

## Scrambled

2040

“This is all your wife’s fault.” Robert levied the spear gun towards Brandon’s head. Brandon absently wondered if the force of the spear would penetrate his skull. He hoped a human skull would put up more of a fight than a flounder or mackerel would. He suddenly felt a twinge of guilt for all the fish he had hunted over the years. What was the last one he had caught? Ah yes, the Mahi Mahi that he had pan-fried for Susan and himself on their anniversary. That had been a tasty fish.

*Thwack.* The spear released, violently impacting Brandon’s left occipital lobe with a wet smack. His head snapped back as his torso shrugged forward, hitting the hideous yellow bathroom tile he had always hated since they bought the house.

2013

Brandon gently felt the top of his head as he looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. His long, straight, black hair was starting to thin. He grimaced and left the bathroom after switching off the mirror’s built-in light. He walked into his cramped dorm. It cost ten thousand dollars a year to live in what amounted to a closet...and a small closet at that. Brandon looked at his watch which read 8:50 a.m. Brandon scooped up his backpack and ran out the door past the elevator to the stairs. He slammed the door open, hitting somebody who was already walking down stairs. *Crap! He did not have time for this.* Brandon stooped to help up whomever he had just knocked over.

She was a girl. She had wavy brown hair and tan skin. Her eyes were deep amber pools. There was a fresh scrape on her knee just below the edge of her skirt. It looked like a galaxy with red stars...

“Watch it, asshole.”

Brandon was suddenly aware that she was hitting him repeatedly. “Ouch. Hey, quit it! I’m sorry! Okay?”

She stopped and glared at him.

“Geez,” he sighed, rubbing his ribs. “I didn’t see you. I was in a hurry to get to class--” he looked at his watch-- “which I’m now late for.”

“Serves you right,” she said as she started walking down the stairs. Brandon rolled his eyes and also started downstairs, keeping his distance from the perturbed individual.

2015

Brandon’s back ached. *You would think they would spring for some cushier chairs when they expected you to sit and learn for an hour and fifteen minutes each class.* He slowly massaged his neck while looking down at his legs. *Cushier chairs and more leg room.* The small space in which he was expected to cram his feet was just atrocious. Brandon looked at his watch. *Only five more minutes of class, thank God.* His history professor had decided to make the class watch *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*. He actually liked the movie, but he wasn’t spending thirty thousand a year to watch corny movies from the 80’s. Finally, the credits rolled. Standing to stretch, he walked through the door into the painfully dated hallway. There were never enough seats for the students standing around waiting for the next class. He walked past a sketchy water fountain, better suited to dispense typhoid than quench a thirst.

He sighed. Feeling drained and once again doubting his business major choice, Brandon made his way out the door onto the main campus and headed for his dorm. As he walked along

the narrow sidewalk, some girl walking with her head down plowed right into his shoulder. He turned, glared, and shouted, “Excuse you!” She just kept walking. He recognized that hair, though. It was Miss Stairwell from freshman year. *Weird*, he thought as he noticed her leather apron with long gloves that looked straight out of a steampunk convention. He shrugged and kept walking.

2017

Loud knocking echoed through the dorm room. Brandon ignored it. He just lay in his bed where he had been ensconced for two days ever since his grades had been updated.

“Brandon? Hey man, I know you are in there. Are you ok?” It was Max, one of his few good friends at school. Brandon was slightly moved that Max had come to check on him. Of course, he had confined himself to his room for two full days now. The knocking continued. Brandon rolled over in his bed ignoring it. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered.

“Ok man, I have to go to class but I’m coming back...I don’t know what’s up, but I’ll be back.”

*Just leave me alone.* Brandon reached down and closed his laptop. As the screen displaying his failure to graduate faded, Brandon closed his eyes. *It didn’t matter anymore--nothing did.* A gunshot resounded through the room. Brandon sat straight up and looked at his door. There was a hole where the lock had been. The door was kicked open and in stepped Stairwell holding a gun.

“Open the window!” she yelled, turning and shooting at somebody down the hall.

Brandon just stared at her. She walked to his backpack and opened the small front pocket.

“Brandon, open the window now!”

