

The First Wrong Beat

Canon placement: Eleven years before “The Second Heartbeat”

At seventeen, Imani Vale thought fear had a rhythm because everyone around her was screaming. Then she realized the second pulse beneath her sternum was not hers.

The pier buckled. Black lake water climbed through broken boards as if gravity had changed its mind. A man reached for her, begging for help, and three quick knocks struck inside her ribs. Human face. Not human underneath.

Imani stepped back. The man smiled too late.

That hesitation saved her. Something wearing him lunged where she had been. The boards gave way beneath it.

Later, wrapped in a silver emergency blanket, Imani told a paramedic, “My heart warned me.”

He wrote shock on his clipboard.

Across the triage tent, a young Directorate researcher named Malachi Reed looked up from a monitor that had recorded the same impossible rhythm.