The Day Everything Changed

The empty soda can rattled along the pavement, bounced off the curb and disappeared into the gutter.

“Great,” Dare muttered. “Even you have somewhere to go.”

He adjusted his backpack and kept walking. He should have been home almost an hour ago. Instead, he'd taken the long route through Anthony Village, past the old bakery and the row of shops where the evening rush was already beginning. Anything to delay getting home.

His phone buzzed with a message from Mum.

Where are you?

Dare stared at the message. He could already picture her in the kitchen, checking the time between stirring pots, trying not to worry. And Dad in the living room, ready with another lecture about wasted potential. His latest mathematics test results hadn't exactly helped matters.

He typed Almost home, then slipped the phone into his pocket. A danfo rattled past, its conductor calling for passengers, while somewhere behind him, a generator coughed to life. Dare barely noticed.

He needs to take life seriously.

His father's words from the previous night were still doing laps in his head. As though he wasn't trying. He'd spent half the night worrying about his future, only to sit in front of his mathematics test and watch his mind go blank.

He kicked at a loose stone. “God, seriously. What am I even good at?” He wasn't expecting an answer to drop out of the sky. Still, it would have been nice to have some idea.

A shout came from the alley beside the old bakery. “Give it back!”

Dare slowed. A younger boy stood with his back against the wall, his school shirt hanging loose where someone had grabbed it. Two older boys crowded him. One held a notebook above his head while the other rummaged through his backpack.

“Please,” the younger boy said, reaching for the notebook. “I need that.”

The taller boy raised it higher. “Then come and collect it.”

His friend laughed and tipped the backpack upside down. Books, pens and a half-eaten snack scattered across the dusty ground.

Dare stopped walking. Just keep going. He knew how this sort of thing ended. The last time he'd interfered in someone else's fight, he'd gone home with a split lip and spent the next week listening to his father explain why he needed to mind his business. He could still hear the lecture.

You think life is a film?

The boy bent to retrieve his books, but one of the bullies kicked his notebook farther down the alley. Dare felt a familiar tightness in his chest and glanced towards the main road, where people were passing without seeming to notice what was happening.

He could walk away. Nobody would blame him. Except he'd know.

Dare let out a breath, adjusted the strap of his backpack and turned into the alley. “Abeg. Is this really how you spend your afternoon?”

Both boys looked up. The taller one frowned. “Who asked you?”

“Nobody. But you're making enough noise for everybody.”

The younger boy glanced at Dare, then quickly looked down again.

The second bully stepped forward. “Guy, you lost?”

“Just leave him alone.”

The taller boy looked Dare up and down, taking in his school uniform and backpack. Then he smiled. “Or what?”

Dare's stomach tightened. He hadn't thought that far ahead. “Look,” he said, keeping his voice steady, “give him his things. Everybody goes home. Simple.”

The bully tossed the notebook onto the ground. “Come and make me.”

Dare considered backing away. For one brief, entirely reasonable second, it seemed like the best idea he'd had all day. Then the younger boy reached for his notebook, and the second bully shoved him hard against the wall.

Dare stepped between them. “Enough.”

The punch came before he could move. It caught him across the cheek, sending him stumbling sideways. His backpack slipped off one shoulder.

He swung back without thinking.

Missed.

The second boy drove a fist into his ribs. Pain shot through Dare's side, and he doubled over, struggling for breath.

Someone laughed.

He tried to straighten, but another blow knocked him to one knee.

Brilliant, Dare.

He'd wanted to help. Now he couldn't even help himself.

The taller boy grabbed him by the collar. “Next time, mind your business.”

Behind him, the younger boy shouted, “Leave him alone!”

Dare struggled to pull free. For a moment, he thought he was going to pass out. His cheek throbbed, and every breath sent a fresh stab of pain through his ribs. The taller boy still had a fistful of his shirt.

Then he felt it. A sudden warmth stirred in his left palm. Dare tried to wrench himself free, but the boy's grip held firm. The sensation intensified, spreading through his fingers. At first, he thought the pain was playing tricks on him. But then the sounds around him began to fade, as though the alley were slipping farther and farther away.

The boy drew back his fist. Dare saw it coming, but not the way he'd seen the other punches. This time, he noticed everything: the shift of the boy's weight, the tightening of his shoulder, the fist beginning to move. And somehow, Dare knew where it would land.

He moved.

