

## The Cereal Box Prize

“You assembled a team using a cereal box contest?”

“You sound surprised?” Bryant said. “I had to recruit somehow and it’s not like we could go to the local high school.”

“But...” Claire struggled for the right words, “you think a bunch of teenagers who solved a cipher you printed on the back of a box of cereal can do this?”

“Maybe,” Bryant adjusted his glasses, “we had nothing to lose.”

“Besides the cost of getting them here...” Claire sighed. The mansion had been busy all morning as Bryant and Claire had arranged for the company and made sure to hide any evidence of the Order’s other activities. Alexandra, the housekeeper, had helped them at first, but Bryant had given her the rest of the day off to escort the contest winners when they arrived.

“You were the one who suggested we recruit nationwide.”

“I didn’t mean make it a contest!”

Bryant couldn’t help but smile at Claire’s flustering. Even after all the time they’d spent working together—and twenty years of marriage—he still couldn’t help but feel excited when he caught her off guard. The Order had not been without its recent struggles, but Bryant was sure that this would change things. “Have you met them yet?”

“No, but I did have to make their travel arrangements. New York, Michigan, Kentucky, Oregon...you might as well have thrown a dart at a map of the US and told me to get them together from there.”

“That was an option,” Bryant said. “Care to join me?”

“I’d hate to miss watching you try to connect with the kids.”

“I can be ‘hip’ when the situation calls for it!”

“That!” Claire laughed. “That’s what I don’t want to miss!”

Bryant opened the door to the study where he’d instructed Alexandra to lead the teens when they had started to filter in. The crew was certainly ‘motley’ if Bryant had to put a word to it. A blonde girl was sitting on the couch, looking up from her phone anxiously as Bryant walked into the study. A boy with curly, dark hair was standing by a bookcase, looking over the titles and pausing his conversation with another teen with short brown hair. The last girl had long, black hair in a braid down her shoulder. Taking a deep breath, Bryant clasped his hands together and smiled.

“Welcome! Welcome, everyone! You can’t imagine how excited I am that you’re all here.”

“What’s this all about?” The blonde girl asked. “What is this place?”

“Curious,” Bryant considered. “Bold and brave...I’m guessing that makes you Abigail Grant? Well, Abigail, we represent the Order of the Rose and Stone. The four of you are here because you are the best.”

“The best at what?” The boy with curly hair asked. “I solved a puzzle on a cereal box and mailed it in for a ‘prize’. Next thing I know, I got a ticket to the middle of nowhere to this fancy house with nothing but the promise of a prize at the end.”

“Winston Barret!” Bryant pointed with a nod. “Am I right? The intellectual sort and a natural problem solver from what I’ve heard.”

“You seem to know a lot more than what I put on the application.”

“Jace Keyes, we at the Order know more than you think. We wanted to be sure you were truly qualified and who you said you were. The cipher puzzle was kind of an...application of sorts. Think of this as your interview.”

“So, you’re offering us a job?” The last girl asked.

“Not quite, Hannah Ona. The Order of the Rose and Stone is offering you membership into our exclusive ranks.”

“You’re still not telling us what this is all about,” Winston said.

“Simply put? We need code breakers. Puzzle solvers and those who think outside of the box.”

“Are you sure?” Hannah scoffed. “I think you made a mistake with Malibu Barbie...”

“Hey, Wednesday Adams?” Abigail glared over her shoulder. “I got a 4.0 and I’m in advanced college placement classes. And I solved the same cipher you did.”

“What’s the point of the Order?” Jace asked, folding their arms. “Is this like an Illuminati kinda thing?”

“Not exactly,” Claire said. “The Order of the Rose and Stone was created in response to a message received by Ally Codebreakers after World War II. The war was over, but there were still forces working behind the scenes. Call it the Illuminati, call it the Freemasons, but there was some force working towards things that weren’t in the best interest of the world.”

“So...” Winston furrowed his brow, “what does that have to do with us?”

“As time goes on, we’ve found outposts where the enemy has existed,” Bryant said, “but no matter how many we take down? There are always more. And the codes are always changing, the puzzles are more complex, and—if I can be frank—none of us are getting any younger. We needed new resources and fresh perspectives.”

