truth. Human beings aren’t perfect. But the truth is. So how can juggling be Truth?”

“Jugglers do not seek to possess Truth,” the stranger continued. “They strive for it. While the balls fly in rhythm or the diabolo spins evenly, the juggler has found Truth. Truth is not a thing. It is a motion, and must be found in movement. For us, Truth is not a ball: it is the love of tossing and catching the ball.”

Jonathan leaned forward, put his elbow on his leg and rested his chin in his palm. He stared intently at the man in front of him. “Continue,” he said.

“When we have mastered our skills, we show them to others. Some do it for pay, others for pleasure only. The professional juggler in the circus, the street performer in neighborhood fairs, the child doing his act in a school talent show — all these are performed for the pleasure of the audience. If they catch some of the sense of skill and joy of juggling, they perceive Beauty.”

“Wait a minute,” Jonathan objected. “Most circus and street jugglers aren’t <sup>seeking</sup> doing what they do for Beauty. They want laughs — laughs followed by applause and, hopefully, money. Beauty has nothing to do with it.”

The stranger gave the ball a vigorous, quick spin, and balanced it on the tip of his index figure. The sphere spun furiously and perfectly on its axis. He gave it a quick toss, then closed it into his palm again.

“Beauty has everything to do with it, Jonathan. Do you think that beauty has only to do with a lovely face or a painting in a museum? Beauty is pleasure seen as the quality of a thing or an act. If people take pleasure in what they watch, they see beauty. And laughter is one of the most pleasant forms of Beauty ever invented.”

Jonathan thought about the idea. He still wasn’t convinced; but he wanted to get to the point. “Maybe,” he said. “But Justice? What does juggling have to do with justice?”

Just then, a loud roar swept through the parking lot. Jonathan looked out the window and saw a stream of big motorcycles cruising slowly in and out of the parked cars. There was a shatter of glass, and a chorus of belly laughs. Then the air was filled with the racket of gunning engines as the motorcycles thundered out onto the street.

Jonathan sprang from his chair and peered out of a side window. The night was dark, and he could see only the vague forms of the cycles as they raced out of the parking lot. He sprang for the door, determined to follow them — but the stranger put his hand on Jonathan's arm.

"Now is not the time, Jonathan. There will come a time when you may have the power to stop destruction. But not now."

Jonathan reluctantly went back to his chair. The whole affair had taken place in less than a minute. The parking lot was quiet again. Jonathan thought it seemed as though the stranger had arranged the whole incident just to make his point. "You said something about justice?"

"Justice means maintaining a balance between order and chaos in society," said the stranger.

"Chaos — you mean evil?" Jonathan asked with surprise.

"Evil is one form of chaos," the stranger replied. "You just heard one form of it — pure destruction — just for the hell of it. Don't tell me you've never felt the urge yourself."

"What urge?" asked Jonathan. He had the feeling the stranger was laying a word trap for him.

"The urge to do mischief, to play tricks," came the reply.

Jonathan thought about it. He worked in the computer industry; and that world was full of tricksters — some gentle, some vicious. Jonathan had never set loose a virus or broken into someone's else's files. But he had programmed

a few, well, call them *surprises*, for his friends. Nothing malicious. But definitely unexpected. But evil?

“Playing harmless tricks isn’t evil,” Jonathan said finally. “It can be just for fun.”

“Just for fun, as you call it, involves laughing at someone else — deceiving them — juggling their emotions, if you will. It’s a minor form of chaos. It’s just the same on the other side. One person gives a panhandler a dime, someone else devotes his or her life to helping suffering people. There are different degrees; but it’s in the same realm.”

“What realm?” asked Jonathan.

“The realm of order. Active sympathy — helping out other people — helps increase harmony in the world. Justice means harmony among people.”

Jonathan shifted uneasily in his seat. “All this philosophy is very interesting,” he said with more than a touch of impatience. “But I thought we were going to talk about juggling.”

The stranger smiled. “The first virtue the Master Juggler must practice,” he said, “is patience. I’ll finish what I have to say — it will be brief — then we will come to the bargain.”

“The bargain?” Jonathan asked.

“The bargain. To continue: if everybody and everything in the world were good and perfect, there would be boredom and rigidity. This is the curse of Order. If all were chaos, might would make right, and fear would rule the world from dawn to dark.

“There are forces of evil in the world, Jonathan, that you know only imperfectly. Yet they exist, and have existed for thousands of years. The most powerful of these Legions of Chaos are Hatred and Greed. Hatred has two brothers: Anger and Violence. Greed has two sisters: Envy and Jealousy. If I

agree to teach you the skills to become the Master Juggler, you must first swear to fight against these enemies of human happiness.

“I have chosen you above all others to become the Master Juggler because of your skill, which I have seen, and because of your heart. Of your skill I am sure. Of your heart — well, I have studied your actions, and I cannot be certain. You seem to have the right instincts. But I have been fooled before, and may be again. But you are the chosen one, so I will ask you to swear never to reveal any of the tricks I will teach you.

“And finally: you must swear never to reveal that you met me.”

Jonathan stared at the stranger. “And just who are you, Doctor Smith? Who are you really?”

“I am your teacher, if you are ready to swear the three oaths. Otherwise, I am just a harmless old fool who has wasted an hour of your time.”

“What will you do if I refuse to swear the oaths?” asked Jonathan. It was a useless question, he knew, because he had already decided what his answer would be.

“Then I will seek out the second best candidate,” came the reply.

“If I am to be the Master Juggler, who am I replacing?” Jonathan asked.

“That you may not know at this time,” the stranger said. “But come: what is your decision?”

Jonathan had already made up his mind. It was possible, of course, that this Doctor Smith was just a crackpot, some poor crazy fellow who had delusions of creating great jugglers. But Jonathan had seen the man’s moves with the Dragon Sphere. The man was a master himself. Even if there was nothing to all that stuff about Truth and Beauty and Justice and the Legions of Chaos, Jonathan knew he could learn from this man. And the learning and mastering of new juggling tricks was Jonathan’s main passion in life.

"Agreed," he said simply.

"Agreed isn't quite good enough," said the stranger sternly. "You must swear on your word as a man."

"This fellow is dead serious!" thought Jonathan. Out loud he said, "All right. I swear to abide by the three conditions. Is that good enough?"

"It is," replied the stranger. "A man's word is God in man. You are bound."

