

Bucketlist in Another World

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Chapter 1: I never got to tell how much you meant to me.

A man in a suit stared at the road ten stories below, then at the other buildings, then at the people, moving like ants.

He smoked one last cigarette before stepping off.

A few seconds later, everything went black.

An eternity later, the man opened his eyes. By looking around, he noticed that he was in a gigantic room that had nothing to do with modern, twenty-first century architecture.

The ruined pillars, broken statues and carved walls reminded him of gothic architecture.

He struggled to get the pure white sheet off of him, then managed to look at his body.

His heart stopped for a second, before beating harder and harder.

His fingers were small, his arms were small, his body was small.

I'm a baby! I'm a baby! he repeated in his mind several times, while waving his fat, little arms and legs. *Where am I? What happened to me? What is this? What is happening?*

After exactly one minute of panicking, the baby calmed himself using advanced breathing techniques.

The baby tried to stand on his legs, but fell immediately.

He tried to speak, but everything that came out of his mouth were "goo-goo's" and "ga-ga's".

Wait a second. The baby's heart stopped a second time. *There's nobody in sight. I don't even know where I am. I'm going to die if I can't move.* The baby scowled. *Therefore I'm left with one last option.*

The baby cried like hell, hoping someone would hear him.

A few seconds later, a blonde woman with dark, round eyes entered the gigantic room. She wore leather armor, and had a backpack on her back. Her face was ridden with scars. She also had two accessories: a gold ring on her ring finger and a weird, paper hanging off her left earlobe. The rectangular paper had a pattern drawn on it: a golden flower with white tips.

That was quick, thought the baby.

"Who could've left a baby here?" the woman asked herself as she looked around the ruined room.

The baby couldn't understand a word coming out of her mouth. He tried to communicate with the woman, but his thoughts couldn't be translated to words.

His ensuing scowl prompted the following reaction from the woman: "Oh you're so cute, you little lump of fat! Goochie goochie goo!"

Stop caressing me, woman! I'm dying here!

"I doubt you can understand me, but my name is Aandra," said the woman as she cut a bit of the long sheet and weaved a makeshift sling, in which she placed him. "The journey back will be difficult, but I know we'll make it!"

I'm so glad a warrior came to save me. the baby talked with himself. He glanced at the woman's muscular arms and equipment. *You have a sword and shield. And you seem strong enough. I think I can finally relax.*

Aandra left the room and the baby gazed upon their current location, leaving his mouth wide open.

Towers and spires loomed over them. Ruined castles and fallen buildings formed a forgotten city with unparalleled verticality. Everything was positioned on floating islands of various sizes.

Those islands moved at random intervals and each had their own speed and direction.

"This is the lost city of Aaranos," said Aandra as she descended the stairs to a lower level of the floating island they were on. "I came here in search of treasure, but I only found you..."

Why does she sound so disappointed? the baby asked himself with a puzzled look on his face.

A deafening shriek pierced the skies. In a few seconds, tens of flying humanoids gathered above them.

Aandra unsheathed her sword. The baby chose to trust in her. After all, he had no other choice.

When one of the flying creatures landed right in front of them, the baby could examine it more closely.

It had a long, dark yellow beak, yellow eyes, two wings coming out of its shoulder blades, two arms holding a halberd, and claws for feet. Its feathers were a dark purple.

"Look, I haven't taken any of your treasure," said Aandra. "If you let me leave, I'll never return again."

Without any warning, the bird-man swung its halberd at Aandra, who ducked under the weapon and split her enemy's head in two with her own sword.

As a fountain of blood splashed all over the stone floor, some of it landed on the baby's face. He was so surprised, he didn't even scream.

As a former twenty-first century citizen, he hadn't encountered much violence in his day-to-day life. He certainly hadn't seen anyone being killed in front of him.

So seeing someone being decapitated in front of his eyes was... an interesting juxtaposition to his previous life.

The bird-man's body didn't even hit the ground that Aandra started running.

The entire flock flew after her.

One particularly fast bird-man caught up to her in no time. It aimed its halberd right at her back and flapped its wings with an impressive might.

Aandra didn't even need to look backwards. She jumped, rotated in the air and parried the bird-man's halberd with one slash before landing and resuming her run, without losing any momentum.

She proceeded to climb a short ladder and enter a dark, long tunnel. A few of the bird-men followed her inside.

Out of every other pathway and building, why did you choose to come in here? The baby's face was contorted in fear. If these guys have half a brain, they'll just fly past this corridor and trap you inside!

And that's what they did.

Three hundred meters away from the end of the tunnel, Aandra was caught between two groups of enemies: three in the front and the rest in the back.

The woman didn't stop moving forward.

The first enemy readied its halberd and started swinging it upward, so that by the time it would reach Aandra, she would be sliced in two.

She jumped forward, before the swing ended, and killed the first opponent with one sword strike.