How did she know his name? He turned and started struggling with the window latches, but they were stuck. He turned back to see that she had his bag opened and inside out.

“What are you doing?” he asked. She dropped the bag. He heard running footsteps down the hall. “Brandon, listen carefully. Where is your lizard-shaped USB drive?” *Lizard-shaped drive...he hadn't had that since freshman year.*

“Uh, I lost it...”

“You what?”

“It's gone.”

She turned a strange color, glared at him, raised the gun and fired it at the window. A masked man dressed in solid black tactical gear came running in and tackled her. Brandon ran over and pulled the guy off her. She stood up and shot the intruder in the head. It was a mess with blood and brains everywhere, not like in the movies. Brandon turned and threw up twice.

“Come on.” She grabbed his shirt and pulled him to the window. “Jump!”

Brandon looked out the window. “Are you crazy? I don't even know your name! Plus-- you just killed that guy right here in my room!”

“My name is Susan.” She jabbed a needle in his neck, whispered 2040, pushed him out the window, then jumped out after him.

Brandon's room was on the eighth floor. As he was falling out his window to his death, he wondered why she said 2040 and what it meant. A bright light enveloped him and he blacked out.

2040

Brandon coughed and opened his eyes. He could still taste stale vomit in the back of his mouth. Pushing himself up he managed to sit with his back against a cupboard. He looked around. He was in a yellow tiled bathroom. There was a ratty bath mat on the floor next to the shower.

Brandon screamed and threw up again. Lying on the bath mat with a spear sticking out of his head was a dead guy. Brandon pulled himself up to the counter and looked in the mirror. “*Where the hell am I?*” he thought. His head was throbbing and his eyes were bloodshot. He

reached over and turned the faucet on. Cupping the cool water in his hands, he drank thirstily. He felt a bit better, and turned to open the door. He stepped out onto some brown shag carpet from the 70's, and was greeted by wood paneled wall with some very odd floral art hanging in front of his eyes. Walking down the hall he turned into what looked like the living room. There was a stone fireplace in the corner.

Brandon froze. He sucked in his breath, and found himself light-headed. On the mantle in front of him was a picture of a bride and groom. The picture looked normal, except for the groom. The groom was Brandon. He looked older--about thirty if he had to guess, but it was him nonetheless. "*Who the hell is the bride?*" He picked up the frame and opened the back. It was dated in his own handwriting. It read 2024.

1970

"Do we have a choice?" Susan asked.

"No."

Brandon had just opened a cardboard box and was removing purple pre-loaded vials for use with their injection gun.

"You could have picked a more aesthetically pleasing decade." She walked over the linoleum floor to the kitchen table and sagged into a chair.

Brandon finished with the vials, walked to her, and handed her a lizard shaped USB drive.

"We couldn't risk a time where anybody could read this."

"I know, but this place is brutal. I mean have you seen the athletic wear? Not to mention the hairstyles..."

"I know. It will be hard and take some getting used to, but—hey, we can finally leave our research behind and just enjoy marriage." He smiled and kissed her.

Susan kissed him back, then she noticed a box on the floor.

“What’s in that?” she asked.

He looked over his shoulder and grinned. “I’ll show you.”

Brandon walked to the box and opened it, pulling out a brand new spear gun. Susan stared laughing.

“What on earth to you plan to do with that?”

Brandon looked at her straight-on. There was a strange conviction in his voice.

“Catch fish of course!”

2040

Brandon was staring at the picture when the girl dressed as the bride came staggering in through the front door. She looked much younger than in the picture. She saw him and seemed startled. She then glanced at the picture in his hands.

“Brandon--I can explain.”

She raised her hand from her side and winced. Brandon saw fresh blood on her shirt.

“How do you know my name?” he asked.

“Look, we have no time, but trust me when I say we know each other. You could even argue that we love each other.”

She started making her way to the kitchen and began rummaging through a cupboard. Brandon put the picture down and marched over to her pulling her towards him.

“No! Tell me what is happening now!”

She stared at him. Then she nodded.

“Look, you are still delirious from the last jump. The jelly didn’t have enough time to be fully absorbed by your system. Your memory is a little fuzzy right now.”

