

The Juggler

Sophie Bonifaz

Summary: A poor young juggler named Basco is doing everything in his power to take care of his family and himself, and dreams of earning more in order to help his friends and his city. One stormy evening, a new opportunity arises, one that could give him all the power he could ever want, but only if he agrees to work for the organization responsible for killing his parents. Which path to power will he pursue, and are they each what they seem to be?

A drop of water hit Basco in the eye, and he nearly dropped a steak knife.

Chianti yelped as his Basco's balance wavered, and her hands gripped his ankles tight, pushing his shoes into her shoulders. He heard her mutter darkly beneath him, and he didn't have to hear her words to know what she was saying. He couldn't blame her. She was placing a lot of trust in him after all; he was the one standing on her juggling five knives with his face turned towards the sky.

The pair was on a median in the middle of a busy street. Their third, Loran, walked among the idle cars at a traffic light, collecting money in an old orange suede hat. It was a dangerous routine, but one that drew in a lot of money for the seventeen year olds. They hadn't made much all day thanks to the intermittent rain, and they were growing desperate.

"Fifteen dollars," Loran called, running over just as Basco was catching his knives. Blond waves fell over his bright blue eyes as he peered into the hat. "That makes sixty so far. We gonna try another light?"

"Maybe one more," said Basco, moving his knives to one hand to push his dark hair out of his face. "It's gonna rain again soon. And my knives are getting wet."

"Is that why you almost dropped one?" Chianti asked.

Basco's dark eyes widened in surprise. "You noticed that?"

Chianti loosened her hold on Basco and he jumped down easily. "You nearly fell off my shoulders, *menso*," she said with mock severity, slapping his shoulder with the back of her hand. A fat raindrop fell on her arm, and as she examined it, more fell, signaling the start of another storm.

"*Pinche* rain," Chianti cursed, glaring up at the sky. "Guess there's no more shows tonight. Split it, Loran."

"I'll stay out longer," said Basco, watching Loran's quick fingers divide the money evenly.

"You don't wanna cut your finger off," Chianti warned as she pocketed her share. "And how're you gonna collect money by yourself?"

"I've done it before," said Basco. "I'll be okay."

Chianti looked at Basco, tugging doubtfully at her long dark braid. Loran pulled at her arm as he smashed his hat on his head. "C'mon, Basco'll be fine. We got enough to buy stuff at the store, so they can't kick us out while we wait the rain out."

"Listen to Loran, you know he's the smartest." Basco gave Chianti an encouraging smile, and she finally relented, allowing Loran to lead her across the median. Basco watched as they waited for a break in traffic before crossing the street towards a line of concrete buildings with doors and windows cut into them. Loran's pale hair and face stood out nearly as much as Chianti's bright teal dress in the growing gloom.

Basco wrapped his knives in an old shirt before stowing them in his backpack. He knew a good intersection that was always busy, even in the rain. It was in a touristy part of New Leon, which meant lots of people tipped there, even if they didn't give much.

The buildings grew taller and newer as he got closer to his spot, fewer concrete walls and more made of brick or steel or stone. The lights got brighter, the clothes got weirder, and the crowds thicker. Here, you could walk into someone from anywhere you could imagine.

It was pouring rain by the time Basco got set up at his chosen intersection, and everyone who might have stuck around to watch had ducked into shops and restaurants. Still, Basco threw up his knives just as the light turned red.

Fifteen minutes passed before someone finally gave him one dollar, but Basco kept going, never missing a beat, never fumbling a knife. If there was anything he prided himself upon, it was never dropping something he was juggling.

He considered giving up and going home, but remembering that he only had nine dollars to go before he could buy his great-aunt Marya's medication rooted him to the spot. He would stop when he got to forty dollars, he told himself. The thought made his stomach turn; forty dollars wouldn't be enough to buy any food for his great-aunt Marya and his little brother Dante for tomorrow, but he still needed time that night to do his homework and cook. Basco couldn't afford to fail; he wouldn't be allowed to apply for internships if he did.

Maybe if he gave them his share of dinner, he thought, it'd last them the whole following day. Basco himself would have to go without much to eat until he got more money juggling after

school, but as long as it didn't rain, that was doable. It wouldn't be the first time he spent the day hungry.

Twenty minutes later, he had thirty-five dollars in his pocket, and it was raining harder than ever. Only one or two cars stopped at any given light, and few wanted to open their windows and get soaked to help him. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled, but Basco kept juggling, his jaw clenched and his throat tight.

He only needed five dollars. Just five dollars.

