1931 Torch Bearer

'He actually did it.'

Today was another day of celebration, but Orum remembered too much, and felt too much, to share in the excitement that had seemingly taken the entire world by storm.

He was dressed in his best clothes, standing in the grand assembly hall of the UHG headquarters. The somber space had been transformed into a lavishly decorated venue for the occasion, and there was a lively crowd enjoying the generous banquet — those who wielded power over humanity and the members of their families, all dressed to the nines and glowing with joy.

Orum should have probably felt pride in being one of them, but he was not in the right mood.

He was not young anymore, having passed thirty last year. He was also not an inexperienced greenhorn who barely knew how to kill a Nightmare Creature. Instead, he was one of the most renowned Awakened in the Waking World, ruling a Citadel of his own in the Dream Realm... his status was not as high as that of the brilliant heroes who had become the idols of humanity, perhaps, but not far below them.

That was why Orum felt frozen and somber in the middle of the joyful celebration.

There were others like him, as well — mostly those who had endured the horrors of the Nightmare Spell from the very first day of its descent.

That was because they understood better than anyone what today's ceremony meant, and how many lives had been lost to pave the road for it.

Today... they were celebrating Immortal Flame, the fiery champion of humanity, who had done something they all considered impossible.

Who had conquered the Second Nightmare.

Orum raised a crystal glass to his lips and took a sip of the liquid inside, not feeling its taste.

Immortal Flame was not the first Awakened who had responded to the Call and led a cohort into a Seed of Nightmare... in fact, many had tried before, some burning with ambition, some simply unable to resist the Call anymore. It was just that none of them had returned alive — Orum had lost plenty of friends that way, their absence leaving deep scars on his heart.

Some people still held hope, but most had long given up on Ascendance. Immortal Flame had changed everything. His impossible feat shook the very foundation of the established world order, and would inevitably and completely change the future... Orum was sure of it.

The news had been announced only a few days ago, and everywhere he went, he could already hear cautions whispers of trying to challenge the Nightmares again. He was even tempted to consider it himself... but no, he couldn't. He had a family to take care of. Maybe later, when the kids pass the age of becoming Dreamers...

But still.

'Ascendance…'

Immortal Flame himself was not in the assembly hall, whisked away by other powerhouses to hold a closed-door meeting, but Orum had met him briefly when entering the venue. of course, he could not tell how much more powerful the man had become, exactly, but it was impossible to mistake him for an Awakened.

Just like a Fallen abomination was incomparable to an Awakened one, an Ascended human should be an invincible existence to people like Orum. Which was both disquieting and reassuring.

Steeling his wildly beating heart, he gulped down his drink and let out a shaky breath.

'We all owe Immortal Flame. What he did... proves that conquering the Nightmares is possible.'

Which was an invaluable blessing, considering its necessity.

Most people did not know, but Orum was high enough in the hierarchy of humanity to have a good rapport with the UHG. Having access to its information network, as well as one of his own, he knew that the rumors about a greater Gate opening in the Eastern Quadrant were not rumors at all... in fact, several of these terrifying rifts had opened across the world in the last few years, far more devastating than any before, and countless lives had been lost.

After the Nightmare Spell descended, people had thought that the world was saved for a few years. He still remembered the elation and optimism of those precious days... however, they had not lasted long.

Soon, the Nightmare Gates started opening, and their lives had turned to fear and bloodshed once more. And now, the Gates were growing more potent... there was already a classification system proposed, designating these new rifts as those of the Third Category. Although nothing had been proven yet, three more Categories were theorized, up to a Category Six Gate.

...Or maybe even Category Seven.

What would such horror look like, Orum did not know, and could not imagine. He did know one thing, though. It was that there would be nothing but chilling escalation in the future, with more terrifying beings entering the Waking World each year. If humans wanted to survive, they would have to keep up with the tyranny of the Nightmare Spell, as well.

That was why what Immortal Flame had achieved was so important.

Not even because he was the first human to become Ascended, but because he had proven that conquering a Nightmare was possible. That Ascension was just another step on a long and winding path to salvation... the path of Ascension. Immortal Flame had given them hope.

Orum placed his glass on a nearby table and went to the far side of the hall, planning to hide his heavy thoughts behind a plate of snacks.

He was still pondering the dire future when his concentration was broken by infectious laughter.

Looking down, he saw a group of children doing what children usually did during the gatherings of adults — being bored and finding their own fun wherever they could.

Among them, one girl especially attracted attention. She was maybe eleven or twelve years old, wearing a frilly gown that made her look like a little princess and a smile so bright and radiant that even Orum's own lips curved upward slightly.

At the moment, the girl was dragging a serious boy of the same age by the hand, saying something boisterously:

"...come on, Vale! I really saw an Echo. It's just outside!"

The boy pursed his lips, unhappy.

"But Madoc said that I must stay here."

The girl scoffed.

"What does he know! Why is he ordering you around, anyway? He's only a year older than us!"

Orum recognized the cute pair. The boy was the younger son of the Warden. The girl... would probably be the daughter of Immortal Flame himself.

He sighed and looked away with a smile.

'Little monsters…'

Orum had never become a father himself, but he was helping raise his niece and nephews. There had been a time when he thought that the children of the new era would grow up knowing nothing but peace and warmth... but fate was cruel. Instead, they grew up surrounded by terror, blood, monsters, loss, and death. They had been raised in the world of the Nightmare Spell, and as a result, they were far more fierce and feral than the children of his own era.

Thinking about that, he looked up and froze.

There, separated from the group of boisterous kids, stood another girl... this one a couple years older and a little gloomy. No one seemed very interested in speaking with her, so she was all alone, holding to the dull fabric of her far less opulent dress awkwardly.

Orum paid no attention to her clothes, however.

He only looked at her face, which was painfully familiar.

It took him a few moments to remember whom she reminded him of.

The girl... was the spitting image of her mother.

Forgetting everything, Orum couldn't help but walk closer and ask, his voice hiding suppressed emotion:

"...Little Ki?"