“Jelly? Jump? What are you talking about?”

There was loud pounding on the front door. Susan quickly turned to the cupboard, pulled out a gun with a needle, and loaded a vial of purple liquid. She held it to her neck, closed her eyes, and discharged it into herself. She ejected the empty vial, reloaded it, and pointed it at Brandon.

“Woah, woah, woah, get that away from me!”

“We are out of time. Just remember 2013.”

“I don’t care. You are NOT shooting some fluorescent purple goo into my body...”

The door broke open. Brandon turned to see several dark figures come running in. He felt a prick in his neck, saw white, then blacked out.

2040

(ten minutes before Brandon’s death)

“It really doesn’t have to be like this Susan.”

Robert, her captor, casually walked through her living room. He stopped, glancing at her and Brandon’s wedding photo on the fireplace mantel. His long, knobby fingers picked up the frame. He faced her holding the picture up to her face.

“If you cooperate and work for JL Industries we can leave your husband alone in the relatively intact shape he is in.”

Susan spat blood from her split lip onto his shoe. She was tied to her own dining room chair with cooking twine from her kitchen. Brandon was in the next room where God only knows what they were doing to him. *At least he had stopped screaming.*

“Go to hell.”

Robert looked at the blood and saliva on his shoe. He then turned to one of his men, generically masked and dressed in all black and snapped his fingers. The man nodded and left the room. He returned shortly with a box. Robert took the box, opened it, and dumped the

contents out onto Susan's lap. She screamed. There were six fingers on her lap. One of them had Brandon's wedding ring.

"You Monster." Susan glared at Robert.

"You can end this all by agreeing to work as an agent stealing technology from the future for us."

"Use one of your stooges."

Robert sighed and sat down across from her.

"My company cannot be tied in any way to this manner of theft. Plus you are the most qualified at this kind of work."

2013

Brandon opened his eyes. He was vaguely aware of a dull pain. He realized Susan was slapping his face. "OW!" Susan let go and stood up. They were back on campus in one of the parking garages.

"Let's go. Just stay close to me and--put this on."

She tossed him a hoodie. While he was putting it on, he noticed her pull out her gun and reload it with familiarity. "*Better not cross her...*" Brandon couldn't figure out if he was being kidnapped or what.

"Uh... could you help me? My head is stuck."

Susan sighed, tucked her gun into her belt, and helped him get the hoodie over his head.

"Thanks" he smiled.

She nodded, then turned and started for the stairs. He jogged after her. They started walking down the stairwell.

"Sooooo...."

Susan said nothing.

“What are we doing?” he pressed.

She stopped right before the door leading outside and turned to him.

“Okay, listen very carefully. That purple stuff is called jelly. It allows you to travel through time.”

Brandon stared blankly. Susan groaned and pulled his phone out of his pocket. She handed it to him.

“What does it say the date is?”

Brandon placed his finger on it and unlocked it. He then tapped on the calendar app. He dropped his phone.

“That’s impossible.”

“I assure you it has been quite possible since 1905.”

“No it—I...”

Brandon bent over and picked up his phone. The screen was cracked.

“This is a trick. It’s a software hack, or maybe a prank.”

Susan grabbed his shoulder and pushed the door open. The main sidewalk through campus was in front of them. Susan called out to a guy walking by.

“Hey, what is today’s date?”

“October 5<sup>th</sup>,” he yelled back.

“Year?”

“2013.”

He seemed annoyed by that question. Brandon’s head was spiraling. Susan pulled him back into the garage.

“This is very important,” she said.

Brandon wasn't paying attention. Susan slapped him again.

"Ow! Okay, enough with the hitting."

"Listen, we have to get your flashdrive, but we can't let your past self see you--okay?"

"Okay."

"Good, now when did you last have the drive?"

"Uh...."

"Think."

"Give me a second. I'm still sorting out the fact some purple goop can send me through time. Are you sure I'm not just on a bad trip?"

"Brandon, this is all very real and very important."

"Uh, okay... okay"

He closed his eyes trying to remember. *If this really is 2013 then it should be in the front pocket of my backpack.*

"Brandon?"

"It's in my backpack. The front pocket."

"Good, did you own a car in school?"

"What, no, wait, why?"

Susan pulled out some zipties and tied him to the stairway railing.

"Stay here. I'll be back."

"What the hell, Susan!"

"Calm down, this is for your own good."

She turned, opened the door, and started down the sidewalk. Brandon could see her through the small rectangular glass window in the door. He watched as a cyclist came barreling down the sidewalk and clipped her. He couldn't believe it, but it was there. Impossible to miss. A cut on her knee. It looked like a galaxy.

2040

Susan was shaking. Robert dropped the spear gun and walked away. Brandon's body was still. His blood was congealing on the tile floor. She saw red. Whipping around, she clamped her teeth down on the bulbous nose of the guard who had forced her to watch Brandon die. He screamed as she tore a massive chunk from his face. The taste of blood was immediately overpowering. Susan spit the nose out and simultaneously brought her knee into the guard's groin. He passed out from the pain. Quickly she sat down on the floor bringing her tied hands from behind her back up and over her knees to her front. Hands still bound, she reached into the guard's jacket and pulled his gun out. She cocked it on the bathroom counter, brought it up, and shot whomever was responding to nose job's earlier screams. She walked through their house and pointed her gun at Robert.

"Hey Bastard!"

Robert turned slowly with his hands up

"Susan listen—"

He never finished. Susan emptied the gun into him and dropped it, collapsing on the floor in tears. *So many memories here. Why did this have to happen?* She stood up and walked to the closet. There was a cardboard box sitting on the top shelf. She picked it up. Carrying it to the coffee table she opened the flaps. Inside was one last vial of jelly and a very worn injection gun. She placed them both down on the table and walked to the kitchen. She pulled open one of the drawers. It was full of junk. She dug around, found a pen, and tried it out on her wrist. Nothing happened so she tossed it and looked for another. She found one and tried it out. Satisfied, she walked back to the table and picked up Brandon's old world atlas book. She tore out one of the pages and began to write. She put down the pen and folded the note, placing it in her pocket next to the familiar lizard shaped USB drive. Susan picked up the gun, loaded it, and injected herself.

2013

Brandon had given up on Susan ever returning. Finally the door opened. But it wasn't Susan who walked in. Standing in front of him were two men dressed in solid black with masks. He opened his mouth to scream but one of them placed their hands on his mouth. Then one of them pulled out a syringe. Brandon screamed, then passed out.

2013

(five minutes later)

Susan ran into the parking garage smiling. She had the flash drive. Opening the door she immediately drew her firearm. Brandon was gone. Only cut zip ties remained.

"Shit" she holstered the gun and pulled out a Geiger counter from her backpack. Jelly left residual radiation. Hopefully she would be able to follow Brandon's trail.

1905

Susan was about to give up. She had tried every single chemical combination with no results. Her attempts at creating a material to store massive amounts of energy in a small space were proving fruitless. Sighing, she rubbed her eyes and started to leave her laboratory. Suddenly there was a flash of light and Susan gasped. Standing in front of her was...well, herself...

"How is that..."

"Possible?" The older her smiled. "I looked pretty good when I was young."

"Why are you here? *How* are you here?"

Susan was sure she was dreaming, then her older self reached into her pocket and pulled out a lizard and a piece of paper.

"I need you to trust yourself."

Susan was quite excited and bewildered. It wasn't every day you were quite literally asked to trust yourself by yourself.

“Okay.”

Her older self nodded “Good.”

“So, what is it you need?”

Older Susan sat down at the table and looked around the laboratory.

“Do you have any tea?”

“Uh. Yes, one second.”

She hurried to the cupboard and opened it up. She rummaged through empty cans and random papers until finally she spotted a tin of tea and grabbed it. Turning to one of her burners, she lit it, and placed a glass of water over it. She then turned to her cluttered counter looking for something to serve as a tea cup. Settling on a small beaker, she put some loose tea leaves in a strainer and placed the strainer over the beaker. Once the water boiled she poured it over the leaves and turned to hand it to herself.

“Sorry, I don’t have any cream or sugar.”

“No problem.”

Susan sat down and faced her older self, who was sipping the tea. She waited eagerly. Finally her older self put the beaker down and faced her with an earnest look.

“What is the date?”

“November 10<sup>th</sup> 1905.”

“Good. Tomorrow you are going to have a breakthrough, but not the one you want.”

Susan listened intently

“While trying to solve energy problems, you will discover a way to travel through time based on thought. You will merely need to think when and where you want to go and inject yourself with a jelly-like substance.”

Susan couldn't believe this. She was giddy. Her thoughts filled with time travel and curiosity about the future. She couldn't wait!

"Written down in this letter are some very specific details and steps you will need to take in order to correct the mistakes I made when traveling."

Susan nodded and eagerly took the letter. Her older self stood and walked to the counter. She began mixing and opening different compounds and containers.

"The three most important things you need to know are these."

She poured whatever compound she had made in a bowl and added water.

"First, that lizard-shaped ornament contains all of humankind's history and science up to 2050 and is literally worth billions."

Susan went to take it, but older Susan slapped her hand, and picked the drive up.

"I'm taking this to Brandon Ross, whom you will meet in 2017 while you are working on your 12<sup>th</sup> university degree. All the information is in the letter."

"Why can't I have it now?"

"Because it is important you find Brandon. I'm doing all of this for him."

Susan nodded and noticed the mixture her older self was stirring had turned purple.

"Lastly, once you discover time travel, you must burn this place. That's the mistake I made. Your work is discovered in a hundred and sixty years leading the government to find us and kill Brandon. They then will try to force you to work for them. Don't let that happen."

Susan nodded and watched as she stopped stirring. Older Susan reached into her pocket and removed a gun with a vial in it. She filled the vial, re-inserted it into the gun, and injected it into herself.

"Good luck Susan. Do better than I did."

She disappeared, leaving Susan alone with her thoughts.

2013

Brandon opened his eyes. He was handcuffed to a dresser. Today was really starting to make his head hurt. He was in a pretty seedy motel. The beds were stained and the wallpaper was cracked and peeling. Evidently his captors weren't flush with cash.

"Hello, Sir. Can you hear me?"

One of his captors was talking on the phone. Brandon noticed he had his wallet out and was looking at his ID.

"Yessir, we have Brandon Ross"

Brandon struggled against the cuffs but there was no way out.

"Sir, what do you mean? There was a double homicide? In what hotel... What was the hotel's name?"

Brandon didn't understand why his captors were getting agitated. The door broke open and Susan charged in shooting. Both men were killed instantly. She walked up and callously nudged one with her toe.

"How did you find me?"

"The Jelly leaves a radioactive signature."

"Ah."

Brandon nervously looked around the room. He spotted his backpack and went to pick it up. Turning back to Susan, he saw her reading a torn out page from an atlas.

"What is that?"

She quickly folded it and placed it in her pocket.

"Instructions."

She opened her bag and started loading the gun with purple vials.

“So, how does that work?”

She held up a vial.

“These go wherever and whenever you are thinking, but you have to be careful that you don’t change your mind halfway into the injection. Then, it is basically a lottery where you end up.”

Brandon opened his backpack to make sure everything was there. Not that it mattered. Everything felt relative. Not as weighted or permanent. If she really could travel through time why was she so interested in him? Susan finished loading the injection gun and started walking towards him.

“Uh, wait! Can I use the restroom first?”

She rolled her eyes but nodded. Brandon quickly ran to the bathroom and closed the door. He looked around. *This is disgusting.* The toilet had some black mold underneath the seat. The sink was dirty with an orange ring in it and the shower was not much better. He pushed the state of the room from his mind.

2013

“Brandon it has been thirty minutes”

Susan stood by the motel bathroom door waiting. She still wasn’t sure why her future self had forced her to meet Brandon by hiding the flashdrive in his Backpack. She only knew that she trusted herself more than anyone else. Finally, done waiting, she kicked the door open again.

“Brandon, we are leaving whether you are ready or...”

He was washing his hands.

“Sorry.”

She blushed and turned back into the room. He walked out of the bathroom drying his hands and smiled.

“So where are we going next?”

