

HEARTBEAT PROTOCOL

A Thriller Short Story

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Protector Romance • Mutual Trust • High Stakes

1. THE SECOND HEARTBEAT

Imani Vale knew danger by rhythm. Not metaphorically. Not in the way people said their heart skipped when a stranger followed them down a dark street. Her heart actually told her. The first beat was hers. The second belonged to whatever should not have been there. It began as a pressure beneath her sternum, followed by a second pulse that did not match her own. Slow for ghosts. Fast for things that hunted. Three rapid knocks for something wearing a human face.

Tonight, the second heartbeat was sprinting.

Imani stood beneath the white lights of Platform Nine in Union Station, one hand inside her charcoal coat and the other wrapped around the handle of a black security case. Commuters flowed around her, impatient and unaware.

Thump.

Her pulse.

Thump-thump-thump.

The warning.

She scanned the crowd.

A businessman arguing into an earpiece. A mother tugging a sleepy child. Two teenagers laughing over a phone. A station employee pushing a yellow mop bucket. Then the employee looked at her. His smile arrived a fraction too late. Three rapid beats hammered behind Imani's ribs. Human face. Not human underneath. She turned away without changing pace.

"Control," she murmured into the microphone hidden in her collar. "Contact confirmed. West concourse. One mimic."

Static answered.

Then a man's voice.

"Your signal is breaking."

Imani frowned. "Repeat."

"Vale, your signal—"

The lights died. The station inhaled darkness. Someone screamed. Imani dropped the security case, drew the compact pistol from beneath her coat, and pivoted toward where the station employee had been. Her heartbeat went wild. The emergency lights flashed red. The employee stood ten feet away. His mouth opened. Too far. His jaw unhinged farther. Too far. Black veins crawled up his neck. Imani fired twice. The first round struck his shoulder. The second caught him in the chest. He staggered but did not fall.

"Of course," she muttered.

The mimic rushed her.

She stepped aside, caught his wrist, and used his momentum to drive him into a steel column. His skin rippled beneath her grip as though something underneath was trying to remember how bones were arranged.

The thing hissed.

Imani slammed the muzzle beneath its chin.

"Try someone else."

She fired. The body collapsed. For one second, silence. Then her warning heartbeat accelerated. Not one. More. Shapes moved beyond the red emergency lights. Five. Maybe six. Imani snatched up the case and ran.

"Control, multiple hostiles. Extraction compromised."

Static. She reached the service corridor just as something struck the locked door behind her. The metal bowed inward. She sprinted down the narrow hallway, boots pounding concrete. The second heartbeat was so loud now that it seemed to vibrate through her teeth. At the end of the corridor waited a black armored SUV. The rear door opened.

"Get in!"

Imani dove inside. The vehicle moved before the door had fully closed.

She rolled upright, pistol raised—

—and froze.

A man sat across from her. Early thirties. Deep brown skin. Broad shoulders under a dark suit. No tie. A faint scar cut through one eyebrow. His hands were unrestrained, but two armed agents sat on either side of him as if restraints would have been unnecessary theater. He studied Imani with calm, dark eyes. Her heart beat once. Only once. Imani stared at him. The second heartbeat was gone. Not fading. Gone. For the first time in eleven years, the supernatural world had become silent. She lowered the pistol by an inch. The man tilted his head.

"You must be Imani Vale."

Her fingers tightened around the weapon.

"Who are you?"

One of the agents answered.

"Your assignment."

The man smiled without warmth.

"Malachi Reed."

Imani's heart gave one ordinary beat. And nothing answered it. That frightened her more than the monsters chasing them.

2. THE MAN WHO MADE MONSTERS QUIET

The Directorate occupied six underground levels beneath a federal building that officially had only four. Imani had worked for the Supernatural Threat Assessment Directorate for seven years and still did not know who had approved the budget. She suspected nobody did.

At 2:17 a.m., she stood behind a one-way observation window watching Malachi Reed sit alone in Interview Room Three. He had requested coffee. Black. He had not touched it. Director Evelyn Shaw entered beside Imani carrying a tablet.