The punch missed his face by inches. The taller boy stumbled forward, still clutching Dare's shirt. Dare caught his wrist, trying to free himself, and the next thing he knew, the boy was staggering backward into the wall.

Dare stared at his own hand. How did I...?

The second bully rushed him. Dare barely had time to turn. His body reacted before he could think. He ducked beneath the swinging arm, caught the boy off balance and sent him sprawling across the dusty ground. It happened so quickly that Dare almost fell with him.

For one stunned second, nobody moved. Then the younger boy pointed. “Your hand!”

Dare looked down. Light was spilling between his fingers. Not the harsh glare of a torch or the flicker of a phone screen. This was golden, almost like fire, except it didn't burn. A thin line of light traced across his palm, curving into a shape he couldn't quite make out.

Dare opened his hand wider, and the light flared. Both bullies staggered back, shielding their eyes.

“What is that?” one of them shouted.

Dare had no answer. His heart hammered as he tried closing his trembling fingers, but the glow shone through the gaps.

“Guy, let's go!”

The taller boy scrambled away from the wall. His friend snatched up his bag, and the two of them ran, stumbling over each other as they fled the alley.

Dare's attention was fixed on his palm, where the light had begun to fade, leaving behind a small, luminous mark. It looked like a flame, narrow at one end, with a curved trail beneath it. Or maybe a comet.

He touched the mark with his other hand, but felt nothing. No heat, no pain. Just a mark that definitely hadn't been there when he left school.

“Bros?”

Dare looked up. The younger boy was still standing against the wall, clutching his rescued notebook. His eyes kept darting between Dare's face and his hand.

“Are you okay?”

It took Dare a moment to realize the boy was asking him. “Me?” He glanced down at his torn shirt. “I think so.”

“You were glowing.”

Dare swallowed. “Yeah. I noticed.”

The boy edged closer, looking as though he wanted to ask a hundred questions but wasn't sure he should. “Thank you,” he said instead.

Dare nodded toward the books scattered across the ground. “Better pick those up.”

They gathered the books in awkward silence. When the last one was safely back in the boy's bag, he gave Dare another uncertain smile and hurried toward the main road.

Dare watched until the boy disappeared into the crowd, then leaned against the wall. The pain in his ribs returned all at once, leaving his legs so unsteady that he sank onto an overturned crate.

He opened his hand again. The mark was barely visible now. He rubbed at it with his thumb. Still there. Dare let out a shaky breath.

“Okay, God.”

He looked around the empty alley, half expecting someone to appear and explain everything. Nobody did.

He stared at his palm. “What just happened to me?”

* * *

By the time Dare reached home, he'd checked his palm at least twenty times. The mark was still there, faint, almost invisible, but definitely there. He'd tried rubbing it with his thumb. He'd even stopped at the neighbourhood tap to wash his hand. Nothing worked. He was beginning to wish he'd imagined the whole thing.

“Dare?”

His mother appeared in the doorway as he slipped inside. “Where have you been? I've been calling you.”

“Sorry, Mum.”

“I sent you a message almost two hours ago.”

“I know. I just...” He shifted his backpack higher on his shoulder.

Her eyes narrowed. “What happened to your face?”

Dare touched his cheek and immediately regretted it. “Nothing serious.”

“Dare.”

He knew that tone. “Some boys were troubling a junior student. I tried to stop them.”

His mother stared at him. “And they beat you?”

“Not exactly.”

She folded her arms.

Dare sighed. “Okay, a little.”

“A little?”

“I'm fine, Mum.”

“Come here.” She took his chin gently, turning his face toward the light. Dare winced.

From the living room, his father lowered his newspaper. “What's going on?”

“Your son has been fighting,” his mother said.

“I wasn't fighting,” Dare protested. “Well, I was, but I didn't start it.”

His father set the newspaper aside. “Again?”

That one word stung more than Dare expected.

“There was a boy,” Dare began. “Two guys were bullying him, and nobody was doing anything.”

“So you decided to fight two people by yourself?”

“They were hurting him!”

“And what would you have done if they'd seriously injured you?”

Dare opened his mouth, then closed it. He hadn't thought about that.

His father looked at the bruise forming on his cheek and shook his head. “You need to learn that courage without wisdom can put you in serious trouble.”

Dare looked away. Maybe his father was right. He'd certainly made a mess of things before the... whatever-it-was happened. But the younger boy had needed help. Was he supposed to have done nothing?

