

# The Shape of Home

by BeneathTheBrownstone

The library chamber, which served as the tunnel community's central gathering space, had never felt quite so stifling. Catherine pressed the back of her hand against her forehead, feeling the dampness there, and wondered how the children managed their lessons in this heat. Even the stone walls, which usually maintained their cool, ancient composure, seemed to radiate warmth back into the air—as though the earth itself had grown tired of holding back the summer sun.

"It's Eric's fault, really," Mouse announced, spreading a hand-drawn map across the worn wooden table. His fingers left small smudges on the parchment. "Eric heard about the swimming cavern from Kipper, and then Eric said, 'Why don't we go swimming?' and now—" He gestured broadly at the assembled group. "Big trip. Very big."

Vincent stood beside Catherine, close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from him in the already-warm air, yet she found herself leaning closer rather than away. His hand rested lightly on the small of her back, a gesture so natural now that she barely registered it consciously—only felt its absence when he moved away.

"Eric had a good idea," Vincent said, his deep voice carrying that particular tone of gentle authority that made the children listen and the adults trust. "Kipper's knowledge of the cavern gave him the inspiration, but Eric's enthusiasm has been infectious. The swimming cavern is far, but it's worth the journey. Especially now." He glanced upward, as though he could see through layers of stone and earth to the blazing summer sky above. "The tunnels haven't been this warm in years."

Jamie pulled her dark hair away from her neck, twisting it into a knot. "Two hours each way is a long walk for the little ones. Patrick's legs are still pretty short."

"Which is why we should make it worth their while," Vincent continued. "Not just a day trip—we'll camp there. Two nights. Give them time to really enjoy it, to explore. They've earned it."

Catherine felt a swell of affection watching him plan, seeing how carefully he considered each child's needs and capabilities. This was Vincent in his element—protector, teacher, father figure to so many. She'd seen him in her apartment above, learning to navigate her world of coffee makers and television news, but here, in these tunnels, he moved with absolute certainty.

"Two nights means more supplies," Mouse said, already making notes in the margins of his map. "More food. More blankets. More—"

"William's already preparing the provisions," Vincent assured him. "I spoke with him this morning. He's planning enough food for all of us—the children and the four of us as adults."

"Seven children," Jaime confirmed, counting on her fingers. "Samantha, Eric, Zach, Kipper, Patrick, Geoffrey, and Amanda. All of them finished their lessons for the term. All of them have been asking about the swimming since Eric wouldn't stop talking about it."

Mouse grinned. "Eric talks a lot. Like Mouse. Father says Mouse talks too much, but Eric talks more."

Catherine laughed, the sound echoing softly off the stone walls. "I think Eric comes by it honestly. He's excited. They all are." She paused, then added more quietly, "I am too."

Vincent's hand moved from her back to briefly squeeze her shoulder, and when she looked up at him, his blue eyes held that particular warmth reserved only for her. "I'm glad you'll be with us."

"I almost wasn't," Catherine admitted, and even now, hours after her conversation with Joe, she felt the residual stress of it. "Joe was not happy about my asking for Friday off. We've got the Salvattore trial starting Monday, and he kept saying I should be preparing, reviewing depositions, making sure every detail is perfect." She shook her head. "I practically had to beg. I definitely had to grovel."

"But you convinced him," Jaime said, smiling.

"I convinced him. Or wore him down. I'm not sure which." Catherine looked around at the three faces watching her—Mouse with his eager, open expression; Jaime with her knowing smile; Vincent with something deeper, something that made her heart beat faster even after all these months together. "I wasn't going to miss this. Not for Joe, not for any trial. This is important."

"Catherine comes Below on weekends," Mouse observed matter-of-factly. "But this is Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Three days. Very good."

Vincent's lips quirked in that almost-smile that Catherine had learned to read like a book. "Catherine has been spending more time Below lately. When her work permits."

It was a careful understatement. The truth was more complicated and simpler than Vincent's words suggested. Yes, she came Below on weekends when she could. But Vincent spent most nights in her apartment now, arriving after dark and leaving before dawn, sharing her bed and her life in ways that still felt miraculous. The boundaries between their two worlds had blurred, and she found herself grateful for it every single day.

"We leave Friday morning," Vincent said, bringing the conversation back to logistics. "Early, before the day grows too hot. William will have everything packed and ready. We'll take the northern route—it's longer but easier for the children. We should reach the cavern by early afternoon."