"Your report."

"Six mimics at Union Station. Maybe more."

"Five bodies recovered."

"Then one got away."

"Or you counted wrong."

Imani looked at her.

Shaw sighed. "Fine. One got away."

"Why were they there?"

"Because of him."

Imani glanced through the glass.

Malachi sat perfectly still.

"Who is he?"

"A consultant."

"That's not an answer."

"It is the answer you're cleared for."

"My heartbeat stops warning me when I'm near him."

That earned Shaw's full attention.

Imani continued. "Not slows. Stops. Whatever sense I have for supernatural threats becomes completely silent."

"Interesting."

"No. Interesting is a crossword puzzle. This is the only warning system that has kept me alive since I was seventeen."

Shaw swiped the tablet.

A photograph appeared: a research facility burned nearly to its foundation.

"Forty-eight hours ago, someone attacked Blackridge Laboratory in Wisconsin. Twenty-three personnel dead. Three missing. One classified object stolen."

"What object?"

"Project Orpheus."

Imani waited.

Shaw did not elaborate.

"Still not an answer."

"Orpheus is a device capable of amplifying supernatural signatures."

Imani's expression hardened. "Meaning?"

"If activated in a populated area, it could make every supernatural entity within miles detectable."

"That sounds useful."

"It could also make them stronger."

Imani looked back at Malachi.

"And he knows where it is?"

"He designed part of it."

There it was.

The reason for the guards.

"The consultant is a scientist."

"Former physicist. Former Directorate researcher. Former missing person."

"That's a lot of former."

"Malachi disappeared three years ago after warning that Orpheus was unstable. Yesterday, he walked into a field office and surrendered."

"Why?"

"He says someone is planning to activate Orpheus in Chicago within seventy-two hours."

Imani's jaw tightened.

"Who?"

"He won't tell us."

"Then why am I protecting him?"

Shaw finally met her eyes.

"Because everyone else we've assigned to him has died."

The room seemed colder.

"How many?"

"Four."

"Agents?"

"Two agents. One analyst. One extraction specialist."

"How?"

"Supernatural attacks."

Imani looked at Malachi again.

He lifted his gaze.

Straight toward the observation window.

Impossible. He should not have been able to see through it.

Yet he smiled faintly.

Shaw said, "He requested you by name."

Imani turned.

"He's never met me."

"That's what he says."

"And you believe him?"

"I believe that if Orpheus activates, we may have a mass-casualty event involving entities most civilians don't know exist."

Shaw handed her the tablet.

"Your orders are to keep Malachi Reed alive until we find the device."

Imani looked at the photograph of the burned laboratory.

Then at the man who made her gift disappear.

"When do we start?"

Shaw opened the interview room door.

"Five minutes ago."

3. TERMS OF PROTECTION

Malachi watched Imani enter.

"You look disappointed."

"I was hoping you'd be uglier."

One eyebrow lifted.

"Would that make protecting me easier?"

"Much."

A small smile touched his mouth.

Imani sat across from him.

"Let's establish rules."

"I dislike rules."

"I don't care. Rule one: if I tell you to move, you move. Rule two: if I tell you to hide, you hide. Rule three: if I tell you to run—"

"I run."

"No. You stay behind me while I run."

"That seems inefficient."

"Rule four: stop talking when I'm trying not to shoot you."

He leaned back.

"You haven't asked the important question."

"Why my heartbeat goes quiet around you?"

His amusement vanished.

"Yes."

Imani folded her arms.

"Go ahead."

"I don't know."

She stared.

"That's your answer?"

"It's the truth."

"My ability has reacted to every supernatural phenomenon I've encountered. Vampires. revenants. mimics. possession sites. cursed objects. Things the Directorate hasn't named yet. Then I get within ten feet of you and it's gone."

"Perhaps I'm comforting."

"You're not."

"Give me time."

She almost smiled.

Almost.

"Why did you request me?"

Malachi looked at the untouched coffee.

"Because your ability is why Orpheus exists."

The humor disappeared from the room.

Imani leaned forward.