"So now comes the moment of truth," said Jonathan with a smile. "I've kept my part of the bargain. Will you keep yours? Will you help me win the numbers competition tomorrow? Or do I have to sell you my soul first?"

"You do not have to sell me your soul," replied the stranger. "You have given me your word."

"Well, all right," said Jonathan. "Shall I get my props so we can head for the gym? I presume that's where you'll want to teach me."

"Not yet," said the stranger. "We start here. Now. Please turn off the lights completely and we shall commence."



## *Chapter Four: Training*

With the lights off, Jonathan could see only the shadowy outline of the stranger. “I suppose I ought to be afraid,” he told himself. “This guy could knife me right now and get away completely. Nobody would even think to search the van for a couple of days.”

“Now shut your eyes and relax completely,” said the stranger. “Place Your palms upward and let your fingers point upward — but calmly. Don’t stiffen them.”

Jonathan did as he was instructed. Several seconds went by. Then a minute passed — though it seemed much longer. All was quiet, except for the distant sound of cars on the freeway. Jonathan let his mind expand outward, quietly and without haste. He thought of himself sitting in his chair, inside his van, in a parking lot, on the campus of Washington University, in the city of Saint Louis, in the state of Missouri, in the United States of America, in the Western hemisphere, on the planet Earth, in the solar system, of the Milky Way. He could imagine himself at the base of a gigantic cone that stretched from himself, here, now, up through the atmosphere and out among the stars. It seemed as though he was balancing the entire galaxy on the tips of his upstretched fingers.

“Now we are ready,” said the stranger. “To begin with, we shall need a new name for you. If you are to become a new person, we need a name for you to live by.”

Jonathan brought his thoughts back to earth. Now he let his mind roam the past. He remembered when he was only a few years old, when he and his

friends, Marsha Kimbal and Jamaal Freedman, used to roam through the streets playing good-guy/bad guy games. Marsha was Marty the Mysterious, Jamaal was Jaleel the Avenger. What had he called himself? Jack the Joker. He was supposed to be the trickster in the group. He would dupe the villains into entering the trap laid by Marty the Mysterious. Then Jaleel the Avenger would pull out his plastic pistol and gun them down or march them off to the police. With his eyes closed, Jonathan smiled at the memory.

“How about Jack the Joker?” he suggested. “It reminds me of the superhero games I used to play when I was a kid.”

“The *Jack* is good; but the joker doesn’t fit your role,” said the stranger. A few moments of silence followed. “I have it. Your name will be *Jack Juggler*. From now on, this will be not only your name, but your personality whenever you invoke the powers of the Master Juggler.”

“And now we proceed. First, I want you to picture your favorite kind of place to live — a desert, a mountain, a jungle — you may choose whatever you wish.”

“A redwood forest,” said Jack Juggler.

“Now make yourself a place to practice juggling in that forest. Tell me what you see with your mind’s eye.”

Jack Juggler let his mind bring forth the scene. It was a warm day of early summer. A towering grove of redwood trees rose hundreds of feet skyward over his head. He stood in a clearing like a stage in the midst of the grove. In his mind, he turned around,. Behind him stood a small redwood cottage. A bed of small purple flowers surrounded the cottage, and large-leafed ivy grew up the sides and over the roof.

Jack told the stranger what he saw.

“Now go inside your cottage. On the table you will find twelve crystal balls. Gather them up and bring them outside.”

Jack went inside the cottage. There was a chair exactly like the one in his van. The walls were lined with books, though he could not see their titles. In the back of the room was a small fountain, which arched a single, thin stream of water a few feet into the air. The water fell into an orange and silver tiled basin, and sparkled in the light that came from candles mounted on the wall.

On the table was a silver sack with a drawstring pulled tight over its load. Jack took up the sack, and went back outside.

It seemed to be late afternoon in the redwood grove. Light streamed through the leaves and branches at a steep angle. He knelt down on the bare earth, pulled apart the opening of the sack, reached in, and pulled out a ball.

Jack held the ball up to catch the slanting sun beams. This was unlike any of his usual juggling balls — the ones made out of plastic, hard rubber, or cloth. The ball in his hand seemed to be made of solid crystal.

“Impossible — or very foolish,” thought Jack. “Who would made a juggling ball out of something so fragile as glass or crystal?” Yet here it was: perfectly round and transparent, two and a half inches or so in diameter. It had a good heft to it. Jack tossed it into the air. It arced and returned with a satisfying smack into his palm. He reached in and grasped the remaining balls in the sack.

There were eleven more identical balls in the sack.

“Now arrange nine of them in your hand for throwing,” came the stranger’s voice.

Amazement, and even a little fear came over Jack. “No way, Doctor Smith. I can handle seven all right. And on a really good day I can maybe throw eight

balls and catch them before they hit the ground. But one flash is my limit. I can't even juggle eight balls, much less nine."

"Just put them in your hands and pay attention to what I say," came the reply. You are here in your van, thinking of your private world in the redwood forest. Now I am speaking to that private self that stands in that forest. Shut your eyes there, and imagine yourself tossing all nine balls in the air. They fly up — but they float down. When you toss them again, they move in slow motion. Now open your eyes in the forest and try it with the crystal balls there."

"How did he know these are crystal balls?" Jack wondered. But he did as he was told. He made his redwood forest self close his eyes and visualize the nine balls rising and falling in slow motion. Then he opened his eyes, looked up toward the roof of the towering redwoods, and began to throw.

Like in a dream, the balls lazily arched upward in a crossing pattern. They peaked at twin high spots at the top of the pattern, then fell like crystal snowflakes toward his waiting hands. He scooped them up as they fell, then tossed them upward again — and again, and again.

A thrill of ecstasy bolted through him. He was juggling nine balls — something he had never attempted, never dreamed he could accomplish. The pure joy of the sensation made him smile — until the stranger's voice came through again.

"Tomorrow, at the numbers competition, you will relax before your turn, and you will recreate what you have just done in your mind. Then you will step forward and do the same thing in front of the judges with your eyes open. It will be the first proof of your new identity as the Master Juggler. Good-bye, Jack. We shall meet again."

Jack Juggler, formerly known as Jonathan Shade, opened his eyes. It was now completely dark inside his van. No light came in from the parking lot lights.

“They must have turned them off while my eyes were closed,” he thought. Out loud he said, “Listen, Doctor Smith, I don’t think....”

But he stopped. The silence inside the van was complete, almost frightening. Jack groped for the light switch, and flicked it on.

He was alone in the room.