The corpse flew into the bird-men behind Aandra, forcing them to stop their forward momentum and dodge. With that one move, she killed two birds with one stone. Not only did she have better chances against her last two remaining enemies, but the ones in the back wouldn't catch up to her, provided she kept the same pace.

Unsurprisingly, she did.

She blocked, dodged, and slashed her way past the last two assailants in her way.

At the end of the tunnel she jumped over a gap in the floating island to a lower portion. She showed no signs of hesitation, not in her chosen path, nor in her skill with the blade.

Aandra continued running on a walkway, but her path was blocked by a rising tower, moving upward at an incredible speed.

She had two options: jump into the sea of clouds below, or stand her ground until the tower moved out of her way.

Aandra turned around with a cheeky smirk on her face.

She kept the tip of her sword low to the ground and stared right into her opponents' eyes.

Granted, they hesitated for a few seconds before attacking. Seeing their comrades cut down so easily must have been traumatizing.

Due to her general air of dangerousness intimidating her enemies, Aandra only had to slaughter two bird-men before the tower finished its ascent.

Aandra turned around and went through the entryway and jumped out the other side, landing on the first of many small, unsteady platforms. Below her and the baby were clouds. Below those, the unknown.

The woman hopped from one platform to another with incredible dexterity. The bird-men tried to cut her down, but her hands were faster than theirs. Using graceful pirouettes, she slew five more enemies before landing on the final platform.

Right after, however, disaster struck. She lost her sword to one, particularly deft, bird-man. Now armed with only a shield, she forged onward.

Aandra and the baby in the sling were running on a narrow pathway when a bird-man appeared out of nowhere, blocking their path.

The warrior grabbed her small, rotund shield with her right hand, flexed her right arm and threw it with all her force. The buckler sunk into the bird-man's face, causing it to spin in mid-air.

Once Aandra arrived at the spinning bird-man's location, she grabbed its legs and threw it into its friends flying from the back. This maneuver bought the two humans some time to cover a bit more ground before their enemies could recover.

At the end of the pathway, there was yet another empty room. At the end of the room, there was... nothing.

Just floating rocks and empty space.

They were at the edge of the flying kingdom, and its furious residents were right behind them.

Aandra hesitated only for a second before jumping off.

The baby's heart felt like it would burst out of his chest.

On her way down, the woman grabbed one of the many floating rocks with her right hand, while holding the baby with the left.

The rock slowed their descent considerably, like a parachute.

After going through the thick layer of clouds, the baby saw the world below. His mouth was agape.

On one side, the red-orange sun and sky, on the other the grey moon and dark-blue sky.

And further below, the ground, the mountains, the deserts, the forests...

The fear in the baby's heart was replaced with another emotion, one he believed he had lost forever.

"This is the world you're going to live in. Mercury," said Aandra. Of course, the baby still didn't understand a word.

A green-scaled dragon flew right above them. A few seconds later, once the flying lizard was a few miles apart from the descending duo, a gigantic, vanilla-white, whale-like creature 'leaped' downward, opened its mouth and ate the poor dragon.

It was like the world was upside-down, and the ocean was up.

"That's a cream whale," spoke Aandra. "It is said that its' meat has the taste of vanilla."

For thirty-three years I lived my life without any sense of wonder, thought the baby. Wake up, eat, go to work, come home, waste time, eat, repeat. Earth was a mess. There was nothing to get excited about. My life had no meaning. I was just another cog in a machine that was going nowhere. He felt tears streaming down his rotund cheeks. But now, for the first time since I was a little, little kid, I feel like the world is mine. Like I could do anything.

The woman and the baby locked eyes.

"I'mma be your momma from now on," she said. "I'm a lousy cook. And I know nothing about raising a kid. But I'll hear no words of complaint. From now on, we're stuck with each other, Arnar."

Chapter 2: I never got to follow my dreams.

Arnar was breast fed until he was two years old.

On his second birthday, after his body developed a little, he spoke his first words in a monotone voice: "Mom, I can speak."

Aandra, mouth agape, hugged her baby and laughed: "I can't believe it! My baby's a genius! And your pronunciation is great!"

It took a while for Arnar to decipher their language and translate it into something he could understand and replicate, but he did it.

The two of them lived in a small hut in a remote village surrounded by mountains and hills. The village was called Kunia.

Life there was pretty great. The people were friendly, the kids were energetic, the air was fresh and the food was great (when people other than Aandra cooked).

The thing Arnar hated the most about his new body were the times he peed and pooped himself. Diaper changes were very uncomfortable, so he would try to hide from Aandra every single time. It wasn't hard to find him, though, what with all the smell.

At four years old, during a village party when Aandra was too drunk to keep an eye on him, Arnar tasted some otherworldly ale.

He expected something a lot different, but was disappointed to find that it had almost the same taste as canned beer, except for a more earthy feel.