"Explain."

"Eleven years ago, a seventeen-year-old girl survived the Lake Michigan incident."

Her blood chilled.

That file was sealed.

Malachi continued.

"Forty-two people disappeared from a lakeside festival. The official story blamed a structural collapse and drowning. The actual cause was a predatory entity that created a localized distortion field."

Imani remembered black water.

People screaming.

Something beneath the pier.

And the moment her heart had begun beating twice.

"You read my file."

"I studied it."

"Without permission."

"I was assigned to."

She stood.

Malachi did not.

"Orpheus began with you, Imani."

Hearing her first name from him irritated her more than it should have.

"Your neurological and cardiac responses were the first measurable evidence that the human body could detect supernatural energy before conventional instruments."

"So you built a machine out of my trauma."

His expression tightened.

"I helped build a detector."

"You just told me it can make monsters stronger."

"That came later."

"Convenient."

"I left because they changed the project."

"Who?"

Malachi hesitated.

Imani saw it.

"That's why you won't name whoever has Orpheus."

"If I give the Directorate a name, the information may reach the person before we do."

"You think there's a leak."

"I know there is."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"Then how do you know?"

"Because Blackridge was not attacked from outside."

Imani went still.

Malachi lowered his voice.
"The security system was disabled using Directorate credentials."
Before she could answer, her earpiece clicked.
Shaw's voice.
"Vale. Move him. Safehouse Delta."
Imani touched her collar.
"Why?"
"We've had a perimeter breach."
The lights flickered.
Malachi stood.
Imani's heartbeat remained perfectly ordinary.
She hated it.
"How close do you have to be?" she asked.
"For what?"
"To silence me."
"I don't know."
"Walk backward."
He did.
Five feet.
Ten.
Fifteen.
At twenty feet—
Thump.
Thump-thump-thump.
Imani's face changed.
Malachi saw it.
"What?"
She drew her pistol.
"Something is already inside."

4. THE SAFEHOUSE THAT WASN'T SAFE

The first creature came through the ceiling. Imani shoved Malachi aside as plaster exploded over the interview table. A pale figure dropped between them. Its limbs were too long. Its fingers ended in translucent claws. Its face had no eyes. Imani's warning heartbeat screamed. She fired. The creature twisted with impossible speed. Malachi grabbed the metal coffee pot and hurled it. The creature turned toward the sound. Imani understood. Blind. She shot twice into its throat. It collapsed.

"Move!"

They ran. The hallway strobed with emergency lights. Agents shouted somewhere ahead. Gunfire answered. Imani kept Malachi close enough that her warning sense dulled but did not vanish completely. Fifteen feet. That was the balance. Close enough to protect him. Far enough to hear danger coming. They reached the stairwell. A Directorate agent stumbled through the door. Blood covered his shirt.

"Vale—"

Three rapid beats.

Imani raised her weapon.

The agent's eyes widened.

"Wait—"

She fired past him. The mimic behind him shrieked as the bullet struck its face. The wounded agent collapsed. Malachi caught him.

"He's alive."

"Leave him."

"We can't."

"We can if you want to stay alive."

Malachi looked at her.

Something in his expression made her angry.

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Judge me."

"I'm not."

"Good."

She crouched, grabbed the injured agent under one arm, and hauled him toward the stairs.

Malachi took the other side.

"Thought we were leaving him."

"Changed my mind."

"Because I judged you?"

"I will drop both of you."

They descended two flights.

The injured agent whispered, "Garage compromised."

"Alternative exit?"

"Maintenance tunnel. Level six."

Imani touched her earpiece.

"Shaw, we're moving to maintenance."

No answer.

Malachi glanced at her.

"The leak."

"Maybe."

"You can't trust command."

"I don't trust anyone."

"Healthy."

"Especially you."

"Less healthy."

They reached Level Six. The injured agent suddenly stiffened. Imani's second heartbeat hammered. She turned. His pupils had turned white.

"Back!"

The agent convulsed. Something moved beneath his skin. Malachi released him. Too late. The man's chest split open. A black, insect-like mass erupted outward. Imani fired until the magazine emptied. Malachi grabbed her wrist.