“But...” Jace started, “cereal boxes?”

“We had to make some source of income,” Claire explained. “The cereal company was always just something we could use to have the resources to fight a secret war.”

“War isn’t the best word,” Bryant said, “really it’s a battle of wits.”

“All right,” Hannah said, “say we believe you. What does that mean for us?”

“Simply put? We want you to help us fight the war. The contest on the cereal box? That was one of the most recent ciphers we had to solve. The fact that the four of you were able to solve it means you’re capable of competing with the Fulcrum. You can be knights in the Order of the Rose and Stone.”

“I’m guessing it doesn’t pay?” Jace said. “I don’t know about these three, but I’m struggling to make tuition with three jobs right now...”

“It doesn’t pay, no,” Bryant said. “However, the Order does have buyers for any artifacts that we uncover through our outpost raids. A lot of the older artifacts we try to send back to their countries of origin, but a lot of museums and private collectors are willing to pay for World War II antiques.”

“Really?” Winston perked up.

“Enough for the four of you to go through college easily,” Claire said. “You think this house is all cereal money?”

“And we just have to solve puzzles?” Abigail asked.

“Solve the puzzles, find the outposts, and expose them,” Bryant said. “Usually, they’re abandoned when we find them, but if we can limit their hiding places, we can bring them into the light one day and stop them from running things behind the scenes.”

“Perhaps,” Claire suggested, “we could show them what we’re currently working on?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Bryant frowned a little. “I doubt they’d be interested in that.”

“Wait, I wanna see,” Jace said. “Like...obviously you’re baiting us, but I still wanna know.”

Bryant smirked a little and beckoned the others to follow him. He walked down the

hallway, catching the reflection of each teen in the suits of armor on either side. He went to the code-breaking room and opened the doors.

At first glance, the writing covering the walls looked like the ravings of a lunatic, but the fact that the walls were giant whiteboards improved the optics. There was a comfortable couch, Bryant's old armchair, and a table covered with cipher devices and notebooks full of attempted ideas. Bryant approached a table in the corner with the house computer system, still trying to process the complex code for any element of a clue.

"As you can see," Bryant said, turning and sitting on the edge of the table, "we have to rely on fairly low-tech options for codebreaking. Computers are all well and good for translations and pattern recognition, but we have yet to develop a software that can match the human brain's creativity and—"

Bryant trailed off as he saw the four teens walking around the room, taking in the code written on the walls. Jace and Abigail had started skimming the notebooks while Hannah and Winston read all Bryant's wall notes.

"It's not a simple cipher..." Hannah noted. "Maybe alphanumeric?"

"No," Jace shook their head. "I don't think it's that simple."

"An equation cipher?" Abigail suggested.

"Mathematical?" Winston said. "We'd need a sample to work backward from at least..."

"Assuming it's algebraic," Jace said. "There has to be some constant or a pattern that we can work off of to—"

"A Fibonacci sequence!" Abigail said, pointing at the notebook. "Look at how it skips integers like that?"

"I told you they have the stuff," Bryant smirked to Claire. He turned to the teens again

and looked at them expectantly. “Now that you’ve all gotten a taste...do you think you can resist the urge to solve the puzzle?”

The four youths looked at each other, hoping to find an answer behind their eyes. Bryant could hear their thought process. He’d had the same doubts before: *Is it worth it? What’s the risk? What’s the reward?* None of their answers could be the same, but the quest was about finding answers.

“All right,” Winston nodded. “Free ride to college and a killer side gig? I’m in.”

“I sunk my teeth in this far,” Hannah said. “I don’t like leaving things half-finished.”

“Personally?” Jace started. “I could use a good adventure.”

Abigail finally shrugged and looked over to Bryant. “This is the best prize I’ve ever gotten from a cereal box. When do we start?”

“We’ll call this weekend a trial run,” Bryant said. “You’ll live here and if you can solve this current puzzle? You’re welcome to stay and keep working. Your internship begins...now!”