

Better This Way

By

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EXT. WOODED AREA - DAY

An unmarked, and unremarkable, two-story building sits shrouded by trees. A small wooden platform extends out from the building's roof.

SUPERIMPOSED: Center for Observational Adjustments of Space-Time (COAST) April 14th, 2020

ELI LEVITT (30), calm and steely-eyed, steps onto the platform. He walks to the edge and peers down at the drop.

CASSANDRA (V.O.)

It's useful to think of time not as a straight line, but as a series of strings pulled taut. Like a sort of infinite harp.

INT. COAST LAB - CONTINUOUS

CASSANDRA (25) stands in a dark room. Bright red hair frames her incisive facial features. She holds a remote and speaks to a camera-mounted tripod. Behind her is the projected image of a harp.

CASSANDRA

Will changing a past event immediately alter our present? Or does time branch off into a new reality? Will we trigger an act of revision, or one of creation?

She clicks the remote. The image changes to that of a large dome structure with the CERN logo beside it.

CASSANDRA

CERN's research in micro black holes has allowed us to access a massive amount of data from beyond our current space-time. We've used that data to construct this.

The image changes to that of an unending series of parallel lines set against a starfield.

CASSANDRA

This is what we believe to be a vast array of alternate universes within our measurable range. Of course the real program is a network of constantly varying equations. So what you see here is basically just a pretty picture.

She clicks the projector off. The lights come up. The room is a sterile white. Rows of computers sit in precise uniform.

Cassandra sets the remote down and turns to the camera, a hint of worry in her expression.

CASSANDRA

Dr. Levitt thinks that by monitoring this data we will have a rough idea of where his jumps take him. It's not an exact picture, but hopefully it's enough to keep him from getting lost. If not, it'll be on me to go in and get him.

EXT. COAST ROOFTOP - LATER

Eli stands on the platform holding a small device the size of a smartphone. The screen reads "Press X to Jump".

Behind Eli, Cassandra emerges from a rooftop door carrying the tripod camera. She sees Eli at the edge and smiles.

CASSANDRA

Don't jump! You've got too much to live for.

ELI

We've gone too far to call it off.

She reaches the edge of the roof and sets the camera down.

CASSANDRA

I see your sense of humor is still intact.

ELI

Was that a joke? Sorry.

He looks her way and notices the camera.

ELI

What the hell is that for?

CASSANDRA

I'm recording the jump.

Eli pockets the device and walks to her.

ELI

Looks like your sense of humor is intact as well. This is a controlled procedure, not a vlog post. Besides, the government doesn't want a recording of this.

CASSANDRA

I was thinking it'd be our own private video.

ELI

(slyly)

We have enough of those already.

CASSANDRA

(rolls eyes)

Then I guess all you need is this.

She pulls out a Luger P08 pistol and hands it to him.

CASSANDRA

It's vintage, so you can leave it at the scene.

Eli looks it over, then slips it in his pocket.

CASSANDRA

I still don't like the jump year. I know you want to make it easy, but I think you're underestimating how hard this will really be.

ELI

I'd rather risk hurting my feelings than hurt the mission.

CASSANDRA

It's not a mission, Eli. It's an experiment. You were raised on Holocaust horror stories. Your family was impacted. I wish you'd chosen a task you could be impartial about.

ELI

What other historical event is more worth changing? Impartially?

Cassandra shrugs. Eli takes her hand.

ELI

You know what I think? I think you're just trying to delay me as long as possible because you know there's a chance I won't come back.

CASSANDRA

I'd be foolish to think I could delay you from anything.

He smiles, but her eyes are uncertain.

ELI

Here, I want you to have this. Until I return at least.

He pulls a small Star of David pendant from his pocket.

CASSANDRA

I can't take a family heirloom.

ELI

If I don't come back than I'll be with my family. One way or another.

He places it in her hand and kisses her. Then he turns and walks to the edge of the platform.

He pulls out the device and, after one final glance at Cassandra, steps off the edge.

Eli plummets toward the earth, then FLASH. He disappears.

EXT. RURAL FARMING VILLAGE - DAY

Scattered cobblestone buildings line either side of a worn dirt road. The trees are bare and frost-covered.

SUPERIMPOSE: December 18th, 1898. Leonding, Austria

A BRIGHT FLASH and Eli appears six feet in the air. He crashes to the ground.

ELI

Ow! Fuck. Thought the jump would slow me down more.

He picks himself up and looks around to get his bearings.

In one direction, the road leads to a small stone bridge. In the other, a small cluster of buildings.

Eli heads toward the buildings.

From an alleyway staircase, CASSANDRA (42) steps up behind him. Bruises and age lines mark her face. Her eyes burn with fury. She pulls out a Luger and points it at Eli.

CASSANDRA
Don't you move.

Eli spins around at the voice. It takes him a moment.

ELI
Cassie? Cassie, it's Eli.

He steps forward. Cassandra steps back into the partial cover of the alley.

CASSANDRA
I know who you are, now stop moving. And keep your hands out of your fucking pockets.

Eli raises his hands.

ELI
What the hell is going on, Cassie?

CASSANDRA
Don't 'Cassie' me. I know what you've been doing.

ELI
I haven't done anything yet. I just got here.

Cassandra looks uncertain.

CASSANDRA
Toss me the device. Slowly.

Carefully, Eli pulls out the device and tosses it over. Cassandra studies the screen for a moment, then pockets it.

CASSANDRA
Alright, I'm taking you in. Turn around and put your hands behind your back.

ELI
You can't just take me in. There's a procedure for-

CASSANDRA
The United States government has authorized me to-!

ELI

Then where's the authorization! If something went wrong you were supposed to jump in immediately, not twenty or whatever years later! And you were supposed to show me an official document, with a raised seal and everything!

CASSANDRA

Well, I don't have it.

ELI

Why not?!

CASSANDRA

Because you took it from me and destroyed it, you prick!

Cassandra indicates her black eye.

CASSANDRA

You cracked me in the face and then you burnt it in front of me.

ELI

I don't believe you.

CASSANDRA

I don't care. I *am* authorized to take you in. I'm authorized to kill you even, and I'm ready to. Now turn around and put your hands behind your back.

Eli does. Cassandra pulls out handcuffs.

CASSANDRA

Step towards me.

Eli backs up to her. She reaches for his arm.

He spins around, going for the gun. A SHOT rings out as they struggle for it. Finally, he grips it and yanks it away.

Cassandra's momentum sends her toward the alley stairs. She rolls her ankle on the first step and tumbles to the bottom, crying out in pain.

Eli rushes down to her.

CASSANDRA
Get away from me!

ELI
I'm sorry, but I need the device.

He searches her pockets. She tries to push him away, but he comes out with TWO DEVICES.

CASSANDRA
You're taking mine too?

ELI
I'm sending you back so you can get medical attention.

Eli pockets one device and adjusts the other.

ONSCREEN: "Countdown to jump"... "10"... "9"... "8"...

He drops the device beside her and runs up the stairs. Then he tosses her gun down too. It lands just beyond her reach.

ELI
I promise if things go wrong, I'll come back and stop myself.

CASSANDRA
It's not that simple. You can't just come back!

Eli leaves as the FLASH goes off behind him.

EXT. VILLAGE ALLEYWAY - LATER

In the middle of the long narrow passage, Eli huddles against the cold, waiting.

ADOLF HITLER (9), a serious-looking boy, hurries into the alley. Eli waits as the boy draws near. Adolf reaches him, passes him, then-

ELI
Adolf?

The boy stops and turns.

ELI
Adolf Hitler?

ADOLF
Wer bist du?

ELI
(German, subtitled)
Are Alois and Klara your parents?

ADOLF
Ja.

Eli shakily pulls out the Luger and points it at him. Adolf's eyes go wide, he turns and runs.

Eli hesitates... then FIRES three shots. The final bullet strikes the boy down. Eli stares at the body, stunned.

Then it stirs. A whimper is heard as the boy rolls onto his back. The color drains from Eli's face.

He staggers over to Adolf, aims the Luger and... it jams.

The boy cries out. Eli yanks on the toggle and tries again.

Still jammed.

He removes the magazine.

ADOLF
Mama! MAMA!

Losing all composure, Eli drops the mag and falls to his knees to retrieve it. Adolf shrieks in panic.

ELI
Shh. Shh, it's okay. Uh... Beruhige dich bitte.

Eli removes the obstructing bullet and reinserts the mag.

ELI
Things will be better this way.

Eli stands, yanks the toggle, and aims at the boy.

EXT. VILLAGE ROAD - CONTINUOUS

A SHOT rings out. Birds scatter from a nearby tree.

Eli stumbles out into the road. He takes two steps then doubles over, vomiting.

He finishes, then pulls out the device and looks around the surrounding area.

EXT. COAST BUILDING - DAY

The unmarked, and unremarkable building is being retaken by nature. It's windows are boarded. The roof is unadorned.

SUPERIMPOSE: April 14th, 2020

Eli FLASHES into existence and falls to the ground.

INT. COAST LAB - MOMENTS LATER

CASSANDRA (25), a brunette now, no bruises, rifles through a filing cabinet. Scattered papers clutter the room. A nearby laptop is the only computer. Eli enters, unseen.

ELI

Holy shit. Where's the lab?

Cassandra whirls around and trains a Luger P08 on him.

ELI

Oh fuck. Not this again.

CASSANDRA

Who are you?

ELI

Come on, Cassie. You know me.

CASSANDRA

My name's Melanie. Now who the-

(beat)

Oh my God. You look just like him.

She lowers the weapon.

ELI

Like who? What is this place?

CASSANDRA

Former HQ for the resistance.

ELI

Resistance to what?

CASSANDRA

What else? Nazis.

LATER

Eli and Cassandra sit in front of an open laptop.

CASSANDRA

You sure you want me to go back
this far?

ELI

Yes. Treat like I'm in grade
school.

She taps the keypad and a photo of Hermann Göring appears.

CASSANDRA

The early Nazi party was born from
an intense power struggle. When the
smoke cleared Hermann Göring was
leader of both the party and
Germany. You know what Germany is,
right?

ELI

Keep going.

CASSANDRA

Early on Göring was pressured to
invade Poland. He opted to build
resources and alliances first.

Cassandra brings up an image of a mushroom cloud.

CASSANDRA

In nineteen forty-five, one month
after successfully testing the
A-bomb, the Nazi's invaded Poland.
Greater Europe declared war and
Germany responded by unleashing
nuclear weapons on Paris and
London. Surrender was immediate.
The war lasted all of five days.

The image changes to one of the White House. An alternate
version of the Nazi flag flies above it.

CASSANDRA

America struck a deal. Non-invasion
in exchange for complete
disbandment of our military.

ELI

What happened to the Jewish people?

CASSANDRA
 (cold)
 What Jewish people?

Eli winces.

CASSANDRA
 In nineteen seventy-two, Germany
 broke the pact and established a
 puppet government. The only real
 resistance is being led by him...

An image of ELI (65). He looks tired and battle-worn.

CASSANDRA
 Look familiar? People call him The
 Traveler due to his random
 appearances. There are recorded
 inconsistencies with regard to his
 age, leading many to believe that
 he's actually a father and son
 team. This video is from nineteen
 eighty-four where he outlined the
 new resistance strategy.

She taps the keypad and the ONSCREEN Eli speaks.

ELI (65)
 I've lost all hope of correcting
 this through conventional means.
 But we can't stop fighting. The
 Nazi's and their collaborators
 target not just our soldiers, but
 our citizens. Men, women and
 children. From this point on, we
 respond in kind.

The video is replaced with the image of a smoking crater.

CASSANDRA
 The next day, the new campaign
 launched a suicide strike on a Nazi
 Youth event. Twenty died.

ELI
 Children were killed?

CASSANDRA
 Children were the target.

Eli's heard enough. He stands.

ELI
I've got to get out of here.

EXT. COAST ROOFTOP - MOMENTS LATER

Eli bursts onto the roof with Cassandra trailing behind.

ELI
I don't care if I look just like
him. I'm not him.

CASSANDRA
I think you should stay, even if
you're not him. You could come to
camp, shake some hands. They could
use the morale boost.

ELI
I can't. I need to fix this and I
can't do that from here.

CASSANDRA
You won't fix it by running.

Eli ignores her and heads for the roof's edge.

Cassandra pulls the Luger on him.

CASSANDRA
Eli, stop.

Eli stops and turns. Cassandra removes a brunette wig,
revealing her red hair.

CASSANDRA
I thought a bit of subterfuge might
do the trick. You've been pretty
stubborn so far.

She pulls a document from her pocket and holds it up.

CASSANDRA
This is an official government
order. The program is shut down.
You are to cease jumping.

ELI
And do what? Stay here?

CASSANDRA
Every time you jump you create a
vibration. Remember how we used to
talk about strings?

ELI

Of course I remember. It was less than an hour ago.

CASSANDRA

When you jump you send a shock wave through multiple strings of reality. If you keep jumping these strings will start to intersect each other. Any intersecting realities will immediately collapse. Do get it yet? You'll be destroying entire worlds.

ELI

I can't just stay here. I haven't even been given a chance to fix this. I've only jumped twice.

CASSANDRA

Damn it Eli, time doesn't move in a straight line. You've jumped two hundred and eighty-six times. You have to stop.

ELI

I can't.

Eli makes a break for it.

CASSANDRA

Eli, please! I have to stop you!

Eli continues and hurls himself off the roof.

Cassandra FIRES. A BRIGHT FLASH erupts and Eli vanishes, taking a small chunk of the roof with him.

EXT. RURAL FARMING VILLAGE - DAY

A FLASH.

Eli appears in mid-air. A bullet RIPS through his body. He and a chunk of concrete crash to the dirt road.

He rolls onto his back, coughing up blood. He sees the device a few feet away and crawls towards it.

Just as he's about to reach it, a hand snatches it away. He looks up to see...

CASSANDRA (68). A streak of gray runs through her dulled red hair. She walks with the aid of a leg brace and cane. She slips the device into her pocket.

CASSANDRA

It's strange. I know I've shot at you many times, but I can't for the life of me remember hitting you.

Eli's eyes dart around.

ELI

Where am I?

CASSANDRA

Austria, eighteen ninety-eight.

ELI

No. I mean... where am I?

CASSANDRA

I don't understand the question.

Cassandra takes out a Luger.

CASSANDRA

I'm not even sure this will work anymore, but it's the only option we've got.

ELI

It won't work. I've seen my future.

CASSANDRA

How many times do I have to tell you? Time doesn't move in a straight line.

She points the gun at him.

ELI

Please, Cassie.

CASSANDRA

If you really understood what you'd done, you'd ask for this.

ELI

Please.

Emotion reaches her eyes.

CASSANDRA

I used to love you so much. Then I
hated you more than anything.
Now...

Cassandra pulls the Star of David pendant from her pocket
and places it gently on Eli's chest.

CASSANDRA

I forgive you.

She straightens up and raises the gun.

CASSANDRA

Trust me, it'll be better this way.

ELI

Cass-

She FIRES. Birds scatter from a nearby tree. She lowers the
gun, and bows her head.

From around the corner, runs Adolf. He halts at the sight of
the body and stares, transfixed.

He looks at Cassandra. Cassandra looks back.

The boy turns and runs. Cassandra makes no move to follow.
Instead she takes out the device and adjusts it.

ONSCREEN: "April 14, 999999999999"... "Count down to
jump"... "5"... "4"...

She pulls her own device from her pocket, pairs them up and
tosses them high in the air.

A BRIGHT FLASH blinks them from existence.

She takes one last look at Eli, then turns and limps off
down the long dirt road.

FADE OUT