"Run!"

They ran. The thing chased them through the maintenance corridor. Imani slammed a fresh magazine into the pistol.

"Door!"

Malachi spotted the red emergency lever. He pulled it as they passed. A steel fire door dropped behind them. The creature hit it hard enough to buckle the center. They kept moving.

"That wasn't a mimic," Malachi said.

"No."

"What was it?"

"New."

"Wonderful."

"You scientists always say that when something horrible happens."

"I resigned."

"Still counts."

They reached the tunnel exit.

Imani stopped.

Her heartbeat was normal.

Too normal.

Malachi stood beside her.

"What's wrong?"

"You're too close."

He stepped away.

Ten feet.

Fifteen.

Twenty.

Nothing.

Imani's stomach dropped.

"Keep going."

Twenty-five.

Thirty.

Still nothing.

Malachi stared at her.

"Imani?"

She pressed two fingers to her throat. Her pulse was there. But the warning sense was gone. Not suppressed by distance. Gone completely. Behind them, the steel door screamed as claws tore through it. Malachi held out his hand.

"Whatever happened, we solve it after we survive."

Imani looked at his hand.

Then took it.

They ran into the dark.

5. MUTUAL TRUST

Safehouse Delta was an old brick townhouse in Bronzeville disguised as a renovation project. No Directorate insignia. No obvious cameras. No neighbors who knew the basement contained enough reinforced steel to withstand a small explosion. Imani locked the final deadbolt. Malachi stood in the kitchen.

"Your heartbeat still silent?"

"My heartbeat is fine."

"You know what I mean."

"No warning sense."

"Because of me?"

"I don't know."

For the first time, Malachi looked genuinely troubled.

Imani removed her coat and set her pistol on the counter.

"Start talking."

"About?"

"Everything."

"That's broad."

She gave him a look.

He sat.

"Orpheus doesn't create supernatural energy. It resonates with it. Think of a tuning fork."

"I know what a tuning fork is."

"Good. Saves time."

"Malachi."

"Right."

He folded his hands.

"Every supernatural entity generates a measurable distortion. Orpheus finds the frequency and amplifies it."

"Why?"

"Originally? Detection. We thought we could map threats before they reached population centers."

"And then?"

"The Directorate realized amplification could be weaponized."

"Against monsters?"

"Against anyone carrying supernatural exposure."

Imani's face hardened.

"Like me."

"Yes."

Her gift had begun after the Lake Michigan incident.

Not inherited.

Not chosen.

Exposure.

"How many people?"

"Thousands may have low-level supernatural signatures without knowing it. Survivors. descendants. people who lived near events the Directorate buried."

"And Orpheus could hurt them."

"Or change them."

"Into what?"

"I don't know."

Imani paced.

"Who stole it?"

Malachi looked toward the dark window.

"Dr. Adrian Voss."

Imani stopped.

The name meant something.

"Former Directorate deputy director."

"Current chairman of the Oversight Council."

"Shaw's boss."

"Yes."

"And you didn't want to tell the Directorate because—"

"Voss controls half the Directorate."

Imani swore softly.

"Why activate it in Chicago?"

"Density. History. Supernatural incidents. The city is saturated."

"And my part?"

Malachi's silence answered before his words did.

"Your cardiac pattern is the calibration key."

Imani stared at him.

"No."

"Your original readings became the baseline."

"No."

"Orpheus needs a living reference signal to reach full amplification."

"Then why steal the machine without me?"

"Because Voss has eleven years of recordings."

Relief came too quickly.

Malachi continued.

"But recordings degrade."

There it was.

"He needs me."

"Eventually."

Imani laughed once without humor.

"So you're not the target."

"I am."

"Why?"

"Because I built the shutdown protocol."

She looked at him.

"Heartbeat Protocol."

His eyes met hers.

"That's what we called it."

The title of a file she had never been allowed to see.

"What does it do?"

"Orpheus can only be shut down by introducing a counter-frequency based on the original human signal."

"Mine."

"Yes."

"And you know how."

"Yes."

Imani picked up her pistol.

"Then we destroy it."

Malachi did not move.

"There's something else."

"Of course there is."

"The counter-frequency has to be generated live."

She understood.

"No."

"Imani—"

"No."

"Voss will come for you whether we act or not."

"You want to use me as bait."

"I want to give you the choice the Directorate never gave you."

That stopped her.

He stood slowly.

"I studied your file for two years. Every scan. Every recording. Every report written by people who described you as a response mechanism instead of a terrified seventeen-year-old girl."

Imani's throat tightened.

"I hated them for that."

"You were one of them."

"At first."

"And later?"

"I shut the project down."

"You failed."

"Yes."

The simple admission disarmed her more than an excuse would have.

"Why does my ability stop around you?"

Malachi hesitated.

Then unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt.

A thin surgical scar crossed his chest.

"Three years ago, Orpheus overloaded during a test."

Imani stared.

"I died for four minutes."

Her heartbeat thudded once.

"After they revived me, supernatural entities stopped reacting to my presence. Instruments couldn't read me. Sensitive people couldn't sense anything near me."

"You're a dead zone."

"Essentially."

"Why didn't you say that immediately?"

"Because people tend to become uncomfortable when you introduce yourself with 'Hello, I technically died in a supernatural resonance accident.'"

Despite herself, Imani laughed. It surprised both of them. Malachi smiled. Then the safehouse alarm chirped. Once. Imani grabbed her pistol. The monitor above the refrigerator activated. Director Shaw appeared on-screen.

"Vale, if you can hear me, do not trust Reed."

Malachi's face went still.

Shaw continued.

"He caused the Blackridge attack. We have evidence."

Imani looked at him.

He said quietly, "She's lying."

On-screen, Shaw held up a photograph. Malachi entering Blackridge Laboratory the night of the massacre. Time-stamped. Imani raised the pistol. Malachi did not move.

"Tell me why that's not you."

"It is."

The silence between them changed.

Imani's finger rested beside the trigger.

"You have five seconds."

"I went there to steal Orpheus first."

"Four."

"To keep Voss from activating it."

"Three."

"I failed."

"Two."

"Imani, if I wanted you dead, I had thirty feet of tunnel to let it happen."

She stared at him.

The alarm chirped again.

Then every lock in the townhouse disengaged.

Malachi looked toward the front door.

"Your Directorate just opened the safehouse."

Imani's warning heartbeat remained silent.

For the first time in years, she had no supernatural instinct to tell her who was dangerous.

She had only judgment.

Only evidence.

Only trust.

She lowered the pistol.

"Back exit."

Malachi exhaled.

"You believe me?"

"No."

She grabbed his hand.

"But I'm choosing you."

The front door exploded inward.

6. HEARTBEAT PROTOCOL

They escaped through the basement before the assault team reached the kitchen.

Imani drove.

Malachi navigated.

“Where?”

“Old Lakeshore pumping station.”

“Why?”

“Orpheus needs industrial power and access to the lake.”

Imani’s hands tightened on the steering wheel.

“The same lake.”

“Voss chose it deliberately.”

Chicago blurred past them in rain and sodium-orange light.

“Can we call anyone?”

“Who do you trust?”

Imani thought of Shaw’s warning.

Agents at headquarters.

Dead people.

Compromised credentials.

“No one.”

Malachi looked at her.

“You trusted me.”

“Temporary insanity.”

“I’ll take it.”

They reached the pumping station at 4:06 a.m.

The building appeared abandoned.

Imani parked two blocks away.

“Stay close.”

“You need your warning sense.”

“It’s gone.”

“Maybe proximity triggered a longer suppression.”

“Then distance won’t help.”

“Imani—”

“If I can’t sense danger, I use training.”

She checked her weapon.

“And if training isn’t enough?”

She looked at him.

“Then you better be useful.”

Inside, the pumping station hummed with impossible amounts of power. Cables snaked across the concrete floor. Men and women in Directorate tactical gear guarded the lower chamber.

Malachi whispered, “Voss.”

An older man stood on the platform below. Silver hair. Expensive coat. Calm posture. Beside him rose Orpheus. It looked less like a weapon than a medical machine built around a circular metal frame. Dozens of sensors surrounded a central platform. A monitor displayed a waveform. Imani recognized it instantly. Her heartbeat. Eleven years old. Recorded while she screamed in a hospital bed. Rage steadied her.

“How do we shut it down?”

“Control console on the east platform. I need ninety seconds.”

“That’s a long time.”

“I can make it eighty.”

“Show-off.”

They separated.

Imani descended the west stairs. Without her supernatural sense, every shadow felt dangerous. Oddly, it also felt freeing. No second heartbeat. No invisible alarm. Only choices. She incapacitated the first guard silently. The second saw her.

“Vale!”

Gunfire erupted.

Imani dove behind a generator.

Malachi sprinted toward the east platform.

Voss turned.

“Stop him!”

Agents moved. Imani fired at the overhead lights. Darkness swallowed half the chamber. Malachi reached the console. Orpheus activated. The sound was not loud. It was deep. A vibration below hearing. Imani’s heart seized. She collapsed. The second heartbeat returned. All at once. Not one warning. Hundreds. Thousands. Every supernatural presence across Chicago seemed to strike inside her chest simultaneously. She screamed. Voss walked toward her.

“Remarkable.”

Imani tried to rise.

Her body refused.

“You were always the missing component,” he said.

“You could have changed how humanity survives the hidden world.”

She forced herself onto one elbow.

“By turning people into weapons?”

“By ending uncertainty.”

Behind him, Malachi worked frantically at the console. Voss noticed. He drew a pistol. Imani fired first. Her bullet struck his arm. His weapon spun away. Voss staggered. Two tactical agents rushed her. Her warning sense became useless in the storm of signals. So she stopped listening. She trusted what she could see. One agent came high. She ducked, drove an elbow into his ribs, stripped his weapon, and swept his legs. The second grabbed her from behind. Imani slammed her head backward. He released her. She turned and struck him twice.

“Malachi!”

“Forty seconds!”

“You said eighty!”

“I was optimistic!”

Voss reached the platform. He hit an emergency command. The Orpheus ring began rotating. The pressure inside Imani’s chest doubled. Across the city, something answered. Howls. Shrieks. Sounds no human throat could make.

Malachi shouted, “It’s amplifying!”

“No kidding!”

“I need your live rhythm!”

“How?”

“Hand on the sensor!”

The central platform.

Imani looked at it.

Voss smiled.

“Yes. Go ahead.”

Malachi’s expression changed.

“Imani, wait.”

Too late.

Voss slammed a control.

Metal restraints opened around the platform.

A trap.

He needed her alive.

Imani backed away.

“Alternative!”

Malachi stared at the waveform.

Then at his own scar.

“Me.”

“What?”

“My dead-zone frequency.”

“You said it can’t be measured.”

“Orpheus can measure everything.”

“Malachi—”

“If my field silences yours, it can silence the machine’s reference signal.”

“And what happens to you?”

He did not answer.

“Malachi.”

“Probably nothing good.”

“No.”

“Imani.”

“No.”

Voss laughed.

“Touching.”

Malachi looked at her across the chamber. For all the noise, all the alarms, all the impossible heartbeats battering her senses, his presence remained a quiet place.

“You trusted me,” he said.

“Don’t make me regret it.”

“Then trust me again.”

He stepped onto the platform. The restraints snapped around his wrists. Orpheus screamed. Malachi arched. Imani ran toward him. The waveform on the monitor flattened. Her warning heartbeats vanished. All of them. The machine stuttered.

Malachi gasped, “Now!”

Imani understood. She shot the primary power coupling. Sparks erupted. The ring slowed. She fired again. The coupling exploded. Orpheus collapsed inward with a thunderous metallic crash.

The chamber went black.

7. ONE HEARTBEAT

Imani woke on cold concrete.

For several seconds, she heard nothing but rainwater dripping somewhere in the dark.

Then—

Thump.