An expensive black car stopped beside him and rolled its passenger window down.

"Get in."

Basco caught his knives as he strained to look into the window. The darkness inside seemed to swallow the light. He couldn't even make out an outline.

"Why?" he finally asked.

The driver's side window rolled down next, and hand wielding a gun bled out of the darkness. Basco froze.

"I'll give you those last five dollars, Basco," the voice promised. It sounded like a woman's voice. "I'll even leave you at the pharmacy. Just get. In."

Basco's heart pounded painfully as his eyes went from the gun to the dark void where the woman's voice came from. He might be able to run fast enough to keep from getting shot, but she knew how much money he had and where he had to go next. How did she know that? What else did she know about him?

"Your address is 82 Luz Drive," the woman said, as if reading his mind. "Dante's going to worry if you don't get home soon."

Basco knew he had no choice, then, and packed his things. Closing the door behind him, he turned towards the mysterious woman. The frail light coming in through the tinted windows gave him nothing but her silhouette.

"What d'you want with me?" he asked gruffly as the car moved forward. He hugged his backpack to his chest and scowled out the window, his clothes sticking uncomfortably to his skin.

"Basco Fernandez," she said, and for the first time, Basco noticed she had the same accent he did. She was from New Leon, too. "Seventeen. Graduating in three months and already applying for internships in the mayor's office, even though you're too young. Your parents died two years ago

in a fire. You live with your great-aunt Marya, who has arthritis, diabetes, and suffered a stroke in June. Your little brother Dante is ten years old, and likes cars, especially red ones."

A chill went through Basco that had nothing to do with the rain. Despite knowing all he'd see was darkness, he couldn't help but turn his gaze back to her.

"I am Doña Ochoa," said the woman. She lit a cigarette, the tiny flame giving Basco a brief glimpse of her face. Shadows rested on her cheekbones and forehead, sculpting her into a marble statue. "I'm sure you've heard of me."

"You lead the Agiad Dynasty," Basco said faintly. "They run the city."

"Very good," said Doña Ochoa, and drew a breath from her cigarette. "What else do you know?"

"The Agiad Dynasty controls almost everything going in and out of the city, especially drugs and alcohol. The state and federal government doesn't want to touch you. The only power that ever stands against you is the mayor's office." Basco's grip on his backpack tightened as hot anger boiled up inside of him. "And you burn down anything that stands in their way."

"One last thing." She blew smoke out into the car cabin, the smell dark and sweet. "What else do they call me?"

Basco licked his lips. "The Juggler."

"Excellent." A light switched on, and Basco blinked, temporarily blinded. A tan woman with perfectly painted red lips studied him, smiling. Her suit alone was worth his house, he was sure of it. With his old, soaked clothes; dirty backpack; and uncut hair, Basco felt poorer than he ever had in his life.

"What do you want with me?" he asked, hoping to sound demanding. Instead, his voice sounded as small as he felt.

Doña Ochoa gave Basco an amused look. "Plucky, no? What do you think, Manuelo?"

The driver grunted.

"I knew you were a good choice," said Doña Ochoa serenely.

"Choice?" Basco repeated, his palms beginning to sweat. "For what?"

"Basco - of course I can call you Basco, we're among friends - I have been watching you for quite some time. Do you know why they call me the Juggler?"

She sure liked to ask questions, Basco thought. "Because you can handle everything at once."

"Yes," she said, taking another drag of her cigarette and exhaling. Basco smothered a cough. "But did you know I also like to juggle?"

Basco's eyebrows shot up.

"I'm very good, but I hear you're the best juggler in town," she said. "Do you think this is true?"

"I gotta be," Basco said before he could stop himself.

This time Doña Ochoa's eyebrows were the ones that were raised. "And why is that?"

"If I'm not, we don't eat."

There was a silence during which Basco was convinced he'd just signed his own death warrant. He jumped when the silence was punctured not by a gunshot, but by laughter.

"Ay, you're much funnier than Manuelo!" Doña Ochoa wiped an invisible tear from her eye. "Well, I'm not sure you're better than I am, but you're definitely better than the idiots that work for me. *Pendejos*."

"What did you choose me for?" Basco asked again. "For a juggling contest?"

"Forget about that internship at the mayor's office," Doña Ochoa said seriously, snapping out of her good humor. "Come work for me instead."

Basco's mouth fell open like a fish. Work for her? For the Agiad Dynasty? The question shot a flare of fury into his chest, and he rounded on her.