Aandra taught Arnar some general information about the world he had reincarnated in. The nations, the people, the different races...

At five years old Arnar had a decent understanding about his new world.

His village was placed in the eastern part of the world, in a country called Phania. Basic math was a common concept even known by farmers. Kings and queens ruled nations. A different system for tracking time was used: there were five seasons, so a year had fifteen months. Also, a week had eight days.

On his sixth birthday, Aandra took Arnar into the wild for the first time.

There she taught him about healing herbs and poisonous mushrooms. She showed him how to hunt and fish.

Maybe because he had lived his life in the city, he never appreciated the beauty of nature. The sound of cold water crashing on stone, the gentle feel of grass and fallen leaves, the various musical symphonies sung by the birds, the feel of the gentle sun on his skin...

One day, as Aandra was taking a nap under a tree with her son in her lap, Arnar could only feel gratitude at this second chance, this second life.

On his eight birthday, during one of their excursions to the forest, Arnar decided to tell his mother the truth about himself.

The two of them were sitting in front of a campfire.

"I'm from another world," said Arnar, matter-of-factly.

Aandra blinked: "What does that mean?"

"It means that I was reincarnated into this body after my previous one died." Arnar scratched the back of his head. "Although I don't know what I was doing in that sky city."

Instead of taking Arnar's words as the ramblings of an over-imaginative mind, Aandra simply asked: "How did you die?"

It was in that moment Arnar wished his mother would've just laughed in his face.

"I killed myself," answered the boy with a solemn look on his face.

Only the crackling fire managed to cut into the deep silence.

"Why?" asked Aandra.

"I felt like my life held no purpose."

"This would explain why you're so intelligent for your age..."

"You really believe me?" Arnar frowned.

"Of course I believe you."

"Why?"

"Because I love you."

Arnar's frowned turned to a smile. He shook his head: "That's not a reason."

"Don't argue with me." Aandra pointed at him. "I'm still your mother."

"You're still willing to? I'm not your blood. I'm not even someone from this world."

"I took care of you for eight years, Arnar, even though I had no obligation to." Aandra crossed her arms. "Our bond is stronger than blood."

Arnar smiled: "Thank you."

"That being said, if what you're saying is true, you've been given a second chance. You have a duty to do better in this life." Aandra exhaled. "Well, since you've exposed yourself, I'll do the same. I was born in the northern reaches of Aandrios. Our nation is one of war. We thrive on fighting. I was especially gifted in that aspect. I defeated every boy in my village when I was your age."

"You were born different..."

Aandra smiled: "That's what everyone always told me. They always how gifted I was. However, as you'll come to see, that gift was my greatest curse. At nineteen I fell in love with Bodvar. We had a boy two years later. We named him Arnar." She lowered her head. "I was supposed to take better care of him, but I was constantly choosing to go to the battlefield. I chose what I was good at simply because I was afraid I wasn't going to be a good mother to my child. Bodvar warned me that Arnar needed me. That both of them needed me. Our last words to each other were ones meant to hurt. One day, after a difficult battle, me and my company returned to our village only to see it destroyed."

Arnar widened his eyes.

"Bodvar, the man I loved, and Arnar, my one year old son died. All I could see of them were their charred remains." Aandra tensed her body. "I was overcome with grief. So much so that I left Aandrios. I explored the world looking for a place to die." She looked into Arnar's eyes. "And then I found you. A second chance."

"I didn't know..."

"You mean much more to me than you think." Aandra pointed at her heart. "You helped me come to terms with my greatest regret. And that's why I told you this. To show you that your past doesn't define you."

Arnar smiled: "That's right. You've become a great mother."

Aandra jumped over the fire with tears in her eyes and hugged the boy so hard, he thought he was going to suffocate.

"Oh, how long I waited to hear you tell me that!" she exclaimed.

After she calmed down, Arnar was able to breathe again.

"Now, tell me, what was your world like?" asked Aandra.

Arnar told her of Earth, of their many nations and many people. Of their great technology and greater shortcomings. Within those stories and within the excitement in his mother's eyes he found a newfound appreciation for the life he left behind.

On his twelfth birthday, Arnar had grown into a fine young man. He had sharp features and a mop of dark chestnut hair on his head.

He learned many more new skills and became a proficient hunter and gatherer.

That's why during one of their hunts, when they encountered an adolescent manticore wandering the forest, Aandra put her sword in her son's hands.

The manticore was a dangerous beast, with the tail of a scorpion, the head of a lion and the body of a bear.

"You've led a peaceful life up until now, but there's no guarantee tragedy won't strike," whispered Aandra. "To survive in this world you need to learn how to fight."

"You've taught me how to swing a sword," Arnar whispered back.

"Yes, but you've never been in a real battle. Don't be afraid. Your effort won't betray you." