

## Chapter 62

The early morning sun filtered through the lace curtains of the small attic bedroom, casting soft, golden light over the faded striped wallpaper. Dust motes drifted lazily in the air, caught in the glow as they floated above the cast-iron bed, its sheets still rumpled from a restless night. A light breeze from the open window stirred the curtains, bringing in the distant sounds of the waking city, clattering hooves, the murmur of voices, the distant clang of metal on metal.

In the corner of the room, a small wooden table stood cluttered with an assortment of bits and bobs, screws, cogwheels, lengths of copper wire twisted into strange shapes, and tools scattered among them in a kind of organized chaos. At the center of it all sat a large magnifying glass, its frame worn with use, its curved lens catching the morning light. Next to it, out of place among the aged and well-worn objects, was a device unlike anything else in the room. Smooth, almost seamless in design, its surface gleamed unnaturally, reflecting the shifting light. Tiny symbols, not of this time or place, pulsed faintly along its edge.

The man stood by the wardrobe, his fingers lingering on the door handle before he pulled it open. The wood groaned in protest, the hinges squeaking. Inside, only a handful of garments hung from wooden hangers, a few shirts, neatly pressed despite their age, and a coat. The man reached inside, running his fingers over the fabric before pulling out a shirt and buttoning it with precise, practiced movements.

He adjusted his tie in the small mirror fixed to the back of the wardrobe door, his expression unreadable. Though he appeared to be in his mid-thirties, his eyes told a different story, deep-set and weary, carrying the weight of something far older than his face suggested. A history of love, loss, and sorrow lay behind them, buried beneath the practiced indifference of someone who had learned to survive.

With a quiet sigh, he reached for his coat, slinging it casually over his shoulders. His gaze flickered toward the device on the table, its light still pulsing, as if waiting. Hesitating for just a moment, he finally turned away, stepping toward the door.

The floorboards creaked beneath his measured steps as he left the room, the distant hum of the device fading behind him.

The narrow staircase creaked under his measured steps as he descended, the scent of old wood and dust lingering in the air. Outside the early morning sky stretched pale blue, tinged with the last wisps of dawn's mist. The city was already stirring, carriages clattering on cobbled streets, the distant call of vendors setting up their stalls, and the rhythmic clang of a blacksmith's hammer shaping metal in the distance.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs, the man paused, fingers brushing absently over the fabric of his coat. His movements were methodical, yet there was an underlying restlessness to them, as

though he carried a weight unseen by others.

After a short pause the man straightened his shoulders and stepped out onto the bustling Victorian street, melting into the crowd as though he had always belonged.

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On the other side of town, the same sun cast its glow over a very different room, one filled with warmth and quiet serenity. The wallpaper, patterned with delicate dusky pink roses, bathed in the golden light, soft and inviting. The polished dark wood furniture gleamed where the sunlight touched it, every surface neat and carefully arranged. Against the far wall stood a pristine white cast-iron bed, its frame ornate and elegant.

Beside it, a baby cot rested in the quiet morning light, its carved wooden spindles standing as a protective barrier around the tiny figure within. Anaya, peaceful and blissfully unaware of the world outside, lay curled in the blankets, her tiny chest rising and falling with each steady breath.

The Doctor stirred first, her face half-buried in the pillow, golden strands of hair tousled from sleep. She blinked groggily, the hazy warmth of the morning wrapping around her. Without thinking, she stretched an arm out, finding Yaz beside her, and with a slow, lazy motion, she pulled her closer. Her hold was almost possessive, an instinctive need to close the space between them.

Yaz barely stirred at first, her body shifting as she was dragged across the sheets. But as the Doctor buried her face against her shoulder, warm and solid against her, Yaz let out a small, sleepy sigh. She didn't protest, didn't even open her eyes, just smiled, her lips curving softly.

Blindly, she reached for the Doctor's hand, lacing their fingers together. The simple gesture spoke more than words ever could. A quiet reassurance. A silent understanding.

And just like that, she drifted back into sleep, safe and content in the embrace of the woman she loved.

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Some time later, Yaz was stirred from sleep by the soft creak of floorboards. Blinking drowsily, she let her eyes adjust to the dim morning light filtering through the curtains.