On the table in front of him were the twelve balls — clear like crystal, perfect spheres glowing in the reflected light of the van’s lamp.

## *Chapter Five: The Numbers Championship*

At one o'clock Friday afternoon, the stands were full. The six judges sat behind a long wooden table, their scorecards laid out, pencils lying on top. Off to the side, seven of the best jugglers in the world waited nervously for their turn to juggle for the judges.

Artistic competitions were matters of taste. The winners were good; but the placing depended on the whims and preferences of the judges. In the numbers competition, there was no room for taste or bias. The goal was solely to put as many objects in flight as long as possible, and to keep them up until the first ball hit the floor. For the past two years, in the numbers competition, no one had managed to go beyond eight balls and sixteen catches.

Jonathan Shade had entered as "Jack Juggler." A lot of people at the Jugglers' festival had stage names, so no one questioned him after he turned in his entry form. Jack saw that he had been placed seventh in the list.

The first qualifying try was with seven balls. Each contestant got three tries to make fourteen catches. Five of the six contestants before Jack made the fourteen catches. One of them, Tony Catt, had made one hundred catches.

"Jack Juggler," came the announcer's voice. "You're on."

Jack came forward with seven of his new crystal balls. He was dressed in a fluorescent orange shirt, soft grey pants, and silver shoes with orange flames. His hair was combed straight back. His green eye sparkled with anticipation.

Murmurs went through the watching crowd. "Isn't that the guy we saw yesterday?"



“The fellow with the great routine but too many drops? I don’t know. I think that’s him.”

“Hey, do you think those balls are made out of glass?”

“Don’t be a geek, George. Who would juggle glass balls?”

But Jack heard none of the conversations in the audience. He walked to the center of the arena, four balls in one hand, three in the other. He closed his eyes, and traveled to his redwood grove. Standing beneath the trees, he threw the seven balls high into the air, then wiled the force of gravity to weaken. The balls tumbled down like particles of sugar in water.

Jack opened his eyes. Everyone in the room seemed to be moving in slow motion. He glanced at the clock on the wall. The second hand seemed to take three seconds to click one space forward. But his own hands, he saw, moved at their normal speed. Jack smiled, then launched the seven balls upward. They rose in two perfect arcs, peaked at the same height, then fell gracefully into his outstretched palms. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen catches. He was tempted to go on, and maybe do a hundred and one catches, just to give Tony Catt something to worry about. But Jack thought, “Not now. Not yet. Save the surprises until the end.” So after the fourteenth catch. He stopped, bowed to the scattered applause, and took his seat on the sideline.

The announcer-judge read from his list: “Qualifying with seven balls, fourteen catches are Todd Jones, Mark the Shark, Cindy Goldman, Tony Catt, Pierre Joubert, and Jack Juggler. Next challenge: eight balls, sixteen catches to qualify.”

Eight balls turned out to be the real separator. The first three competitors could not get beyond seven catches. Pierre Joubert tried once, swore in disgust when he missed every single ball, then sat down. Tony Catt had made his

sixteen catches on the second try. On his third try, Catt made thirty four catches. The audience applauded vigorously. After that, he never reached higher than twelve catches.

"Jack Juggler," came the announcer's voice.

Jack rose again, this time with four balls in each hand. But when he got to the center of the arena and shut his eyes, one of the judges blared out, "Come on, Jack, we don't have all day. Get going."

Jack had been in the middle of his mental practice when the voice broke his concentration. He opened his eyes. Well, maybe the benefit from his seven-ball qualifying run was still there. He poised himself, and threw the eight balls.

As soon as the first one left his hand, he knew it was wrong. Too much force. The hesitation made him throw the second ball more weakly — not enough force. He stopped, but had to lunge to catch the two before they hit the ground.

The announcer's voice was mocking. "Two catches for Jack Juggler. You've got a way to go there, JJ!"

Jack felt a flare of anger, but suppressed it. The announcer was a good friend of Tony Catt's. Maybe they were trying to unnerve him on purpose. It was unlikely that Tony would try anything like that. But this guy....Jack realized that getting angry in the middle of a numbers competition would be sure to cause him to lose concentration — and the match! But if that announcer kept getting on his case....

An idea came to Jack.

He smiled, walked over to the judges' stand, and bent down over the table so that his eyes looked directly into those of the offending announcer. Jack thought, "You will not say one word, nothing, zero, until I have completed this

competition. You are afraid that if you do, I will come over and start feeding juggling balls directly into your mouth. *Say Nothing!*”

Jack smiled again, then turned around and walked back into the center of the arena. He closed his eyes. This time, in the redwood grove in his imagination, he adjusted the gravity for the eight balls. He then opened his eyes, took a deep breath, and tossed them upward. This time the pattern and his arm motion were different. He started with four balls in each hand, palm upward, and held far away from his body. His arms made twin circling motions as he fed balls two at a time high into the air. He caught them close together in front of his stomach, rushed them out to the side, then tossed again. Eight, sixteen, twenty-four, thirty-two, forty catches. He could have continued — but once more he scooped them in. The crowd was applauding vigorously now. He bowed slightly, then returned to his seat. He had made six more catches than Catt.

The announcer tried to speak, but seemed to have lost his voice. Two of the other judges pounded him on the back; but he just waved them off, and passed the microphone to the woman on his left. She then asked the formal question. “Do either of the remaining contestants wish to challenge with nine balls?”

“Sure, why not?” said Catt. If they had settled for the eight-ball results, Catt would lose anyway, so he had nothing to lose by trying nine. There were rumors that he had been working on nine. Now came the test.

Catt tried his best. On the last try he managed to make eighteen catches.

“Try it again, Tony,” shouted Jack from the sidelines. “I’m willing to let you have another go at it.”

Catt smiled at his rival, nodded his head, and tried again. This time, though, twelve catches was the best he could do. As he came over to the sideline, he smiled at Jack. “You can’t really do nine balls, can you?”

Jack winked as he rose. "Watch."

Once again, he went to the center of the stage. There was real tension in the audience now. Here was the man who had made forty catches with eight balls on his first try. Could he do nine?

But Jack had a surprise for everyone. He went over to the judges table and spoke in a low voice to the judges. They conferred among themselves for a minutes, then nodded in agreement to Jack. The announcer said, "Jack Juggler will forego his nine-ball attempt. He will instead attempt ten balls. If he fails to qualify, Tony Catt wins with nine balls at eighteen catches."