“Go upstairs and change,” his mother said, resting a hand on his shoulder. “I'll bring something for your face.”

Dare nodded and headed for the stairs. Behind him, he heard his father speak again, more quietly this time.

“He could have been badly hurt.”

“I know,” his mother replied.

Dare paused. There had been something in his father's voice he hadn't expected. Worry? He wasn't sure what to make of it.

Upstairs, Dare shut his bedroom door behind him. His room looked exactly as he'd left it, with clothes draped over the back of his chair, schoolbooks piled beside his laptop and one trainer under the bed, the other nowhere in sight. For once, he was glad nothing had changed. At least something still made sense.

He dropped his backpack, changed out of his uniform and sat on the edge of his bed. Then he opened his left hand. There it was again, a faint, curved mark across his palm. He stretched his fingers, closed them and opened them again.

Nothing.

He remembered the taller boy flying backward, the light pouring between his fingers and the look on the younger boy's face. Most of all, he remembered that strange moment when he'd known exactly

where the punch would land.

Dare leaned back against his pillows. “What is happening to me?”

His phone lay beside him. He picked it up, opened a search page and typed:

Why does my hand glow?

He stared at the words, then deleted them. Even the internet probably wasn't ready for that one. Instead, he opened his favourite playlist. The familiar opening chords of Still Here filled the room.

Dare closed his eyes and listened for a while before lowering the volume. “God?” He glanced at his palm again. “I don't know what that was today.” He hesitated. “Was it You?”

The room remained quiet. Dare wasn't sure what sort of answer he'd expected. A voice? Another flash of light? He looked at his hand one more time. “If it was You, could You maybe tell me what's going on?”

Nothing.

He sighed, set his phone aside and lay back. A slight movement near the window caught his eye. He sat up, watching as one of the curtains stirred, then slowly settled.

Strange. He was sure he'd shut the window.

As he swung his legs off the bed, a faint breeze brushed against his face.

Dare froze.

He got off the bed and approached the window, careful not to make a sound. For a moment, he stood with his hand hovering over the curtain. Then he pulled it aside.

A figure stood outside.

Dare jerked backward. Someone was watching him from the darkness across the street. He couldn't make out the person's face,

but there was no mistaking it. The figure was looking straight at his window.

He stumbled against his desk. By the time he looked again, the figure was gone.

Dare pressed his face closer to the glass. The street below was quiet. A security light glowed over the neighbouring compound. Farther down the road, a car turned the corner and disappeared.

No one.

He checked the window latch.

Locked. Good.

He pulled the curtains shut and stood there for a moment, listening, his heart still pounding. For the first time since the alley, he wondered whether what had happened to him was really over.

* * *

“Dare!”

He pulled his pillow over his head.

“Dare, wake up!”

He groaned. Whatever Tomi wanted, it could wait.

“There's someone downstairs asking for you.”

“Tell them I'm sleeping.”

“You're talking to me, so clearly you're not.”

Dare closed his eyes again. “Please, Tomi.”

“Fine. I'll tell her you're not interested in the scholarship.”

His eyes flew open. “Scholarship?”

Tomi's footsteps were already retreating down the hallway.

Dare sat up. “Wait! What scholarship?”

No answer.

“Tomi!”

Her laughter floated up the stairs.

Dare threw off the covers. He'd been so restless after what happened at the window that he couldn't remember when he'd finally fallen asleep. Now his sister was announcing scholarships before he'd even brushed his teeth.

This family.

As he reached for his clothes, he glanced at his left palm.

The mark was gone.

He turned his hand over, then checked again. The faint outline had still been there before he fell asleep, but now there wasn't a trace of it. If only the rest of yesterday were as easy to explain away.

Ten minutes later, he was halfway down the stairs when the sound of his mother's laughter stopped him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard her laugh like that at breakfast.

The smell of toasted bread drifted from the dining room. His father was seated at the table, looking unusually attentive. His mother sat opposite a woman Dare had never seen before.

She wore a simple, elegant outfit with a long patterned scarf draped over one shoulder. There was something striking about her, although Dare couldn't have said exactly what. Perhaps it was the way she sat, completely at ease, as though visiting strangers before breakfast was the most ordinary thing in the world.

Tomi spotted him first. “Ah, Sleeping Beauty has arrived.”

Dare ignored her.

His mother smiled. “Good morning, darling. Come and sit.”

The visitor turned. “Dare,” she said, smiling. “It's lovely to finally meet you.”