There, pacing slowly beside the bed, was the Doctor, cradling Anaya in her arms. One hand supported the baby against her shoulder while the other tapped her tiny back in a gentle rhythm. She was humming, a soft, absent-minded melody, something soothing and familiar. The sight made Yaz's heart swell.

The Doctor glanced over, catching Yaz's gaze, and a small, mischievous smile flickered across her face. She lifted a finger to her lips in a silent request for quiet, then carefully leaned over the cot. With practiced ease, she lowered Anaya onto the mattress, tucking the blanket around her small frame. The baby barely stirred, her breathing slow and peaceful.

Satisfied, the Doctor straightened up and turned back toward the bed, grinning cheekily as she tiptoed over. Yaz lifted the blanket in invitation, and the Doctor eagerly crawled back in, immediately snuggling close.

They smushed together with a quiet giggle, the warmth of the covers wrapping around them as they met in a soft, fleeting kiss.

"Did she eat?" Yaz murmured, her voice still thick with sleep.

"Yep," the Doctor confirmed, pressing another quick peck to Yaz's cheek. "And nappies changed. Everything's sorted." She shifted even closer, her voice dropping into a playful murmur. "Now, I'm hoping for a bit of quality time... before we both have to get up."

Yaz huffed a small laugh, her fingers absentmindedly tracing patterns against the Doctor's back. "You mean a lie-in?"

"That's exactly what I mean." The Doctor grinned, resting her forehead against Yaz's. "So, shh. No talking. Just cuddles. Strict cuddle rules."

"We have rules?" She smirked

"We always have rules...Don't mean we can't break them" the Doctor grinned kissing the tip of her nose.

Yaz smirked but didn't argue. Instead, she sighed happily and let herself melt into the warmth of the moment

As they curled together, their bodies nestled under the covers, Yaz couldn't help but bring up the events from the previous day. She shifted slightly, her head resting on the Doctor's chest,

"So, about that machine you found on the market... do you know what it is yet?"

The Doctor's hand absentmindedly traced patterns along Yaz's arm as she thought about the device. "Hmm...It's a temporal device, no doubt about that. But here's the thing...it's part of something else... Bigger. More complicated." She shifted a little, looking down at Yaz with a frown. "I'm not entirely sure what, though. Or how it ended up here. I've never seen anything quite like it before."

Yaz's brow furrowed slightly. "So it's from the future?"

"Could be. Or another timeline altogether...But one thing's for sure...it's not from this time. Which makes it little concerning."

Yaz nodded, her eyes scanning the Doctor's face as she processed the information. "Alright then, what's the plan for today? What do we do now?"

The Doctor paused for a moment, her lips curling into a determined smile. "Well, we're definitely going to the hilltop," she said, her eyes lighting up with the thrill of the chase. "I have a feeling it'll

hold more answers. Those lights, the device...everything's pointing to that place. There's definitely a bigger picture here, Yaz. We just need to piece it together."

Yaz shifted, resting her chin on the Doctor's chest now, her fingers tracing the lines of her shirt. "Sounds like good plan...And I'm in, as always...Just...worried about her" her eyes glimpsed towards the cot.

The Doctor winked at her. "I got this...don't worry, alright?" She gave Yaz's hand a quick squeeze.

"Promise?" She looked up at her

"I promise..." the Doctor smiled kissing her forehead "But first, we get up, get ready, and figure out exactly how to tackle this thing. Maybe a bit of breakfast too." She grinned, "Can't think on an empty stomach, can we?"

Yaz laughed softly. "Egg sandwiches, again?"

"Best fuel for solving mysteries!" the Doctor said with a wink.

"I could think of few other fuels" Yaz grinned cheekily, her hand slipping underneath the covers

"Yeah...that could work too" the Doctor murmured pulling her into a kiss

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The dining area of the small Victorian hotel was warm and inviting, with morning sunlight streaming through tall windows, illuminating the polished wooden tables and ornate wallpaper. The smell of fresh bread, butter, and tea filled the air as guests in elegant dresses and sharp suits conversed in polite murmurs.

At one table, however, things were considerably less refined.