Murmurs of surprise went through the audience.

"What an idiot. Why not just go for the nine balls?"

"He probably can't do nine. The ten is just an act to get out of competing with nine. He'll lose."

"Ten balls! That would be a world record!"

"Did you see him with eight? He just might do it!"

"No way!"

Jack took out ten balls. It was difficult just to hold them. In each hand, four balls made a square, while the fifth rested in the cradle at their center. He closed his eyes. Even in his redwood world, it was difficult to make the throws and catches. Ten balls rising and falling seemed just too many objects moving at the same time for the human mind to watch and control. When he finally opened his eyes ten seconds later, Jack wasn't sure he could do it. But he was going to give it a try!

Jack gave the first two balls a tremendous heave upward in an alternating, piston-like motion.. They had to go practically to the ceiling of the gym if he was going to have enough time to catch and throw all ten. Then the next ones, then the next. He was aware of nothing but the stream of ten balls soaring,

slowing at the peak, falling, landing in his palm, then soaring again. The pure joy of it was so great that Jack forgot to count throws and catches. He was aware of a tension in his left arm — a tension that meant he was tiring out. Fatigue meant misses. Reluctantly, Jack gathered his ten balls in — but not before he took the final ball, hurled it as high as it could go. It actually ticked the ceiling, then plummeted earthward. Jack took the square of four balls in his right hand and moves them around behind his back. The tenth ball landed right in the middle — wobbled slightly, then came to a rest.

He had done it!

A thunder of applause broke from the audience. Several jugglers down on the floor level were bowing down, making their salaams in a mock imitation of Islam prayer.

Jack was supremely happy. But had he done enough? Jack was so intent on the act of juggling that he hadn't counted the throws or catches. Anxiously he waited for the judges' announcement. The original announcer sat scowling on the side. The woman who had taken his place said, in tones of amazement and awe:

"Jack Juggler. Ten balls, two hundred and one catches. Do you wish to challenge, Tony?"

Tony Catt shook his head. He came over and gripped Jack's hand. "World-class juggling!" he said in sinvere admiration. Jack returned the handshake with warmth.

The annopuncer finally made her voice heard over the applause. "Jack Juggler is the 1991 numbers champion in ball juggling, and now officially holds the world record for such a feat. Congratulations, Jack!"

Jack Juggler scarcely heard the applause, scarcely felt the heavy First Prize medallion as it was slipped around his neck by the admiring judge. People

were congratulating him, asking him questions, taking his picture as he put his balls back into his tote bag, hitched it over his shoulder, and walked out into the hot Saint Louis afternoon.



## *Chapter Six: Trouble at the Truck Stop*

Early next morning, Jack was heading down the freeway back to San Francisco. For the rest of the Jugglers' festival, people would be talking about his feat of juggling ten balls. But for now, Jack did not want to bask in his glory. He wanted to think. And the best place to do a lot of long, hard thinking was on the road. It was a 45-hour drive back to his home in San Francisco. Jack decided to drive it in one unbroken trip — no stops. It would give him time to analyze the questions that were bothering him:

Who was "Doctor Smith?"

How and why did the Redwood Grove of the Mind work?

What did it mean that Jonathan Shade had agreed to become Jack Juggler?

What were the powers and responsibilities of the Master Juggler?

As he headed out across the long, rolling prairie roads, he decided that, strange as it might be, Doctor Smith was the Gravity Wizard: the one who appointed the Master Juggler throughout the ages. But this only raised further questions. Who was the Gravity Wizard, and who appointed him? Was the old man hundreds, or even thousands of years old? Had he made Pierre Grignoire Master Juggler in 15th-century France, or Lan Zi Master Juggler in the Warring States period of ancient China?

Jack was baffled. There were answers to the questions. But only "Doctor Smith" himself could answer them. And Doctor Smith had disappeared two nights ago.

But Jack had a feeling that he would see the mysterious old man again.

Heading across Kansas into Colorado, Jack turned his thoughts to the Redwood Grove of the Mind. It was obviously some kind of mental discipline. But he had no idea how it worked. Could it be that he could just close his eyes, imagine something, then open his eyes and find the world changed? He hadn't exactly changed the world. But he had acquired a juggling skill that he did not possess before. Did the Gravity Wizard give him the power of the Grove, or was it always there, waiting to be used? What other powers might be waiting for him in this world inside his mind?

And could any of the powers backfire on him?

At eight o'clock that evening, Jack pulled into a truck stop for a cup of coffee and a hamburger. As he was finishing, a commotion at the doorway caught his attention. The truck stop owner was arguing with a big, heavysset man. The man, dressed in leather riding clothes and carrying a big loop of chain draped over his shoulder, was swearing at the owner. But the owner stood his ground.

"You fellows came in here, ordered the food and ate it. Now you've got to pay up, or I'm calling the police," he said, looking the big man in the eyes.

From outside came another voice. "Hey, Vince, let's go. What the hell's holding you up?"

Jack looked outside. There was a whole gang of cycle riders — maybe a dozen — waiting outside, gunning their engines impatiently. All of the drivers were men. There were a few women riding on the seats behind the men on some of the cycles. All of them, men and women alike, were big and tough looking.

Jack looked at the motorcyclist still in the cafe. He was more than big: he was huge. Two tattoos ran up his right forearms and onto his bicep. Jack saw that he had no left forearm. It was cut off halfway down. A metal cap ended

where his right wrist should have been. His face had a two or three day's growth of beard. A toothpick jutted out from between his teeth as he talked. Without looking over his shoulder, he shouted out, "Nothin's holdin' me up. This creep is about to apologize for servin' us rotten food."

The owner flushed in anger. "You ate everything on your plates. I don't..."

But he never finished his sentence. Without warning, the big man swung his left arm. The metal cap on his stump connected with the store owner's jaw in a sickening crunch. The man went down in a heap. Blood trickled out from the corner of his mouth.

The big cycle rider spit the toothpick onto the man's crumpled body.

"There's your tip, sucker," he said, turned, and walked out.

It all happened so fast that all the other customers in the diner were stunned. Jack was the first to react. He started toward the door, then looked down at the man. He knelt down and turned him over. The man didn't move. Jack felt his pulse. He was alive; but the blood still seeped out of the corner of his mouth. A dark, ugly bruise was beginning to form on the right side of his jaw.

