The Lake Michigan File

Canon placement: Eleven years before the main story

The first person to believe Imani Vale was not a doctor, police officer, or grieving parent. It was a junior physicist with a badge he was not supposed to have yet.

Malachi Reed stood outside the emergency triage tent holding a borrowed Directorate tablet. Forty-two people were missing. The lakeside festival had collapsed into panic after a section of pier seemed to fold into black water. Official responders called it structural failure. Directorate instruments called it nothing at all.

Then a waveform appeared.

Not on their sensors. On a medical monitor connected to a seventeen-year-old survivor.

Imani sat wrapped in foil, wet hair stuck to her cheeks, arguing with a paramedic.

“I’m telling you, it happens before they change.”

“Before who changes?”

“The people who aren’t people.”

The paramedic glanced toward a police officer. Shock, his expression said.

Malachi stepped closer.

Imani’s monitor jumped: one ordinary heartbeat, then three rapid spikes layered over it.

She looked directly at him.

“No,” she said. “Not you.”

Malachi stopped.

A man in a rescue jacket approached from behind him.

Three rapid spikes struck the monitor again.

Imani stood so quickly the blanket fell.

“Move.”

The rescuer smiled.

Too late.

Malachi moved because the terrified girl sounded certain. A second later, the rescuer’s arm bent backward at the elbow and black veins flooded his throat.

Directorate agents opened fire.

Afterward, while everyone shouted, Malachi stared at Imani’s cardiac trace.

The instruments had detected the creature only after it transformed.

Imani had detected it first.

A senior researcher took the tablet from him. “We have a viable biological detector.”

Malachi looked at the girl shaking beneath a new silver blanket.

“She has a name.”

The researcher barely heard him.

“Get me every medical record. Full cardiac workup. Neurological imaging. Blood chemistry.”

Imani looked across the tent and met Malachi’s eyes.

He would remember that look for eleven years.

Not gratitude.

Not fear.

A warning.

Years later, when she told him he had helped build a machine out of her trauma, he would not defend himself. Because the first blueprint for Orpheus had begun here—not with a machine, but with adults deciding that surviving something impossible made a seventeen-year-old useful.