The Doctor was enthusiastically tucking into a plate of toast, eggs, and a pile of something unidentifiable but apparently delicious. "Right, I know we've got a time-sensitive mystery on our hands, but this breakfast..." she gestured dramatically at her plate, "...is an absolute masterpiece. I mean, look at this butter. So creamy!" She popped a bite into her mouth and sighed contentedly.

Yaz smirked as she poured herself some tea. "Glad to see you've got your priorities straight."

Across the table, Hakim was bouncing Anaya lightly on his knee, making exaggerated faces as she gurgled happily. "She's clearly the smartest of us all," he announced. "Not worried about machines or lights on hills, just enjoying the moment." He wiggled his fingers at Anaya, who squealed with delight.

Sonya, however, was not enjoying the moment. She tugged at the front of her corset with a huff. "I swear, if I have to wear this thing for another day, I might actually lose a rib." She leaned back in her chair, only to straighten again with a wince. "How did women survive in these?"

The Doctor, still chewing, pointed at her with a fork. “Ah, well, fun fact! Victorian corsets were actually way more flexible than people think. Unless you’re laced in too tightly. Which…” she squinted at Sonya, “...you probably are.”

“I don’t care,” Sonya huffed, smoothing her dress. “If I’m stuck here, I’m doing it in style. I mean, look at them.” She gestured towards the room, where finely dressed women in delicate gowns and elegant hats sat sipping tea. “Imagine being invited to court!” Her eyes sparkled as she took in the high ceilings and candle-lit chandeliers, fully swept up in the fantasy.

Yaz snorted into her tea. “Sonya, you do realize if we were actually at court, you’d be stuck in a corner with a chaperone, sipping weak tea and trying not to say anything scandalous.”

“Excuse you,” Sonya said, lifting her chin. “I would be the talk of court. My wit and charm would dazzle.”

“Uh-huh.” Yaz smirked. “More like you’d be causing a scandal within five minutes.”

Before Sonya could retort, Hakim cleared his throat. “Right, before we get too caught up in Sonya’s royal aspirations...Doctor, what about the machine? What are we actually dealing with?”

The Doctor swallowed her last bite of toast and wiped her hands on her napkin. “Ah, yes! The machine.” She leaned forward. “So, here’s the thing...it’s not working. At all. Dead as a doornail.”

“So... it’s broken?” Yaz asked.

“Not broken. Just... incomplete,” the Doctor said, tapping her fingers on the table. “It’s only one piece of something bigger. And whatever the rest of it is, it’s not here. At least, not in the market.”

Hakim frowned in thought. “So, it could be anywhere?”

“Possibly.” The Doctor grinned. “But my gut says we’re looking in the right place—Wincobank Hill. The lights, the disappearances, the tech....it’s all connected.”

Hakim considered this. “Alright, so, best-case scenario...we find the missing piece and put it all together.”

“Worst-case scenario?” Yaz asked.

The Doctor shrugged. “It turns out to be something very dangerous, and we have to run for our lives.”

There was a beat of silence before Sonya let out an exaggerated sigh. “Great. At least I’ll look fabulous while running.”

Yaz chuckled and shook her head as the Doctor clapped her hands together. “Right then, eat up, everyone! We’ve got a hill to climb, a mystery to solve, and possibly some running to do. And if we’re lucky, I might even find some custard cream along the way.”

With that, the group returned to their breakfast, the chatter flowing between them...Sonya grumbling about corsets, Yaz teasing her relentlessly, Hakim throwing out increasingly wild theories, and the Doctor, in the middle of it all, happily munching on her toast, absolutely in her element.

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The crisp morning air carried the scent of coal smoke and freshly baked bread as they stepped out onto the bustling streets of Sheffield. The city was already alive with activity, horse-drawn carts rattled along the cobbled roads, vendors called out their wares, and the occasional clatter of a blacksmith's hammer rang out from a nearby forge. Women in long skirts and bonnets hurried past, some carrying baskets filled with goods from the morning markets, while factory workers in soot-streaked clothes trudged towards their labor.

Yaz adjusted her shawl, glancing down at Anaya, who was snug in her mother's arms. "Maybe you and Dad should stay behind," she suggested cautiously. "The hill could be dangerous, and someone should keep Anaya safe."

To Yaz's surprise, her mother immediately shook her head, tightening her grip on the baby. "Absolutely not," she said firmly. "I didn't come all this way to sit around in some boarding house while you lot go running off to investigate strange lights. I want to see what's going on."

Hakim raised his eyebrows. "You do?"

"Yes, I do," she said, determination in her voice. "I have lived through my fair share of strange things since meeting the Doctor, and I have no intention of being left out now. Besides," she added, adjusting Anaya's blanket, "who's to say you lot won't need me?"

The Doctor grinned, stuffing her hands into the pockets of her coat. "Now that's the spirit! If we're all sticking together, we'll just have to be extra careful." She turned on her heel and started walking.

As they weaved through the streets, the Doctor slipped effortlessly into lecture mode, gesturing excitedly as she pointed out details of their surroundings.

"Right! Sheffield, 1890s, thriving steel industry, full of innovation, factories everywhere. The city was absolutely booming, but also pretty grimy, to be honest. Loads of pollution, workers doing long, exhausting shifts, and, oh!....this was around the time Sheffield was known for its cutlery! If you had a fancy dinner set in London, odds are the knives came from here."

She tapped the side of a building as they passed. "See that soot? That's the industrial revolution at work. The air was so thick with smoke back then, some folks swore you could taste the metal in it."

Sonya wrinkled her nose. "Ugh. No wonder my skin feels gross."

Hakim smirked. "And yet, you were just saying how much you wanted to go to court."

"I never said I wanted to *live* here," Sonya retorted.

The Doctor carried on, barely missing a beat. “Now, fun fact...there were some dodgy dealings happening in Sheffield around this time. Lots of secret political meetings, workers organizing protests over poor wages, even some underground societies. If you were looking for a bit of intrigue, this was *the* place to be.”

Yaz glanced around, imagining the city as it must have been in her own time—modern streets replacing the cobbled roads, tall buildings standing where these soot-stained brick houses now stood. It was strange, walking through a place that was both familiar and completely different.

“So, what are we thinking?” Hakim asked. “Are these lights part of some secret society? Some lost technology? Or just a trick of the light?”

The Doctor tilted her head. “Dunno yet. But that’s why we’re going to find out!”

They continued down the road, heading towards the outskirts of the city where Wincobank Hill loomed in the distance. The further they walked, the quieter the streets became, the grand buildings of the city fading into smaller houses and open fields. The air grew fresher, carrying the scent of damp earth and autumn leaves, the towering hill ahead bathed in golden morning light.

As they approached, Sonya let out a low whistle. “Alright, I’ll admit.... that’s nice.”

From this distance, the hill looked peaceful. The trees at its base swayed gently in the breeze.

The Doctor stopped, rocking back on her heels. “Well then,” she said cheerfully, “let’s see what all the fuss is about.”

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The air on Wincobank Hill felt thick, charged with something. The early morning sun cast golden light over the rolling landscape, illuminating the patches of heather and gorse that clung to the hillside. A few twisted old trees stood like silent sentinels, their bare branches reaching skyward. Birds called in the distance, and the wind carried the scent of damp earth and leaves.

But the Doctor saw something no one else did.

She froze mid-step, her eyes going wide as she activated her sonic. A strange shimmer hovered in the air, not quite visible, yet unmistakably there. Like a heatwave rising from the ground, except it wasn’t just distorting the air, it was bending reality itself.

The edges of the trees seemed to ripple when she looked at them from the corner of her eye, only to snap back into place when she focused directly. The colors around her felt... wrong. The greens of the grass were too deep, the browns of the earth too rich, like an oil painting with too much pigment. And then there were the shadows, some stretched too far, while others flickered as though cast by a light that wasn’t really there.

The sky, too, had a strange quality to it. If she tilted her head just right, she could see cracks, thin, spiderwebbing fractures where the blue deepened into something impossibly vast. Like looking at the sky through old glass, warped and imperfect.

She turned a slow circle, adjusting her sonic settings. The readings were off the charts. The very air hummed with unstable energy, like a taut string about to snap but she seemed to be the only one feeling it. To the others, it was just a blustery morning with an odd feeling in the air, but to her, it was like staring at a puzzle with half the pieces missing.

"Babe?" Yaz's voice cut through the tension.

She blinked, realizing she'd been staring at the landscape without speaking. "It's... not good...Something's definitely off," she muttered, stepping forward cautiously.

"Yeah, no kidding," Yaz said, arms crossed. "You're staring at nothing like it owes you money."

The Doctor ignored her, eyes darting over the landscape. To most, the hilltop looked the same as it had for centuries...grassy earth, wind-bent trees, and the remnants of old fortifications. But through the Doctor's eyes, she saw something else. Faint, shimmering distortions, as if the very air was struggling to hold itself together. A ripple in time, barely noticeable, but undeniably there.

"This isn't right," she said shortly, then bend down placing her hand on the wet ground. She could feel it in every cell of her being.

Suddenly Anaya became restless. The Doctor darted towards her baby who was tugging at her grandmother's blouse as though she wanted to claw her way out of her arms.

"You can feel it too...can you?" The Doctor said getting up

"Feel what?" Yaz reched out taking her daughter into her arms

"Something's... broken."

"Broken how?" Yaz asked, shifting Anaya in her arms.

"What's broken?" Nadja asked, her eyes widening in worry

"Time" the Doctor said shortly as others looked at each other with gasps

"What?" Sonya blinked

Yaz frowned. "It looks normal to me."

"Exactly! And that's the problem." The Doctor gestured around her. "This place appears to look normal but it isn't. The way the light bends, the colors, the shadows...none of it's behaving the way it should. It's subtle now, but if this carries on..." She trailed off, running a hand through her hair.

Sonya shifted uncomfortably. "Carries on how?"

The Doctor exhaled sharply. "Imagine a tapestry. If you pull at one loose thread, at first, nothing seems wrong. But keep pulling, and eventually, the whole thing unravels."



Hakim folded his arms, glancing at the hill. "So, you're saying time itself is coming undone?"

The Doctor tilted her head, considering. "Not yet. But something's nudging at it, stretching it in ways it shouldn't be stretched." She spun on her heel. "Which means whatever's causing this is still here. Somewhere."

"Right," Yaz said, nodding slowly. "And that means...?"

"It means something happened here. Something big. Something that disrupted time itself," the Doctor said. "And it's getting worse."

Sonya shivered. "I don't like this. That just sounds way too creepy."

"It's probably just the wind," Nadja suggested, not sure if she's trying to convince herself or the others. "Or maybe the storm last night unsettled the ground?"

The Doctor shot her a look. "Yeah, storms tend to do that. But they don't usually make the laws of time go wibbly-wobbly."

Yaz squinted at the horizon. "You think it's got anything to do with that weird machine you found?"

"Could be," the Doctor admitted, tapping her chin. "If it's a piece of something larger, maybe whatever it belonged to caused this. But why here? And why now?"

Hakim scratched his head. "So let me get this straight...time is broken, and you're not sure why?"

"Welcome to my life," the Doctor sighed.

"Great," Sonya muttered. "Just great. First corsets, now time is broken."

"And it's getting worse," the Doctor added, pacing again. "If I could just...wait. Did anyone else feel that?"

A strange ripple ran through the air, like heat distortion on a hot day. Yaz frowned, reaching out a hand. "I swear, for a second, the ground felt like it wasn't... solid?"

Before anyone could respond, the distant sound of bells rang through the air, loud, urgent, coming from the city below.

The Doctor's head snapped up. "That's not good."

Dark smoke was rising over Sheffield, curling into the sky like an omen.

"A fire," Nadja breathed, eyes wide.

"A big one," Yaz added, shifting Anaya protectively in her arms.

"Right," the Doctor said, already turning on her heel. "Theory time is over...time to move!"

She took off, Yaz close behind. The others exchanged a quick, nervous glance before following, the eerie disturbance on the hill still in their mind but momentarily forgotten as the real-world danger took precedence.

As they rushed down towards the city, one thought nagged at the Doctor.

This wasn't a coincidence.

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By the time they reached the city, the streets were bedlam.