"Time for swimming before dinner," Mouse added enthusiastically.

"And Saturday for exploring," Jaime said. "There are passages near the cavern the children haven't seen. Nothing dangerous, but beautiful."

"And Sunday we return," Vincent finished. "Back here by the afternoon."

Catherine felt the anticipation building in her chest, a fizzing excitement that reminded her of childhood summers, of promised adventures. She reached for Vincent's hand, lacing her fingers through his, feeling the familiar texture of his palm against hers.

"The children are going to love this."

"Yes," Vincent agreed, and his voice held a note of something wistful, something that spoke of his own childhood in these tunnels, of summers spent exploring and discovering. "They will."

Mouse began rolling up his map, already muttering about supplies and routes and things he needed to remember. Jamie stood, stretching, commenting again about the heat. But Catherine stayed where she was, her hand in Vincent's, looking around at this chamber that had become so familiar, so dear.

In two days, they would leave this hub behind and venture deeper into the earth, toward cool water and stone chambers and two nights with Vincent and the children, with this community that had claimed her heart as surely as the man beside her had.

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The journey to the swimming cavern unfolded like a story the children would tell for weeks afterward—an adventure marked not by danger or difficulty, but by the simple joy of traveling together through passages that grew progressively cooler as they descended.

Patrick's legs had given out almost there, his small face crumpling with exhaustion and embarrassment, until Vincent had crouched down without a word, offering his broad back. The boy had climbed on with a mixture of relief and wonder, his arms wrapped around Vincent's neck, his cheek pressed against Vincent's shoulder. Catherine had watched them, her heart doing something complicated in her chest at the sight of Vincent's patience, his gentleness with the tired child.

Amanda, younger still, had required different assistance. Mouse and Jaime had taken turns holding her hand, swinging her between them occasionally when the passage allowed, her delighted giggles echoing off the stone walls. The other children—Eric, Samantha, Zach, Kipper, and Geoffrey—had ranged ahead and fallen back in turns, their excitement building with each step closer to their destination.

When they finally emerged into the cavern itself, Catherine had caught her breath.

She'd expected water, of course. A pool, perhaps, dark and still. What she hadn't anticipated was the beach—a genuine crescent of pale sand that looked impossibly soft against the dark stone, sloping gently into water so clear she could see the rocky bottom even in the dim light of their lanterns. The cavern ceiling arched high overhead, lost in shadows, and the air here was blessedly cool after the warmth of the upper tunnels.

"It's perfect," she'd whispered, and Vincent had smiled, that rare, full smile that transformed his face.

Setting up camp had been organized chaos. The children wanted to swim immediately, of course, but the adults had insisted on establishing their sleeping areas first. Vincent and Catherine had claimed a small alcove off the main cavern—private enough for intimacy, but positioned so they could see the beach and hear everything happening in the larger space. Catherine had helped Vincent spread their sleeping pads, acutely aware of the domesticity of the gesture, of what it meant that they would share this space so naturally, so publicly within the community.

By the time they'd finished setting up, the children were practically vibrating with impatience. But Mouse had been firm: "Food first. Swimming after. Everyone too excited to eat on the way—now everyone hungry."

He wasn't wrong. They'd skipped their planned lunch entirely because the children had refused to stop, too eager to reach the cavern. Now, as the adults began unpacking the provisions William had carefully prepared for them, Catherine could see the exhaustion beginning to show beneath the excitement. They needed to eat.

The meal came together quickly—cold chicken, fresh bread, cheese, fruit, and William's special lemon cookies that made Eric's eyes go wide. They ate sitting on the sand, the children's chatter filling the cavern with echoes and laughter. Catherine found herself watching them, these children who had become so dear to her, and felt something settle in her chest. Contentment, perhaps. Belonging.

She thought, briefly, of the previous summer. Of the trip to Connecticut she'd planned, the chance to show Vincent her world, the lake and sunshine of her childhood. It hadn't worked out—Father, the community, and Vincent's understandable hesitation about venturing so far from the tunnels. She'd been disappointed then, had felt the loss of that shared experience.

But this—this almost made up for it.

After the meal, the children scattered to play. Samantha, Zach, and Geoffrey immediately waded into the water, their shouts of delight bouncing off the cavern walls. Eric had discovered the potential of the sand and was attempting, with more enthusiasm than skill, to build a castle. His efforts kept collapsing, but he persisted with admirable determination.

Amanda and Patrick, the youngest, played at the water's edge under Jamie's watchful eye. Neither child knew how to swim yet, but they splashed and giggled, their small hands scooping water and sand in equal measure. Jamie sat nearby, her feet in the shallows, ready to intervene if either ventured too deep.

Catherine helped Mouse pack away the remaining food, sealing containers and organizing supplies. She was happy—genuinely, deeply happy.

She was still feeling that warmth when Vincent stood and began unlacing his boots.

Catherine watched, curious, as he removed his socks and set them aside. Then his hands went to the laces of his shirt, and she realized what he intended. She'd seen Vincent without his shirt before, of course—in the privacy of her apartment, in intimate moments. But here? In front of the children?

He pulled the shirt over his head in one smooth motion, revealing the powerful muscles of his chest and shoulders, and the tawny fur covering his torso. Then, without hesitation or self-consciousness, he walked to the water's edge and dove in.

Catherine stared.

Vincent surfaced in the deeper water, his hair slicked back, water streaming down his face and chest. Eric immediately abandoned his sandcastle and splashed toward him. Samantha and Zach followed, and within moments Vincent was surrounded by children, all of them laughing, all of them completely comfortable with his presence, his appearance, his bare-chested ease in the water.

It was so natural. So unselfconscious. Vincent moved through the water with the children as though this were the most ordinary thing in the world, and perhaps—Catherine realized—for him, it was.

She found herself moving toward Jaime, drawn by curiosity she couldn't quite name.

"Does he always swim like that?" Catherine asked, keeping her voice casual. "Without his shirt?"

Jamie glanced up, then followed Catherine's gaze to where Vincent was teaching Zach a swimming stroke, his movements patient and sure.

"Yes," she said simply. "Always has, as long as I've known him. Why wouldn't he?"

Why wouldn't he? Such a simple question, but it carried weight. Catherine was still processing. In her world—the world above—Vincent hid. Covered himself. Protected himself from stares, questions, and fear. But here, in this cavern with these children who loved him, he was simply Vincent. Swimming. Playing. Being.

She watched him lift Eric onto his shoulders, watched the boy's delighted shriek as Vincent pretended to stumble, watched the absolute trust in every child's face as they surrounded him in the water.

This was Vincent's world. And somehow, miraculously, it had become hers too.

Catherine stood, brushing sand from her legs. She'd worn her swimsuit beneath her clothes for exactly this reason—anticipating that she'd want to join them, though she hadn't been entirely certain until this moment. Now, watching Vincent with the children, the decision felt inevitable.

She pulled her shirt over her head, then unzipped her pants, stepping out of them with practiced ease. The swimsuit was simple—navy blue, modest—but it felt like shedding a layer of her surface self. She folded her clothes neatly and set them aside, then turned to Jaime.

"Coming in?"

Jamie's face brightened. "Yes. Amanda's been asking when you'd join us."

They waded in together, the water cool against Catherine's skin, shocking and refreshing all at once. The children noticed immediately. Amanda squealed with delight and splashed toward them, her small legs churning through the shallows. Patrick followed more cautiously, his hand reaching for Jaime's.

"Catherine!" Eric called from deeper water. "You're swimming!"

"I am," Catherine confirmed, moving to where Jamie stood with the two youngest children. The water came to her waist here, perfect for what she had in mind.

She knelt down so she was at eye level with Amanda, her hands gentle on the child's small shoulders. "Do you want to learn something special?" Catherine asked. "Something that feels like flying?"

Amanda nodded solemnly, her dark eyes wide with trust.

"It's called floating," Catherine explained. "You lie back in the water, and the water holds you up. Like magic."

She demonstrated first, lying back in the shallow water, her body buoyant, her face tilted toward the cavern ceiling. She could hear Amanda's delighted gasp. When Catherine righted herself, the child was practically vibrating with eagerness.

"My turn! My turn!"

Catherine guided Amanda backward slowly, her hands supporting the child's back. "Just relax," she murmured. "Let the water hold you. I've got you."

Amanda's small body went rigid at first, fear and excitement warring in her expression. But Catherine's voice was steady, reassuring, and gradually the child began to trust. Her body relaxed, her arms spread wide, and suddenly she was floating—truly floating—her face peaceful, her eyes reflecting the cavern's dim light.

"I'm flying!" Amanda breathed, wonder in every syllable.

"You are," Catherine confirmed, her heart full at the sight of it.

Beside them, Jamie was working with Patrick, who was proving more cautious. But Jamie had the patience to match Vincent's, and gradually Patrick, too, began to relax into the water's support. His small face scrunched in concentration, but when he finally achieved that moment of weightlessness, his grin was enormous.

The afternoon deepened around them. Vincent continued with the older children, teaching them proper swimming strokes, while Catherine and Jamie worked with Amanda and Patrick, practicing their floating and building their confidence in the water. The children's laughter echoed off the cavern walls, a sound so pure and joyful that Catherine found herself laughing too.

But gradually, imperceptibly, the light began to change. The shadows in the cavern's upper reaches grew deeper. The water, which had felt refreshing in the afternoon heat, began to feel cool. Catherine noticed Eric's movements slowing, Samantha's splashes becoming less enthusiastic.

"I think someone's getting tired," Jamie murmured, watching as Zach floated on his back, his eyes half-closed.

Vincent seemed to notice it at the same moment. He called out, his voice carrying easily across the water: "Time to get out, everyone. Dinner's waiting."

There was a moment of protest—children never wanted to leave the water—but their exhaustion won out. They waded toward shore, dripping and shivering slightly as the cooler air hit their wet skin. Mouse, who had been tending the camp, immediately wrapped the children in the towels they'd brought.

Catherine and Jamie emerged last, and Catherine retrieved her clothes, pulling them on over her damp swimsuit. The fabric clung uncomfortably, but she didn't mind. She felt alive in a way she rarely did in her surface life—present, engaged, part of something larger than herself.

The evening meal was a quieter affair than lunch. The children were genuinely tired now, their earlier frenetic energy replaced by a pleasant drowsiness. They ate the hearty stew Mouse and Vincent had prepared, along with fresh bread, with single-minded focus, barely pausing for conversation. Even Eric, who could talk endlessly, was mostly silent, concentrating on his food.

As darkness fell completely, the adults settled the children into their sleeping areas. Samantha, Zach, Kipper, and Geoffrey were sharing one section of the cavern, with Mouse keeping watch nearby. Eric had claimed a spot close to them, already half-asleep. Amanda and Patrick curled up together under a pile of blankets, their small bodies exhausted from the day's adventures.

Catherine helped Vincent arrange their alcove for the night. They'd brought a thick, heavy wool blanket—and spread it over their sleeping pads, creating a cocoon of warmth and privacy.

When they settled beneath it, Vincent pulled Catherine against him immediately, his arms wrapping around her from behind, drawing her back against his chest. She could feel the steady beat of his heart, the warmth of his body, the solid reality of him surrounding her.

"Thank you," he murmured against her hair, "for being here. For being part of this."

Catherine turned in his arms, needing to see his face. In the dim light of their single lantern, his features were soft, almost vulnerable. She reached up and traced the line of his jaw.

"Where else would I be?" she asked softly.

He answered by kissing her—slowly, deeply, with a tenderness that made her chest ache. His hands moved to her face, cradling it gently, and she pressed closer, her fingers threading through his hair. The kiss tasted of the cavern's cool air and something uniquely Vincent—something that had become as necessary to her as breathing.

When they finally broke apart, Catherine rested her forehead against his, their breathing synchronized in the quiet darkness of the alcove.

"I love you," she whispered.

Vincent's arms tightened around her, pulling her back against his chest. "I love you," he replied, his voice rough with emotion. "More than I have words for."

They settled into sleep like that, Catherine cradled against Vincent's chest, his arms around her, the thick blanket wrapped around them both. Outside their alcove, the cavern was quiet except for the soft sound of water lapping against stone and the gentle breathing of sleeping children.

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Morning came gently to the cavern. There was no sunrise here, no gradual brightening of sky—only the slow stirring of bodies, the soft murmur of voices, and the rekindling of lanterns that pushed back the darkness. Catherine woke to the sound of children's whispers and the warmth of Vincent's arms still wrapped around her.

She turned carefully, not wanting to disturb him, but found his eyes already open, watching her with an expression so tender it made her breath catch.

"Good morning," he murmured, his voice still rough with sleep.

"Good morning," she replied, and kissed him softly before reluctantly pulling away from their warm cocoon.

Outside the alcove, the cavern was coming alive. Mouse was already stoking a small fire for breakfast, while Jamie helped Amanda and Patrick wash their faces in the shallow water. The older children were emerging from their sleeping areas, stretching and yawning, their hair tousled and their faces still soft with sleep.

Mouse had prepared a simple breakfast—bread, cheese, dried fruit, and hot tea that steamed in the cool cavern air. The children ate with the quiet focus of the newly awakened, but Catherine could see energy building in them, anticipation for the day ahead.

It was Samantha who voiced what they were all thinking. "Can we explore?" she asked, looking hopefully at Vincent. "There are so many passages we haven't seen yet."

Vincent considered this, his gaze sweeping the cavern's perimeter where several dark openings led to unknown depths.

"Yes," he said finally. "We'll explore together. Stay close, and stay with the group."

The children's excitement was immediate and infectious. Even Patrick and Amanda, who had been content to play at the water's edge, perked up at the prospect of adventure. Catherine found herself caught up in it too, the simple joy of discovery calling to something deep within her.

They set out after breakfast, Vincent leading with a lantern, Jamie bringing up the rear with another. Catherine walked near the middle of the group, keeping an eye on the younger children. The passage Vincent chose sloped gently downward, its walls smooth from centuries of water flow.

"I've been here before," Vincent said, his voice echoing slightly in the confined space. "This passage leads to —"

He stopped abruptly.

Catherine nearly walked into his back. "Vincent?"

He stood perfectly still, his lantern raised high, illuminating a branching passage that split off to the right. The opening was narrow, easily missed in the darkness, and partially concealed by a natural fold in the rock.

"I've never seen this before," he said quietly, and Catherine heard genuine surprise in his voice.

"Never?" Eric pressed forward, his eyes wide. "But you know everything about the tunnels!"

"Not everything, apparently." Vincent's tone held a note of wonder that Catherine had rarely heard. He moved closer to the opening, examining it carefully. "The rock formation here—it must have shifted. Or perhaps I simply never noticed it in all my years of coming here."

"Can we go in?" Zach asked, practically bouncing with excitement.

Vincent hesitated only a moment before nodding. "Carefully. Single file. Hold onto the person in front of you."

The passage was tight enough that Vincent had to turn sideways in places, his broad shoulders barely fitting through. Catherine followed close behind, one hand on his back, feeling the children form a chain behind her. The air grew cooler as they descended, and she could hear water dripping somewhere in the darkness ahead.

Then the passage opened up.

Catherine's breath caught in her throat.

They stood at the entrance to a chamber unlike anything she had ever seen. Vincent's lantern light swept across the space, and everywhere it touched, Catherine saw evidence of human hands, human lives, human history stretching back into unimaginable time.

The walls were covered in drawings—petroglyphs etched deep into the stone, painted figures in faded ochre and charcoal black. Animals she recognized: deer, fish, what might have been a bear. And human figures, dozens of them, engaged in activities she could only guess at. Hunting. Dancing. Gathering around what looked like fires.

But it wasn't just the drawings. As her eyes adjusted, Catherine realized the chamber was filled with artifacts. Pottery vessels of various sizes sat in carefully arranged niches carved into the walls—some intact, others cracked but still whole, their surfaces decorated with intricate geometric patterns. Spears leaned against the far wall, their stone points still sharp after who knew how many centuries. Tools lay scattered on natural stone shelves: scrapers, awls, what looked like grinding stones.

And hanging from rock formations, impossibly preserved in the dry, cool air, were tapestries. The fabric was so old it seemed to shimmer in the lantern light, threads worn thin but still holding their ancient patterns. Catherine couldn't imagine how they had survived, but there they were—woven with designs that echoed the pottery, the wall paintings, speaking of a culture sophisticated enough to create beauty alongside utility.

"Oh," Amanda breathed, and the single syllable held all the wonder in the world.

The children stood frozen for a long moment, simply staring. Then, as if released from a spell, they moved forward—carefully, instinctively understanding that this place demanded reverence. Samantha approached the nearest wall, her fingers hovering just above the painted figures, not quite touching. Eric knelt to examine a pottery vessel, his face inches from its intricate patterns. Geoffrey and Zach discovered a collection of smaller tools, their young minds puzzling over what each might have been used for.

Catherine found herself drawn to one of the tapestries—a large piece that hung from a natural overhang, its patterns still visible despite the passage of time. Spirals and lines, geometric shapes that might have held meaning she could never understand. She stood before it, hardly daring to breathe, aware that she was looking at something created by human hands hundreds, perhaps thousands of years ago.

She felt Vincent's presence beside her before she heard him. He stood close, his shoulder nearly touching hers, his own gaze fixed on the ancient weaving.

"I had no idea this was here," he said softly, his voice filled with genuine astonishment. "All these years of coming to the swimming cavern, and I never knew." He gestured at the walls, the artifacts, the tapestries that seemed to float in the lantern light. "People lived here. Or used this place for something important enough to leave all this behind."

"It's incredible," she whispered.

"Yes." But when he looked at her, she knew he wasn't talking only about the chamber. His hand found hers in the darkness, their fingers intertwining. "I'm glad you're here to see it. To share this."

The simple words carried so much weight. Catherine understood what he was really saying—that her presence made the discovery more meaningful, that sharing wonder with her had become as necessary to him as breathing. She squeezed his hand, unable to speak past the sudden tightness in her throat.

"Vincent! Catherine! Look!" Kipper's voice echoed from the far side of the chamber. They turned to see him pointing at something on the wall, his face glowing with excitement.

They made their way over, the other children clustering around. Kipper had found a section where the petroglyphs were particularly elaborate—a large panel showing what appeared to be a gathering or

ceremony. Dozens of human figures surrounded a central image that might have been a fire, their arms raised, their bodies captured in what looked like dance or celebration.

They spent nearly an hour in the chamber, the children exploring every corner while the adults watched with gentle vigilance. Mouse discovered a cache of arrowheads, each one perfectly knapped, the craftsmanship evident, even after all this time. Jamie found what appeared to be a grinding stone, with a smooth depression worn into its center, evidence of countless hours of use.

Patrick and Amanda, too young to fully understand what they were seeing, nevertheless sensed the importance of the place. They moved quietly, their usual exuberance tempered by the hushed atmosphere, their small hands reaching out to touch the pottery with a gentleness that surprised Catherine.

She found herself watching Vincent as much as she watched the chamber. He moved among the children with his usual grace, answering their questions, pointing out details they might have missed, but there was something different in his manner—a lightness, a joy that seemed to radiate from him. When he caught her watching, his smile was so open, so unguarded, that she felt her heart turn over in her chest.

She realized she wanted to belong to this world as fully as she belonged to Vincent.

"We should head back," Vincent said eventually, though Catherine could hear the reluctance in his voice.

The children protested, but mildly, their energy finally beginning to flag. They formed their chain again, this time with Geoffrey leading and Vincent bringing up the rear, making sure no one was left behind.

As they made their way back through the narrow passage, Catherine heard the children already planning how they would describe the chamber to the others, their voices overlapping in excitement. She smiled, knowing that this discovery would become part of the tunnel's lore, a story told and retold, growing more magical with each telling.

When they emerged back into the main cavern, Mouse looked up with curiosity. He had been preparing lunch, and the smell of cooking food filled the air.

"Where did you go?" Mouse asked, noting the children's flushed, excited faces.

"We found something," Eric announced, practically vibrating with the need to share. "A secret chamber! With drawings and tapestries and—"

The words tumbled out, all seven children talking at once, their descriptions overlapping, contradicting, and building on each other, until the chamber they described sounded like something from a fairy tale.

Catherine caught Vincent's eye across the chaos and saw him smiling—not at the children's exaggerations, but at their joy, their wonder, their absolute certainty that they had discovered something miraculous.

Because they had.

Later, after lunch, after the children had finally exhausted themselves with retellings and had scattered to play in the water again, Catherine found herself sitting beside Vincent on the small beach. His arm was around her shoulders, and she leaned into his warmth as she watched the children splash and laugh.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"For what?"

"For this. All of this." She gestured at the cavern, the children, the hidden chamber they'd discovered. "For letting me be part of it."

Vincent turned to look at her, his expression serious. "Catherine, you are part of it. You've always been part of it, ever since you opened your heart to us."

"I know," she said. "But today—finding that chamber with you, seeing your face when you realized it was new even to you—it made me understand something."

"What?"

She took a breath, trying to find the right words. "That this world you've built—it's not static. It's not finished. There are always new things to discover, new wonders to find. And I want to be here for all of it. I want to explore every passage, find every hidden chamber, share every moment of wonder." She paused, then added softly, "With you."

Vincent's arm tightened around her, and when he spoke, his voice was rough with emotion. "I want that too. More than I can say."

They sat in silence for a while, watching the children play, listening to the sound of water and laughter echoing off the cavern walls. Catherine felt something settle deep in her chest—a sense of rightness, of belonging, of home.

She had found where she truly belonged, with this man and this community that had become her own.

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