Her heartbeat.

She sat up.

“Malachi?”

No answer. Emergency lights flickered on. Smoke filled the chamber. Voss was gone. Several agents lay unconscious or injured. The Orpheus machine had partially collapsed. Malachi remained strapped to the central platform. Motionless. Imani ran.

“Malachi.”

She released the restraints.

He fell against her.

No pulse.

“No.”

She lowered him to the floor.

“Absolutely not.”

She began compressions.

“One, two, three—”

Nothing.

She kept going.

“You’re not allowed to do this.”

Nothing.

“Four minutes, remember?”

She gave rescue breaths.

“You’re apparently good at dying.”

Nothing.

Her arms burned.

“Come back.”

She pressed harder.

“Come back, Malachi.”

A beat struck beneath her palm.

She froze.

Then another.

Weak.

Real.

Malachi coughed.

Imani laughed and cried at the same time.

His eyes opened slightly.

“Did we win?”

"You died."

"Again?"

"Yes."

"Embarrassing."

She leaned her forehead against his.

"Idiot."

His hand weakly found her wrist.

For several seconds they stayed that way.

Close.

Breathing.

Alive.

Then Imani noticed something.

Her heart beat.

Once.

Twice.

No warning.

She pulled back.

"Your field."

"What?"

"It's still silencing me."

Malachi's expression fell.

"I'm sorry."

Imani listened to the quiet inside her body. For eleven years, silence had terrified her. Now it felt different. Not blindness. Rest. She looked at him.

"Maybe I don't hate it."

His eyes softened.

Footsteps echoed above.

Imani grabbed her pistol.

Malachi tried to sit.

"Directorate?"

"Maybe."

"Do you trust them?"

"No."

"Good."

"But I trust Shaw enough to make her explain herself."

They climbed toward the surface together.

EPILOGUE — THE SPACE BETWEEN BEATS

Three weeks later, Director Shaw placed a sealed file on Imani's desk.

"Voss?"

"Gone."

"Of course."

"We froze his accounts and dismantled six affiliated facilities."

"Six you know about."

Shaw gave her a tired look.

"You're becoming difficult."

"I've always been difficult."

"Fair."

Imani opened the file.

HEARTBEAT PROTOCOL — RECLASSIFIED.

"What is this?"

"Everything we kept from you."

Imani looked up.

"Why now?"

"Because you were right."

"About?"

"People making decisions about your life without giving you a choice."

Shaw walked toward the door.

"Reed has been cleared of the Blackridge murders."

"Provisionally."

"Nothing in this building is permanent."

"Where is he?"

Shaw smiled faintly.

"Your office has a visitor."

After she left, Imani opened the adjoining door.

Malachi stood by the window holding two coffees.

"You broke into my office."

"The door was open."

"It was locked."

"Details."

He handed her a cup.

Black for him.

Cream and two sugars for her.

She eyed him.

"How did you know?"

"I pay attention."

"That's suspicious."

"I've been told."

She took the coffee. Since the pumping station, her warning ability had returned. Mostly. Ghosts produced their slow echo. Predators triggered the familiar racing pulse. Mimics still struck three times. But when Malachi came near, the second heartbeat softened into silence. Not instantly anymore. Gradually. Like the world lowering its voice.

"You staying?" she asked.

"At the Directorate?"

"In Chicago."

He looked at her.

"If you'll have me."

"That's dangerously close to flirting."

"I can be clearer."

"Don't."

He smiled.

Imani did too.

Outside, Chicago moved beneath a gray morning sky, unaware how close it had come to becoming something else.

Somewhere, Adrian Voss was still alive. Somewhere, pieces of Orpheus might still exist. There would be another threat.

Another hunt.

Another night when Imani's heart warned her that something impossible was near.

But for the first time, she understood that protection did not mean standing alone between danger and everyone else.

Sometimes it meant allowing someone to stand beside you.

Malachi reached for her hand.

Imani let him.

Her heartbeat continued.

Steady.

Strong.

One beat.

Then another.

And in the quiet space between them, she trusted what came next.