"Someone call a doctor!" Jack shouted. "Here, give me a dry towel and wet another one," he said to a waitress, who had watched the whole scene with her hand over her mouth. When she didn't move, Jack got the dry towel himself and put it behind the man's head so that it wasn't resting directly on the hard floor. A woman customer came over with a wet cloth and mopped the blood from the man's jaw. Several people headed out the door — without paying, Jack noticed. "People can be real sleaze balls," thought Jack. "The owner's just been beaten up, and some of these people use the situation as a way to get a free meal."

Several minutes later the wail of a siren announced the arrival of an ambulance. The still-unconscious man was taken out on a stretcher to the

ambulance. A few minutes later the police arrived. After Jack told them what had happened, one of the officers looked at the other. "The Heavyweights?" he asked his partner.

"Who else?" was the response.

"Who are the Heavyweights?" asked the woman who had helped Jack tend the injured store owner. Jack looked at her closely for the first time. She was very pretty, he thought: medium height, pale skin, and long, red hair worn over her shoulders. Her blue eyes showed genuine concern.

"M'am, I'm surprised you haven't heard of them. You from around here?"

"I live in Palo Alto — close to San Francisco," she replied.

"Well, maybe the Heavyweights haven't gotten out that far. But they will, believe me. They're a motorcycle gang that's been terrorizing all of Colorado, Utah, and Nevada for years now. No one is sure where their headquarters is. And no one has ever been able to arrest them even though we're sure they're responsible for several beatings, some robberies, vandalism, and maybe a few things even worse."

Jack thought back to the evening in the parking lot at Washington University. Those motorcycles....

"A few times police officers have tried to stop them. The officers got beaten up pretty badly for their trouble. No one knows what to do about them," said the first officer.

"Can't you have the store owner swear out a complaint and have them arrested? I'll certainly testify as a witness," said Jack.

"And so will I," added the woman.

"That's mighty public-spirited of you to offer," said the second officer. "But by the time the owner wakes up and swears out the complaint, the Heavyweights will be in Nevada. And if they ever find out that the man has

been making trouble for them, they'll be back. And the next time they may not be satisfied with smashing his jaw."

Just then, the radio on the police car called the officers away. Jack turned to the woman and said, "Sounds to me like the police are frightened of them, too."

The woman looked at Jack. For a moment she didn't respond.

"It's these blasted eyes again," thought Jack. To break the spell, he added, "Do you think the police will even bother trying to track them down?"

The woman responded this time. "Probably not. But it's a disgrace that a gang like that should be allowed to go around doing whatever they want to anyone who gets in their way."

Now it was Jack's turn to be struck silent. There was something about the way this woman talked that reminded him of music. Her voice had the rise and fall of a musical instrument. It was subtle — not everyone would catch it — but to those who could hear, there was a spell-binding quality to her speech.

This time she had to break the silence. "My name is Anabelle Bright." She put out her hand. Jack took it and replied, "Glad to meet you I'm Jack..." he smiled and corrected himself, "Jonathan Shade."

"Good to meet you — though I wish it had been under more pleasant circumstances," she said. "I have to be off. I must be back in Palo Alto by tomorrow night."

"You've got a long fast haul in front of you if you want to make it by then," Jack responded.

"You're right," she responded. Then there was a moment of awkward silence. "Well, good-bye," she said, walked to her red Mustang, started the engine, and sped off down the road.

Jack paid for his meal, got into the van, and drove off. "I blew it," he said to himself. "Why didn't I ask her for her address or phone number? She was obviously waiting for me to say something. Damn!" He pushed down the accelerator in vexation, and the van shot forward down the road, heading for Salt Lake City.

## *Chapter Seven: The Heavyweights*

Jack passed through Salt Lake City and on into Nevada the next morning. The day was bright and glaring. A constant taste of dust was in his mouth, even with the van's windows closed.

Jack was tired. He had been driving for over thirty hours. Just outside of Denver he had pulled the van over to the side of the road and napped for a couple of hours. His sleep was interrupted when a highway patrolman rapped on his window and told him to keep moving.

The long, boring Nevada highway seemed to stretch onward forever. As he came to a slight rise in the road, Jack could see the highway, straight as a ruled line, for miles and miles ahead. The bare landscape had nothing interesting to see except raw rocks and an occasional abandoned car. Jack's attention began to drift when he noticed, far down the road, a cluster of vehicles pulled off to the side.

"A wreck?" Jack wondered, and pushed down the accelerator.

Even at 80 miles an hour, it took Jack twelve long minutes to get to the scene. What he saw made his heart freeze.

There, pulled off to the side of the road, were a dozen or so motorcycles. They surrounded a red Mustang, whose driver could barely be seen, surrounded by leather-jacketed men and women. They all turned around as Jack's van hurtled into the scene, the van's tires spraying dirt and rocks as it halted.

In a flash, Jack sized the situation up. The red-headed woman, Anabelle Bright, was being harassed by the gang. Her clothes were torn, her face was scratched and bleeding, and she had the look of a hunted animal. In her right hand she clenched a screwdriver — a pathetic weapon to face this mob with! Still, one greasy-haired, lanky man showed a fresh gash on his right cheek. Ms. Bright was not going to be taken without a fight.

Jack flung open the door of the van, jumped out.... the thought, “Uh, oh. Now what, Jack Juggler?” In truth, he had no plan of action. When he saw the woman in trouble, he merely acted out of instinct. But that moment was over. How should he handle this situation?

In a flash, he knew.

Jack smiled at the motorcyclists, bowed, and began searching the ground for rocks. The gang growled at first; but Jack’s behavior was so bizarre that no one moved. They all just stood staring, waiting to see what this madman would do next.

Finally Jack had collected ten rocks. They were not perfectly round; but they all had a nice weight and feel. Jack closed his eyes.

“The jerk is nuts. Forget about him,” said one of the women in the group.

“Right. Rudy get on with it. Show the little lady how the heavyweights introduce themselves to a new girl.”

The man with the slashed cheek advanced warily on the girl again. She backed up, holding the screwdriver in front of her. Then in a flash, she found herself grabbed from behind and her arms pinioned by the strong grip of an enormous man.

The man with the slashed cheek relaxed. “Thanks, Vince. Now if you’ll just keep her locked up for a little bit, I’ll...”

The words were broken up by a cry of amazement.



“What the hell?”

“Look at that, would you?”

Jack’s eyes were open and he was tossing the ten rocks high into the air. Except for the two men attacking Anabelle Bright, the motorcyclists stood amazed at the spectacle of ten rocks flying high into the air, falling, and rising again. Even Anabelle seemed to forget her trouble and stare.