People were shouting, running with buckets of water, while others stood frozen, watching the blaze consume part of a red-bricked building near the city center. Firemen, clad in thick uniforms were already working the pumps, their brass helmets glinting in the firelight. The acrid scent of burning wood and oil filled the air, smoke thickening in the streets, making it hard to breathe.

A woman clutched her shawl, coughing into her sleeve as the Doctor approached. "It just...came from nowhere!"

"What do you mean 'nowhere'?" the Doctor asked, eyes sharp.

The woman shook her head, bewildered. "There was no warning, no spark, no nothing! Just this... sound, like a whistle, and then...boom!"

Yaz frowned. "A whistle?"

An older man, his face streaked with soot, nodded. "Aye. Not a train, though. Higher pitched. For a second, it sounded like... I dunno. Air being torn open....Then..boom! Whole street shook."

That made the Doctor's eyebrows shoot up. "Fascinating."

"Fascinating?!" Nadja hissed, glaring at her. "Doctor, people could be hurt!"

"Oh, I know, I know, absolutely awful, but also...why?" The Doctor whirled to the man. "You're sure there was no explosion beforehand?"

"Nothing! Like it just... fell from the sky."

Hakim looked up. "So, uh... what exactly fell?"

Before anyone could answer, Sonya yelped.

She stumbled forward, nearly tripping, catching herself against Yaz. "Bloody hell!" she snapped, shaking her foot. "What did I just—?"

Then she looked down and froze. A chunk of metal lay on the cobblestones, blackened but oddly intact. It was curved, thick, and stamped with something unmistakable, serial numbers and markings in perfect condition, untouched by rust or time. "Doctor...I think you should look at this"

The Doctor snatched it up instantly, flipping it in her hands. The others barely had time to react before she let out a low, impressed whistle. "Oh, that's new."

The street noise seemed to dull.

Yaz's stomach twisted. "Doctor... what is it?"

The Doctor turned the metal over, her expression shifting from intrigued to deeply, deeply concerned. She tapped one of the engravings, then nodded to herself. "Well... it's a piece of a German SC-500 aerial bomb."

"Whaa?" Yaz gasped "What like from the war?"

The Doctor nodded "Yap..."

A heavy silence.

Then Nadja laughed, high and nervously. "Oh, wonderful. Love that. And why exactly is a Nazi bomb in the middle of Sheffield in the wrong century?!"

"Excellent question!" the Doctor chirped.

"Maybe it just stayed from the war?" Sonya asked

"Which one exactly?" Yaz shot her a look "You daft cow...it's from the second world war"

"Thing is, Sonya...it's not an old bomb." the Doctor's voice dropped. She held up the metal for them to see. The serial numbers, the military stamp, looked brand new. "This just arrived."

A stunned beat.

Hakim's voice was far too calm. "So... you're saying it just... appeared?"

"Correct."

"...Like it fell from the sky."

"Correct again."

Nadja exhaled sharply. "Doctor. What does this mean?"

The Doctor tapped the metal against her palm, eyes fixed on the still-burning building. "It means, Nadja..." Then she turned back, scanning the smoke-filled sky. "Time isn't just bleeding through anymore." She glanced at the others. "It's spilling out."

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The tavern was dimly lit, the air thick with the scent of ale, roasted meat, and the lingering bite of smoke from outside. The fire in the city had been contained, but the unease remained, curling around the room like an unwanted guest.

The Doctor and Yaz's family had squeezed into a wooden booth near the hearth, the fire crackling in the grate doing little to warm the tension between them. Around them, Sheffield's locals muttered in hushed voices, the occasional burst of nervous laughter punctuating the low murmur of conversation.

Sonya pushed her spoon around her stew, not really eating. Hakim, sitting beside her, was nursing a pint, his brow furrowed. Nadja, usually so composed, was gripping her cup a little too tightly, knuckles pale.

"So," Sonya finally said, breaking the silence. "Can we go back to the part where a Nazi bomb just poofed into Victorian Sheffield?"

Hakim exhaled, rubbing his temples. "Yeah. Because that's a thing that happens now, apparently."

The Doctor, sitting opposite them, was rapidly dunking a piece of bread into her stew, taking enthusiastic bites between thoughts. "Not a thing that should happen! Normally, time is a lovely, well-behaved river, flowing in one direction. Sometimes a little wibbly, sometimes a bit wonky, but mostly sensible. But now..." she gestured wildly, nearly knocking over her cup, "it's like someone's punched a great big hole in the dam, and history is leaking out like a burst pipe!"

Nadja blinked. "Right. And what else is going to come pouring through that 'burst pipe'?"

The Doctor wagged a finger at her. "Ah! Excellent question. Could be more Blitz-era bombs, could be a medieval siege weapon, could be a futuristic espresso machine that burns a hole through reality. Who knows! But whatever's happening, it's big. And messy. And very, very bad."

Yaz put the baby bottle on the table and shifted Anaya into her lap. "Okay, but what about the missing kids and livestock? If time is just vomiting random things into Sheffield, could it also be swallowing things up?"

The Doctor's head snapped up, her face lighting up in that 'ooh, you're clever!' way that Yaz had gotten used to. "Yes! Exactly! Disappearances and appearances are two sides of the same coin. If things are dropping in from the past, then things from now could be getting yanked out."

Sonya paled. "So... the kids? They're not dead, they're just...gone?"

The Doctor nodded vigorously. For the first time since they've sat down her expression changing. Line on her forehead getting deeper as if she was hoping she wouldn't have to answer this question, but she did her best to give the answer "Somewhere in time. Sucked in, pulled out, displaced. Could be the Blitz, could be ancient Rome, could be a space station in the year 5000.... They could be anywhere." She said more quietly.

Hakim leaned back, shaking his head. "That's insane...Poor kids. Could you imagine how scared they must be..."

The Doctor didn't answer, her eyes landing on Anaya for a second.

Yaz drummed her fingers on the table. "And how exactly do we fix this? We can fix this? Right?"

The Doctor waved her spoon. "Ahhh. That's the tricky part. We need to find the source—the thing that's messing with time. Could be a rift, could be a rogue time traveler, could be a weird alien artifact just chilling under someone's garden shed." She wagged her eyebrows. "Or a bomb that shouldn't be here."

Nadja, who had been silent for a moment, finally spoke, her voice low. "Doctor. If this doesn't stop... how bad does it get?"

The Doctor stilled.... her expression shifted just slightly. The lighthearted energy dimmed, just for a fraction of a second.

Then she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. "If this keeps happening? Time collapses in on itself. The past and future start bleeding into each other, until there's no 'now' left at all."

A heavy silence settled over the table.

Sonya swallowed. "Cool. No pressure, then."

Yaz exhaled sharply, running a hand through her hair. "Right. So what's the plan, then? There's a plan? Right?"

The Doctor, mid-bite, held up a finger, chewed quickly, and swallowed. Then put her spoon down. "First things first...I need to see where that time traveler vanished into thin air. That's where it all started, which means it's the best place to figure out what's gone wrong."

Hakim frowned. "You mean that guy from the store?"

"Exactly!" The Doctor tapped her temple. "If people and things are being snatched out of time, then that bloke might have been one of the first. Which means there might be traces left behind. Clues. Breadcrumbs. Wibbly-wobbly time nonsense."

Yaz leaned in. "Okay, but say we find out what's causing this. Can it be fixed? More importantly, can you bring those kids back?"

The Doctor hesitated. Just for a moment. A fraction of a second. But Yaz saw it.

"Doctor." Yaz's voice was firm. "Can you get them back?"

The Doctor licked her lips, then exhaled through her nose. "I don't know."

Nadja let out a sharp breath. "God...."

"Look," the Doctor said quickly, leaning forward. "If they're still out there, still somewhere in time, then yes...there's a way. I just have to find the right thread to pull. But we don't know how long they've been gone, or how far they've been thrown. If they're in another era, they might be..." She trailed off.

Sonya's voice was quiet. "Dead...They might be dead?"

The Doctor's fingers tapped against the tabletop. "Time isn't kind. It doesn't care. If we don't fix this fast, those kids could end up growing up in the wrong century. Or worse, in a war. Or lost in deep space...or..."

Yaz's jaw tightened. "Then we better move fast."

The Doctor grinned, some of the usual manic energy returning. "Now you're talking! Come on, team. We've got a store to investigate!"

She leapt up from her seat, tossing a few coins onto the table, already heading for the door.

Hakim looked at Yaz. "This is mental."

"Yep," Yaz said, grabbing her coat. "Hey wait!...Nappy change" she yelled

The Doctor stopped in her tracks "Oh...sorry" she scrunched her nose...."

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The narrow street was quiet, save for the occasional dripping of rain from overhanging rooftops. The shop stood before them, its crooked wooden sign barely legible in the dim light. The windows were clouded with dust, and behind them, odd trinkets and strange, forgotten relics cluttered the shelves.

The Doctor twirled her sonic screwdriver between her fingers before pointing it at the lock. With a quick buzz and a click, the door creaked open.

"Right, in we go!" she declared, stepping inside.

Hakim hesitated at the threshold. "Are we just... breaking in?"

"More like... reclaiming access to important information," the Doctor said breezily, already scanning the dimly lit room.

Inside, the shop smelled of aged wood, mothballs, and something metallic beneath it all. Shelves sagged under the weight of ancient books, tarnished silverware, peculiar sculptures, and a dozen other things that seemed plucked from different times.

Yaz swept her gaze across the room. "Weird place. Looks like the kind of shop you'd find cursed objects in."

"No such thing as curses," the Doctor muttered, but she was distracted. Her eyes had caught something.

At the back of the room, a narrow staircase wound its way upward, the wooden steps worn from decades—maybe centuries—of use. She took a step forward.

"Upstairs," she murmured. "That's where we need to be."

Nadja shivered. "You always know these things, don't you?"

The Doctor shot her a grin. "Not always. Just most of the time."

One by one, they followed the Doctor up the creaking staircase. Dust motes danced in the dim light filtering through a small attic window. The air was thick, as if time itself had been sitting still for too long.

As they reached the top, the Doctor took it all in—the low, slanted ceiling, the wooden beams, the single bed shoved against the far wall. A small table sat in the middle of the room, scattered with strange blueprints, loose gears, and—

"This is it!" Hakim's voice practically cracked with excitement. "This is the machine!" He rushed forward

The Doctor's eyebrows shot up. "Well, well, well."

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Meanwhile, outside, footsteps echoed softly against the damp cobblestones.

A man walked briskly down the alleyway, his long coat billowing slightly with each step. His expression was unreadable, but his pace quickened as he reached the shop's door.

He froze. The lock was undone.

His fingers twitched, and he reached into his pocket, gripping something tightly.

Then, without hesitation, he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

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Hakim's fingers were just inches from the device when

"Aaaa—aa!" The Doctor's voice rang out in warning. "Don't touch!"

Hakim froze, hands hovering above the strange machine. The Doctor's eyes had widened, her breath catching in her throat as she stared at the symbols carved into the metal casing.

Yaz, standing just behind her, glanced at the Doctor's expression. "Is this...?" she asked cautiously.

Before the Doctor could answer, the sound of footsteps on the wooden stairs made everyone snap to attention. The boards groaned under slow, deliberate steps.

The Doctor acted on instinct. With one swift motion, she grabbed Yaz and pushed her behind, stepping protectively in front of the group. The sonic was already in her hand, raised and ready.

The door creaked open.

And standing there, in the doorway, was a man in a long brown trench coat. A man with wild, gravity-defying hair. A man holding a sonic screwdriver pointed right back at her.

The room fell into absolute silence.

His deep brown eyes scanned the group, flickering over Hakim, Nadja, Yaz holding a baby and Sonya before landing on the Doctor. His brow furrowed, lips parting slightly. "What?"

A single word. Disbelief, confusion, and sheer bewilderment packed into that one syllable.

The Doctor's mouth opened, then closed. Her brain, usually running at full speed, seemed to short-circuit entirely. She blinked.

"What?" he repeated, taking a step forward, expression shifting from confusion to something closer to alarm. "No, no, no, no, no. That's...no! That's not right. That is...What?"

For the first time in a long, long time, the Doctor had no idea what to say.

The silence was shattered as Sonya, eyebrows raised, gestured at the strange man and asked the obvious "Who's this bloke?"

The Doctor, still staring, still processing, still absolutely stunned, answered without thinking. "Me."

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