Finally?

“Good morning, ma.”

“My name is Mrs. Ayotunde. I'm here from The Braves Institute.”

Dare glanced at his parents. Nobody looked as confused as he felt.

“Sorry, ma. The what?”

“The Braves Institute. It's a school for young people with exceptional potential.”

“Exceptional potential,” Dare repeated.

Tomi made a small choking sound behind her cup. He shot her a look.

Mrs. Ayotunde's smile widened, but she continued as though nothing had happened. “We're rather particular about the students we admit. We look beyond academic results to qualities that aren't always easy to measure.”

Dare wondered whether she had seen his mathematics test scores. If she had, this conversation was about to become very short.

His father leaned forward. “Mrs. Ayotunde was explaining that the Institute has offered you a place.”

Dare turned to him. “Me?”

“Yes, you,” Tomi said. “Unless there's another Dare hiding upstairs.”

“Tomi,” their mother warned, although she was smiling.

Mrs. Ayotunde opened a slim folder on the table. “We would like to offer you a full scholarship, Dare. Tuition, accommodation and the other essentials would be covered.”

Dare stared at her. A full scholarship. For him. He looked at his mother, then back at Mrs. Ayotunde. “Why?” The question came out more sharply than he'd intended, but Mrs. Ayotunde didn't seem

offended.

“That's a fair question.” She closed the folder. “Tell me something. Yesterday afternoon, you saw a younger boy in trouble. You could have walked away. Why didn't you?”

Dare went still. His mother looked at him. His father frowned.

“Is this about the fight?” his father asked.

“In a way,” Mrs. Ayotunde replied.

Dare felt the blood drain from his face. How did she know?

“I just...” He shifted in his chair. “They were picking on him.”

“Two boys, wasn't it?”

Dare nodded slowly.

“And you knew you couldn't take them both.”

He glanced at the bruise on his cheek. “That became obvious pretty quickly.”

Tomi snorted.

Mrs. Ayotunde leaned forward. “But you stepped in anyway.”

Dare shrugged. “I couldn't just leave him there.”

For a moment, she studied him with an expression he couldn't read. “That's one of the reasons we're interested in you.”

His father cleared his throat. “With respect, madam, courage is one thing. But I'm sure you understand why we have questions. We'd never heard of your school until this morning, and now you're offering our son a full scholarship.”

“Of course.” Mrs. Ayotunde nodded. “I'd be concerned if you didn't ask.”

She reopened the folder and passed a brochure across the table. “The Institute provides a full academic programme alongside a specialised course of training. Students are selected through a process that's rather different from conventional school admissions.”

Dare picked up the brochure. On the cover was a large building surrounded by green lawns and trees. Above the entrance, the words THE BRAVES INSTITUTE stood out in gold.

It looked impressive. Possibly too impressive.

“And where exactly is this school?” his father asked.

“All the information is in the documents, including the arrangements for visiting and speaking with our admissions team. We would never expect you to make a decision without looking into it properly.”

His father nodded, though he still didn't look entirely convinced. “And what about his current school? He's in the middle of his term.”

“Dare would complete the term before transferring. Our next intake is in a few weeks, so there's time to make the necessary arrangements.”

His mother looked relieved.

Dare was still staring at the brochure. There was something he couldn't shake. Yesterday, a strange light had poured out of his hand. That same night, someone had stood outside his window. And now a woman he'd never met was sitting in his dining room, offering him a place at a school he'd never heard of. That was quite a lot of coincidence.

“Mrs. Ayotunde?”

“Yes, Dare?”

“How did you hear about what happened yesterday?”

She regarded him for a moment. “We keep an eye out for certain qualities in young people. Sometimes, they reveal themselves in unexpected ways.”

“That doesn't really answer my question.”

“No,” she agreed pleasantly. “Not completely.”

Tomi raised her eyebrows. Dare had a feeling his sister was enjoying this far too much.

Mrs. Ayotunde turned back to his parents, and the conversation moved to application documents, school records and arrangements for the coming weeks.

Dare listened with half an ear. He had a hundred questions, and somehow, he was beginning to suspect that Mrs. Ayotunde knew the answers to all of them.

By the time she was ready to leave, Dare's mother had invited her to visit again, his father had asked enough questions to fill an entire notebook, and Tomi had offered to help Dare pack.

Dare followed Mrs. Ayotunde to the door. “Thank you for coming, ma,” he said.