The cry of amazement changed in an instant to a series of howls of pain. As each rock landed <sup>in</sup> his palm, Jack flung it with hard, deadly accuracy at the crowd. Ten rocks, ten hits. The two who were quick enough to protect their faces with their hands found their knuckles and fingers smashed by the force of the rocks. The crowd surged backward.

Vince let Anabelle go and unwound the heavy chain draped over his shoulder. He stepped forward — but stopped when he saw that Jack had gathered up another load of rocks. Jack flung one — but Vince blocked it with a fistful of chain. He smiled a black-toothed smile.

“Now whatcha goin’ ta do, Rocky?” he asked, taking a step forward.

Jack didn’t hesitate. Using a shower pattern, he sent two streams of rocks rushing outward. The odd-numbered throws again hit the crowd, who howled in pain and anger as the sharp stone sailed into their chests, arms, and faces. The even numbered rocks clanged into the motorcycles themselves. Chips of paint flew from the gas tanks, and the motors pinged as the rocks crashed into them.

Jack stopped when he had two stones left. He carefully backed up, reached down to pick up more stones, but not taking his main attention from Vince. He let his green and brown eyes burrow into Vince’s gaze. “Leave! Now!” Jack thought at the big man.

Vince hesitated, like he had been hit by the force of a wind. But he shook his head, took three quick steps forward, and lashed out with the uncoiled chain.

Jack was concentrating so hard on sending his thoughts and picking up stones that Vince's action caught him off guard. He sprang back — but the end of the chain crashed against his ribs. Pain flared through him, and Jack stumbled backward, gasping for air. In a desperate motion as he fell backwards, Jack flung all the rocks at the big motorcyclist.

The aim was bad, and only two rocks bounded harmlessly off the man's leather jacket. He flinched briefly, then raised his arm for another blow.

But this time Jack was ready. He rolled to the side, sprang up, and seized two large, jagged stones, one in each hand. As Vince turned to face him, Jack let both stones go — the left hand stone aimed from over his head, the right hand flung upward from down low. Both were aimed directly at the head. Vince brought down his arm to ward off the rock coming from above; but the other rock crashed into his jaw — “At the same place he struck the truck stop owner,” Jack noted with satisfaction. The big man groaned, dropped the chain, and sank to his knees.

“Get in!” shouted Jack to Anabelle. He gestured toward his van, reaching down to pick up more stones as he backed toward the door. The gang, which had been watching the fight with fascination, now shouted in violent anger as it saw their leader down and the man who felled him trying to escape with the woman they were mugging.

Anabelle flung open the door and dived in. An instant later Jack was inside, furiously pumping the gas pedal and turning the ignition switch. As the engine roared to life the first gang member reached the door. He grasped the door handle, but Jack's elbow came crunching down on his hand. As the van shot

forward in a shower of dust, Jack heard the crash of glass — one of the gang had smashed his rear window. He heard other thumps and a loud clang as one of them struck the side of the van with something heavy. Jack saw that it was Vince, his face beet-red with fury, trying to smash the van with his chain.

The van took the road with a squeal of tires. Jack's van had a powerful engine, and it roared down the long road at full throttle.

Jack knew that he couldn't outrun the motorcycles, though. His best hope was to head for the nearest town. If the cycles tried to run him off the road, he could swerve and bash them if he had to.

Jack turned and looked at his passenger. Anabelle's face was streaked with dirt and sweat. Her clothes were torn and filthy. The back of her left hand and her neck were cut and bleeding. "You all right — I mean, are you going to live?" asked Jack.

Anabelle said nothing. She only nodded. "My Mustang..."

"Forget the car," shouted Jack, "Unless you want me to turn around and go back to ask that herd of gorillas if they'd please wax and polish your Mustang first."

Anabelle put her face in her hands. "You're right. I'm sorry. And thank you. You saved my life back there."

"I haven't saved it yet," said Jack. Looking into his rear-view mirror, Jack saw the motorcycles coming onto the highway back down the road. "They're coming after us."

Just then, the van raced over the top of a small rise in the road. Jack looked — and almost shouted for joy. There, just ahead, was a small town. There was a gas station, a general store, and a few houses.

Jack thought fast. "This may be a town, but it's no place to hide or get help. If we stop here, that gang will be all over us in minutes."

He looked at the houses — a sorry, run-down looking bunch. But one of them, Jack saw, had a garage. He turned the wheel, raced across two front lawns, whipped the wheel to the left, and ducked into the garage of the last house in town. He jumped out, reached up for the piece of rope, and pulled the door shut.

Just then he heard the roar of twelve motorcycles as they thundered into the town.

"If they saw us pull in here, it's all over," Jack said, turning to Anabelle. She was still suffering from the fright of bouncing across the lawn and zooming into the garage. Her left hand was still in front of her mouth. Finally she took it down and said, "You're a madman behind that wheel."

"You're right," said Jack. "I didn't use my turn signal. Now quiet. Listen."

Outside, the booming racket of motorcycle engines filled the air. From the sound, Jack and Anabelle could tell that the gang was cruising slowly through the town, looking for signs of their van.

Just then, Jack heard a voice.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing in our garage, Mister?"

Jack turned. In front of the van stood an old woman, her red hands carrying a shotgun.

"We..." Jack began.

Anabelle put her hand on Jack's arm. "Let me handle this," she whispered to him. To the woman she said, "Do you hear those motorcycles out there?"

"Can't miss 'em," said the woman, still pointing the shotgun at Jack. "That still don't answer my question. What the hell you doing in my garage?"

"That gang is chasing us," said Anabelle. "We came in here to..."

The woman interrupted in an angry voice. "I don't care who they are or who you are. You get out of my garage this minute or I'll blow you away."

She cocked the gun.

"All right," said Jack, slowly getting out of the van. "We're leaving."

The woman waved the gun again. "Just where do ya think yer goin'?"

Jack stopped and smiled. "Why, to open the garage door. Unless you want me to back out and take the door with me."

The woman snorted. "All right, wise guy. Open it up. No tricks now. This ain't no toy I've got here."

Jack could still hear the cycles outside. He had to stall for time. "Say," he said, "I don't suppose you'd like to rent us this garage for a while?"

The woman was unmoved. "Not on your life, sonny. Now get going."

"How about a dollar a minute? That's pretty good rent."