"*You're a murderer!*" he snarled, forgetting the danger he was in. "*You're* the reason my parents are dead, and why our shop is gone!"

"That was unfortunate," Doña Ochoa said, tapping cigarette ashes into a tray built into the door. "They should have just given me the food I requested. It was for a good cause. Instead they tried to hire a hitman against me, and my bodyguard at the time took it too far. He can no longer cause such problems."

"You just wanted it for your gangs," Basco spat, his face contorting in fury. "And my parents would never do that, so don't you dare - "

It only took a sharp quirk of her brow to shut Basco up. "I wanted it for Los Reyes," she said, voice cool. "Surely you've heard of it. It's only the biggest homeless shelter in the city. Chianti lives there right now, doesn't she? And Loran lived there, too, last year."

Basco glared at Doña Ochoa, struggling to keep his temper in check. He couldn't afford to piss her off when she knew so much about everyone he loved.

"Who do you think made sure you found Marya, hm? It wasn't the social worker." Doña Ochoa sighed, leaning back into her seat. "The problem with people is they don't understand how the city works. You think you can make a change by working for the mayor. You're wrong."

"Mayor Gamoia is a good man, not corrupt like you!" Basco was unable to control how loud his voice was growing. "He would never - "

"Gamoia is mine. Here," she said, pulling out a cell phone. "Let me show you."

She pressed a button and the phone rang. A moment later, a voice Basco knew from the news came out of the speaker.

"Doña Ochoa!" sang the mayor. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"The empanada place you suggested was shit," said Doña Ochoa, her voice teasing. "You need to learn what empanadas should actually taste like."

"I'm sorry! Shall I send a health inspector to shut it down?"

"No, no. No need for that," Doña Ochoa assured him. "But next time, make sure a place is actually good before you send me there to spend money. I don't want to pay to eat trash when I can get that for free off the street."

"I'll find you a better place, I promise!" Gamoia simpered, so desperate to please it made Basco sick.

"Thank you, Mayor Gamoia, I'll talk to you later." She hung up on him without waiting for his response and turned to Basco with a smirk. "Be my protégé. Either way you'll be doing what I say, so might as well skip the middle man."

Basco tuned her out, eyes as lost as his thoughts. He had looked up to Mayor Gamoia, idolized him: Gamoia had been poor, too, barely making enough as a bus boy to pay for his siblings' education. In the end, he had won his position fair and square in a world filled with dirty games, and was fighting to clean up the streets for future generations. Or, at least, Basco had thought so. Now he wondered if Mayor Gamoia was really just a poor kid desperate for money and power who had won the jackpot and would do anything to keep it.

"Basco," said Doña Ochoa briskly. "Do you remember how last year, Gamoia passed legislation that cut school tuition in half for the poor?"

Basco nodded numbly.

"I paid for that," she said. "I bribed everyone into passing it. Because those crooks known as politicians are worse than any hitman I've ever hired."

Basco stared out the tinted window.

"Did you know every city in the region ran out of vaccines last winter because the state government couldn't pay for them? Who do you think smuggled them into New Leon? People complained about the high prices, but no one noticed that there were people coming in from miles away because you couldn't get them anywhere else."

"Why..." Basco began, struggling to keep up, "why're you telling me this?"

Doña Ochoa gave him a sad smile. "I've been an orphan since I was ten. The Don before me was orphaned at eleven, and the Doña before him at fifteen. I could go back further. All of us survived by juggling on the streets for cash. The Agiad Dynasty is a dynasty of poor orphans, Basco, who choose each other because only the vulnerable know what the most vulnerable of people need. And all of us were expert jugglers, because we prided ourselves on never dropping a thing. The crime is just part of the show, because who better to control crime than the people who hate it most?"

She locked eyes with Basco, and he found he couldn't look away. Her eyes were the same shade of brown as his.

"You are the best juggler in the city after me," she said quietly. "In every sense of the word. You want to make a difference? I'm giving you the chance. But you only get one."

The car had stopped outside of the pharmacy. The rain had stopped, and Basco could see through the window the shelf where his great-aunt's medication sat waiting for him. He had enough to pay for a week's worth. It was still only one of the many, many medicines she needed.

"It's eight," Manuelo announced from the driver's seat.

Dante would be wondering where he was. He must be hungry; he was still too afraid of fire to use the stove by himself. Basco needed to get home. But more than that, he needed someone to tell him if this was the right thing to do. He needed money, and power, and the ability to help the people he loved. He had none of that.

"Time to make a decision, Basco."

Yet.

Basco turned back to Doña Ochoa. "When do we start?"