“You're welcome.” She adjusted the scarf over her shoulder, then paused. “Dare, may I ask you something?”

He nodded.

“Have you noticed anything unusual since yesterday?”

His fingers curled instinctively. For one wild moment, he considered pretending not to understand. Then he met her eyes. “You know about my hand.”

Mrs. Ayotunde's expression softened. “Yes.”

The word was so simple that it caught him off guard.

Dare stared at her. “What happened to me?”

“Something has begun,” she said. “But you'll need time, and the right people around you, to understand it.”

“Is that what your school is for?”

“In part.”

He waited. She smiled. Of course she did. Dare was beginning to think smiling instead of answering questions was something they taught at The Braves Institute.

Mrs. Ayotunde studied him for a moment. “You remind me of a comet, Dare.”

He blinked. “A comet?”

“Something small enough to be overlooked, until it lights up the sky.”

Dare wasn't quite sure what to say to that. “Someone was outside my house last night,” he said. “Watching my window.”

Mrs. Ayotunde's smile faded. “What makes you say that?”

“I saw someone standing across the street. When I looked again, they were gone.”

She glanced towards the road. “Did you see the person's face?”

“No. They disappeared before I could get a proper look.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Tell your parents what you saw. And if anything else unusual happens, you can contact me. My number is in the folder.”

Dare searched her face. “Should I be worried?”

“I wouldn't want you to live in fear,” she said. “But I do want you to be careful.”

Somehow, that wasn't quite as reassuring as he'd hoped.

She gave him one last, encouraging smile. “I look forward to seeing the young man you'll become, Dare.” Then she turned and walked towards the waiting car.

Dare stood in the doorway, watching her car disappear down the street. He opened his left hand, but there wasn't even the faintest trace of the mark. Yesterday, he'd been wondering whether he was good at anything. Now he had a full scholarship to a school he hadn't even known existed.

Dare closed his fingers. What exactly had he gotten himself into?

* * *

ELSEWHERE

The man had been waiting in the darkness for nearly an hour. He knew better than to interrupt Slida.

Across the room, a tall window overlooked the city. Beyond the glass, thousands of lights stretched into the distance, interrupted here and there by patches of darkness.

Slida stood with his back to the room, watching the city below. “Well?” he asked.

The man straightened. “The boy has awakened.”

Slida said nothing.

“It happened yesterday afternoon. Two older boys attacked him after he intervened in a fight. There was a burst of light, and a mark appeared on his palm.”

“What kind of mark?”

“Like a flame, sir. With a curved trail.”

Slida turned from the window. “A comet.”

The man lowered his eyes. “Yes, sir.”

For a moment, Slida appeared almost pleased. “And the Institute?”

“They've approached him. Ayotunde visited his home this morning.”

“Already?”

“Yes, sir.”

Slida considered this. “Then they were expecting him.”

The man shifted uneasily. “Shall we prevent his transfer?”

“No.”

The answer came so quickly that the man looked up.

“But if he joins them, he'll be trained. He could become difficult to control.”

Slida approached the table at the centre of the room, where several documents lay spread beside a map marked with locations the man had never been permitted to ask about.

“Tell me,” Slida said, “what happens when a young person discovers he has an unusual gift?”

The man hesitated. “He becomes dangerous?”

“Not immediately.” Slida ran a finger along the edge of the map. “First, he becomes curious. Then he wants answers. He wants to know who he is, what he can do, and why he matters.”

He looked up. “And people searching for answers can be led in all sorts of directions.”

The man nodded slowly. “Shall we keep watching him?”

Slida gave him a look. “Of course. And the others?”

“Still quiet. But we've noticed signs. One or two may be close.”

Slida nodded. “Good.”

The man frowned. “Good, sir?”

“Let them awaken. The Institute can gather them and prepare them for whatever they believe is coming.”

Slida glanced at his reflection in the dark glass. “A comet,” he murmured. “Fast. Brilliant.” His expression hardened. “Doomed to burn out.”

The man waited for further instructions.

Slida faced the man. “Keep your eyes on the boy. Study him. Find out what frightens him, what makes him angry, where he's most vulnerable.”

“And once we know?”

“Use it. A little pressure in the right place can do more damage than a direct attack.” Slida regarded him steadily. “But don't drive him away from the Institute. Let them train him. We have plans for what he'll become.”

The man nodded. “Understood, sir.”

He left without another word.