The woman hesitated. Then she heard the growl of the motorcycles as they moved down the street. "Not worth it, sonny. If those hellraisers found you in here, they'd smash me up too. Now get going."

Jack had to admit she had a point. The gang would not be too friendly toward someone who had tried to hide the man who had just flattened their leader and rode away with an intended victim. But he needed more time.

"Fair enough," said Jack. "But let me give you a little something for the use we've already made of your garage. Would five dollars be enough?"

The woman's greed was tickled again. "For the fright you give me, you ought to make it twenty."

Jack slowly reached into his pants for his wallet. "How about ten dollars?" He said, and slowly counted out a five and five ones. He started to hand it to her, but she shook the shotgun at him again.

"Just put it on the shelf there, sonny. Good. Now open that door and get out. Now!"

Jack walked slowly to the door. The motorcycles were still out there; but there was an impatience in the way the riders were gunning their engines. Jack heard one voice cry out, "They ain't here Vince. They must've hammered on down the road. Let's go. We can catch 'em if we hurry." There was some talk that Jack couldn't hear.

"Quit stalling and open that door!" shouted the woman. X

Jack took the rope and slowly pulled. The door raised up. Jack caught sight of the motorcycles speeding out of town and down the road at full throttle. He breathed a sign of relief. *-the motor*

Jack climbed back into the van, started and slowly began to back out. He didn't want to hurry. If one of the cyclists caught sight of him in a rear-view mirror, they would be back in a flash. As the van was halfway out of the garage, Jack leaned out the window and asked the woman, "Can you tell us how far it is to San Francisco?"

The woman still had her shotgun trained on Jack. "San Francisco? How the hell should I know? I ain't even been to Reno in twenty years. Get going!"

"Friendly people here," said Anabelle as Jack backed into the street.

"We can't really blame her," Jack answered. "What would you think if two people suddenly drove into your garage, shut the door, and waited for a gang of motorcyclists to drive by?"

"I see your point," Anabelle replied, raising her eyebrows. "Well, what now?"

"Now I think we can go back and get your car. Why did you pull over to the side of the road back there?"

Anabelle looked worried. "The engine just died. I tried and tried to start it again, but it wouldn't turn over."

*\* Wouldn't she  
be surprised if the  
Said Jack in her  
Garage - might hear of  
her plan.*

Jack smiled at Anabelle. Even in her frazzled and frightened condition, Jack liked looking at her. "Let's go see what we can do," he said, and headed back down the road to Anabelle Bright's abandoned Mustang.

## *Chapter Eight: Return to San Francisco*

The problem turned out to be nothing more serious than a leaky hose. The radiator had lost its water, so the engine overheated and died.

"Can it be fixed?" Anabelle asked anxiously.

"No problem," Jack replied. He went to the back of his van, opened the door, and pulled out a tool chest. He took out a roll of tape and a small knife. It was only a matter of moments before the hose leak was repaired.

"But the radiator is empty now," Anabelle said. "Won't the engine burn up if I try to drive it this way?"

Jack raised his index finger. "The well equipped van, Ms. Bright, always has water."

Anabelle smiled a pleased smile. "So you remember my name?"

"Sure," Jack replied as they walked to the back of the van. Before he opened the door, he said, "But I bet you don't remember mine."

"Of course I do," she said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "It's Jack — I mean *Jonathan* Shade."

They both laughed. "The Jack is a name that I've just taken," he said. "Or, more precisely, it's a name that's just been given to me. So I'm not used to using it yet."

Anabelle looked interested. "Who gave you the name?"

Suddenly Jack felt cautious. "It's a long story, Anabelle. It has to do with a kind of new profession for me."



“What do you do?” she persisted.

Jack opened the van door and swept his arm downward in an invitation for Anabelle to enter. “If we’re going to exchange life stories,” he said, “let’s get out of the Nevada heat.”

As Anabelle climbed into the back of the van, she let out a whistle. “My goodness, this is plush. Do you live here?”

“Only when I’m traveling,” he replied. “I’ve been in Saint Louis for the past few days, and I’ve been sleeping and eating in here while I went to the festival.”

“What kind of festival?” Anabelle asked.

“Juggling,” Jack replied. “You asked me earlier what I do. Well, for a living I’m a computer programmer. But my real passion is juggling.”

“Are you good?” she asked with a smile.

“Now how can I answer that?” he replied, reaching into the refrigerator for the water container.

“You’re good,” she announced decisively. “I saw that trick you pulled on the motorcycle gang. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anybody able to keep so many things in the air at one time.”

“That’s the first time I’ve ever used my skill to help someone out,” he said. “It felt good.”

“Do you ever perform in public?” Anabelle asked.

“Never,” came the reply. “Well, almost never. I took the stage for the first time in Saint Louis at the festival. But wait a minute. Time for me to ask the questions. What do you do, and why do you do it?”

Anabelle laughed. She was sitting on one of the benches at the back of the van. She had smoothed her hair and dusted off her skirt. She still looked like

she had been through a fight. But Jack thought she looked more attractive than ever.

But it wasn't her looks that intrigued him most. It was her voice. That same musical quality that he had noticed when they were back at the truck stop continued to fascinate him. "If I were a movie director," he thought, "I would cast her as a wood elf. She's got the looks, and she's especially got the voice for it."

"You're not going to believe it, but I'm a programmer, too. And, like you, my main passion is somewhere else. I play the flute. I've spent the last three days at a flute convention in Denver."

Impulsively, Jack exclaimed, "With a voice like yours, why on earth do you want to play an instrument?"

Anabelle smiled and brushed back her hair. "That's sweet of you to say. But I can't carry a tune with my voice. The flute lets me sing."

Jack thought about that. "I think I understand," he said finally. "Listen, Anabelle, I'd love to sit here all afternoon and exchange stories. But I have the feeling we should get going. It's late, and we shouldn't be out here in case the Heavyweights decide to come back looking for us."

Jack and Anabelle took the water and poured it into the Mustang's dry radiator. She got in and started the car.

"Great!" she exclaimed. "I'm on my way."

"You'd better stop in town and get some more water," Jack suggested. "Do you want me to come along?"

"Thanks very much, but I think I can handle it from here," she said. Then <sup>+</sup> added, with a wink, "A woman shouldn't depend on a man too much."

Jack took out his billfold, extracted a card, and handed it to her. "You never can tell when you might need a juggler, though," he said. "Here's my address

and phone number. Call me if you feel the urge."