Susan pulled out the note and his Lizard shaped drive.

“Look do you know how to get the information off this thing?”

Brandon nodded

“Of course. You can stick that in any computer around.”

Susan seemed convinced and put it back in her pocket. She then unfolded the letter.

“Okay. This sounds crazy I know, but my future self gave this to me and it basically describes the wonderful life you and I will spend together and how it all gets ruined by some guy named Robert. And it told me where to travel and...”

She was talking a lot and seemed confused. Brandon just walked up to her and placed his finger on her lips. Then he kissed her. She kissed him back. Nothing had felt more right in his life. Susan screamed and started falling. Brandon caught her.

“What’s wrong? Susan!?”

“This is my fault I didn’t burn the lab...”

“What?”

“I couldn’t... my work, my life’s...”

“I don’t understand.”

She went limp and her forehead formed a scare in the center of her head that looked terminal. Brandon didn’t know what to do. He sat on the bed and stared out ahead not focusing on anything. He didn’t know how long he sat there. The sun was setting; several rays came through the window and reflected off the injection gun into Brandon’s eye. He looked at the gun. He stood up, walked over, picked it up along with all the purple vials, and shot himself in the neck. He stooped over Susan and kissed her, picking up her handgun and tucking into his backpack. The jelly kicked in. His only thought was Susan.

1905

(30 minutes before Susan arrives with the letter)

Brandon opened his eyes. He was lying on a stone floor. He could hear something boiling. There was an acrid scent in the air.

“Who are you? How did you get in here?”

It was Susan’s voice. He pushed himself up and looked around. He was in a very eclectic room that looked like it belonged in a Jules Verne novel. There were papers covered in scribbles littered across the room. Several containers with compounds were organized hazardously. And all manner of chemistry apparatus was on the wooden counters and shelves circling the room. Susan was standing in the middle looking at him. She was wearing a long leather apron and gloves up to her elbows. Her hair was tied back. She looked confused. It was hard to believe this budding scientist was the source of all his problems. Susan walked up and felt his jacket.

“What kind of material is this?”

She had noticed the Velcro breast pocket and her eyes grew wide. She kept closing and opening the pocket. A figure stepped out of the corner of the lab. Brandon took her hand and moved it from his pocket he then reached into his backpack and pulled out the handgun. Susan’s eyes widened. She stepped back.

“Take what you want. Anything! This is all I have.”

He pointed the gun past her.

“Hold it right there, Brandon.”

Robert’s voice came from behind Susan.

“Who is that?” Susan’s voice trembled

“Someone who wants to hurt you,” Brandon replied.

Robert smiled and kept his gun up pointed at Brandon.

“How interesting to find you both here together.”

Brandon was desperately trying to find a way out of this. *The jelly!* Brandon slowly drew another vial of jelly from his pocket.

“I guess you both are really destined to be together throughout all time” Robert continued.

Brandon injected Susan and himself again he whispered 2015 into ear.

2015

Susan opened her eyes. She was in the future at some center for learning. Looking around she saw a walkway and started down it. She bumped into somebody turning she recognized that Brandon guy. *Why had that purple stuff brought me here?* She shrugged and lowered her head moving quickly down the path.

1905

Brandon opened his eyes. He was lying on a stone floor. He could hear something boiling. There was an acrid scent in the air.

“Who are you? How did you get in here?”

It was Susan’s voice. He pushed himself up. He didn’t have much time. Susan walked up and felt his jacket.

“What kind of material is this?”

He pushed her aside, lifted his gun, and fired six times into the corner Robert had emerged from five minutes in the future. Robert’s body fell down. Susan screamed and ran. Brandon reloaded the gun and shot himself.

2015

Susan kept going down the sidewalk. She felt a hand on her back and turned around. It was Brandon.

“What do you want? Where are we?” she asked

“Trust me it’s really complicated”

She glared at him

“Start talking.”

Brandon nodded and reached into his pocket he pulled out a piece of paper that looked like it had been torn from a map. He handed it to her.

“Here don’t trust me trust yourself.”

She took the paper and unfolded it. There was a note written in her handwriting. Susan began to read it. A smile crossed her lips.

The End