

3 • The Apprentice Juggler

There was a juggler in Great Park, the land of the King, who wanted to perform with the Juggling Master's troupe more than anything else in the whole world. But he had something terrible hidden in his heart, a secret he had shared with no one...

The Apprentice Juggler was sure he would shame the troupe in tonight's performance. He knew he would drop a baton during the pyramid cascade. Then the Juggling Master would know his secret, and he would lose his place in the juggling group. A knot in the pit of his stomach felt like a tug-of-war between giants.

Standing in the middle of the practice field, the Apprentice Juggler warmed his hands in a patch of morning sunlight. He loosened his fingers with limbering exercises. He started tossing balls in a basic crisscross pattern.

The Apprentice Juggler concentrated. He could hear the words of Juggling Master's first lesson. "Teach the balls to dance. The word *ball* is from the French. It means to dance. Make the balls dance!"

The balls did dance in the Apprentice Juggler's hands. As long as he worked alone, he did fine. In this last year as an apprentice, he had learned to toss rings, batons, clubs, and eggs (even unboiled ones). He could spin plates on sticks. He could balance umbrellas on his forehead and shoulders and hands—all at the same time.

He put three balls in motion. *Throw * Throwcatch * Catch; Throw * Throwcatch * Catch.*

No one knew he was battling his inner count. No one knew

that a different rhythm was ticking in his heart than in his hands.

It was only when the Apprentice Juggler worked with the other student jugglers, or when he did a routine with the troupe, that things went wrong.

He tripped.

He dropped batons.

The others thought this was because he was new at juggling. But the young man knew his inner count was just plain different. He didn't want anyone to know his secret, especially the Juggling Master. To work with the troupe was the glorious goal of every apprentice.

The balls danced in the Apprentice Juggler's hands. He switched to the two-in-one-hand. He practiced showers.

He picked up two clubs. He tested their weight in each hand. He tossed one—high. It turned twice in the air—a double. He started a third club with an outside foot kick up. It turned twice in the air. Soon, even the clubs were dancing.

He guarded himself against his inner rhythm.

One of the other fellows was juggling clubs. He moved closer to the Apprentice Juggler and started passing. Six clubs now looped into the air. The young men timed out loud. "Pass, Self, Self. Pass, Self, Self. Pass, Self, Self, Pass."

So far, so good, thought the Apprentice Juggler. If only he could count out loud as he was now. But every juggler knew that was the sign of an amateur.

"Very good! Very good!" shouted the Juggling Master. "Excellent work this morning! And I have wonderful news. The King will be present at tonight's Great Celebration. We will be

performing for him!”

The whole troupe cheered, but the Apprentice Juggler’s heart fell to the pit of his stomach, where the tug-of-war was raging. He had juggled at Great Celebrations before, with the other students. Tonight he was supposed to solo, then appear with the troupe in the finale.

What if he failed before the King? It would serve him right for keeping this hidden thing to himself. All he had ever dreamed of was seeing the King smile in pleasure at his juggling. He had even imagined the King walking over to him and saying, “Well, done, young man. You have a special gift.”

The Juggling Master’s voice interrupted his thoughts. “Let’s practice the finale!”

The troupe moved into position for the pyramid cascade. Four jugglers stood in a row. A signal was shouted, “Hup!” All counted inwardly, *One, two, UP!* Three jugglers hopped on the shoulders of the first four.

The signal again, “Hup!” *One, two, three, UP!* A hand grasp, a scramble, a hop. The two apprentices climbed to the very peak.

The clubs began looping upwards, turning and spinning up the pyramid. Eight came from the bottom. Six passed from the middle. The apprentice turned the rising clubs back down toward the outside men. It was quick work, but simple—as long as the count was kept.

The Apprentice Juggler knew that all nine members of the troupe were timing inwardly: *Throw * Throwcatch * Catch; Throw * Throwcatch * Catch.*

With horror, he realized his count was off again. He had been silently timing: *Throw * Throwcatch * Throw!* He caught himself, and changed his pace—but it was a loud danger signal.

Should he tell the Juggling Master? But how could he bear

to have his place taken from him and given to another? What would happen if he followed his inner count? What disaster would befall him?

With sagging shoulders, the Apprentice Juggler walked home from the practice field. Later, with lagging feet, he made his way to the huge clearing in Deepest Forest. Here the Great Celebration always took place, surrounded by the circle of Sacred Flames.

The subjects of the King were beginning to gather in Inmost Circle. The Sacred Flames had been lit, and they flickered and danced in a huge ring. Rangers in their dark-blue cloaks stood posted around the flames. The music of celebration had begun.

The Apprentice Juggler watched as celebrants walked through the gateway of flame into Inmost Circle: “making entrance,” the ceremony was called. He saw each one become real as he or she did so, for the Sacred Flames showed persons not as they seemed, but as they truly were. All disguises were gone.

The laughter and the music and the joy within the flames called to the Apprentice Juggler. But he held himself back. How could he make entrance with this hidden thing in his heart? Wouldn’t his secret be revealed when he became real?

The funny old Caretaker walked through the flames. His form dimmed for a moment in the bright light. Then he made entrance. He became tall, straight, broad-shouldered, wearing the dark-blue cloak and silver clasp of a Ranger. Caretaker was not what he seemed. He had become Ranger Commander, chief protector of the park and intimate adviser to the King himself.

The Apprentice Juggler squirmed. He remembered how Caretaker had found him—as a young child, hungry and abandoned—and taken him to Mercie, who had loved and