Anabelle put the card in her purse. "I'd give you mine," she said, "but I'm in the process of moving right now. Maybe we'll see each other again though." She started to drive off, then stopped. "Oh, Jack, I almost forgot. Would you come over here for a minute?"

Jack walked over to the Mustang.

"What do you think of this?" she asked, pointing to something on the dashboard. Jack leaned down to look in. He found his head suddenly and gently seized by Anabelle, who kissed him full on the lips. "Thank you, Jack, thank you for all you've done for me. I'll always be grateful." She rolled up the window and sped off down the highway.

Jack stood by the highway in amazement for several seconds.

"Wow!" he said to himself.

Several minutes later, as he sped through the town where they had so recently escaped from the motorcycle gang, Jack waved to Anabelle, who was filling her radiator at the service station. For an instant Jack considered pulling over and talking to her again. But he decided against it.

"Patience," he thought. "Go slowly and don't drop the ball."

\* \* \*

The rest of the drive back to San Francisco was uneventful. Jack was tired, but grateful to be home when he pulled up in front of his small Victorian house in the Noe Valley district. He parked the van in the driveway, took out his keys, and opened the front door.

He froze.

There, on the table in the hallway, was a package.

He had certainly not put the package there. But the door was locked, and no one else had the key to his place. He picked up the large cardboard box. There were no postage stamps, and no return address. In neat script on the front of the box were the words:

## Jack Juggler

### Do not open before 9 o'clock p.m.

Jack looked at his watch: 6:30. Was this some kind of joke? Who?...

But in an instant he knew.

"Doctor Smith. The Gravity Wizard. It has to be! But why not open it before 9 o'clock?" Jack wondered to himself. He was tempted to open the package right then. But his better judgement told him to wait. So he went back to the van and unloaded his things, and put them away in the house. Then he <sup>heated</sup> took out some ~~of his~~ chili from the refrigerator, made salad, and ate dinner.

As he washed and put away the dishes, he looked at the clock.

7:45. An hour and fifteen minutes to wait. <sup>fresh</sup>

Jack went back to the van and brought out the ~~ten~~ crystal balls and placed them in a neat stack on the table in his living room. Beside them he placed the unopened box. He sat down in his favorite chair, shut his eyes, and traveled to the redwood grove

It was twilight in the grove. The sun sent no beams lancing through the redwood needles. The pond beside the cottage was dark, almost black green, shiny as a polished mirror. He went inside the cottage. Two sets of candles flickered in their holders mounted on opposite walls. He looked down. There,

in front of him, was a redwood burl table. On the table were <sup>trick</sup>ten twins to his crystal balls. And there beside the balls was the twin of the mysterious package.

"Would it be cheating to open this package?" he mused.

He reached for the package — but instead picked up three of the crystal balls. In the world of the redwood grove, they seemed lighter, clearer, and less real than in the world of open eyes. He held them in a triangle in the palm of his right hand. With a waving motion of his fingers, moving from the little finger to his forefinger, he sent the spheres rotating in a circle across the surface of his palm. Another wave, and the circling continued. Jack had done a little of this sort of juggling before — *palm juggling*, it was called — but the balls he normally used weren't smooth enough to allow a gliding motion around his palm. He stopped the balls, then reversed the motion. At first, it was more difficult going "backward"; but with the heightened <sup>power of</sup> concentration powers he possessed in the redwood grove of the minds, he soon had them spinning equally well in both directions.

"This is fun!" he thought, and picked up three more crystal balls, put them into his palm, and began to rotate them. In a few moments, he was as proficient with his right palm as with his left.

"I've always wanted to master this trick!" he said to himself, and started rolling three balls in the right hand and three in the left at the same time.

There was a bright purple flash. The room disappeared, and suddenly he felt as though he were suspended in a rich purple mist that swirled all around him. Jack was so startled, he stopped spinning the balls.

The cottage room reappeared. There were the candles, the package, the dark brown burlwood table.

He spun the balls again just as before. The room vanished again, and the purple mist instantly began flowing around him.

"You'd better stop that until you know where you're going," said a gentle voice.

Jack opened his eyes. There, before him, stood the figure of Doctor Smith — the Gravity Wizard.

"Or, to put it more precisely, until you know when you're going. You spun yourself forward by almost an hour just then."

Jack at first was too astonished to reply. Then the questions flooded out.

"How did you get in here? Where was I? What's happening to me? How..."

The man, now dressed in a grey suit with a white tie, held up his hand for silence. "All in good time, Master Juggler. First, it is now nine o'clock. Would you please be so kind as to open the package?"

Jack started to insist on some answers. But something in the other man's manner made him stop, then reach forward for the box.

In an instant it was open. Jack held his breath as he slowly extracted its contents.

Now lying on the table in front of him were nine swords. They were short — no more than thirty inches long — but were obviously fashioned by master craftsmen. The hilts were gold, with a single round red stone on the pommel. The blades at first seemed silver; but the closer Jack looked, the more they seemed to be made from light blue ice. One of the swords had writing on the blade. The writing was in a script Jack couldn't decipher.

Jack picked up one of the magnificent swords and held it up to the low light of his living room. It felt perfectly balanced in his grip. He touched the blade. It was more than razor sharp. The handle seemed to shape itself to his grip. The weapon seemed to be feeding him power.

Doctor Smith reached over and gently removed the sword from Jack's hand, then laid the weapon on the table.

"Take the rest of the contents out of the box, Jack," he said.

Jack reached in. One by one, he took out a set of sixteen juggling rings. Like the swords, they were perfectly balanced, and felt as though they were made for his personal grip. <sup>on</sup> The surface of each ring was a holographic rainbow that flashed and shifted whenever it moved. Jack stared at them, selected one, then tossed it into the air. The rainbow seemed to glow out some <sup>several inches</sup> inches away from the ring. Jack also thought he heard a low humming sound <sup>beginning</sup> come from the prop ring. <sup>the ring</sup>

Doctor Smith's hand reached out and caught the ring.

"Yes, they do look beautiful, Jack. And you would not believe me if I told you where they came from, or how old they are. They are indeed beautiful. But their beauty is very little compared to their true powers."

Jack tore his gaze away from the swords and rings, and looked into Doctor Smith's eyes.

"Their powers?" he asked.

The other man nodded. "Are you ready for your second lesson, Jack Juggler?"

*THE END*

This Concludes *The Origin Of Jack Juggler*

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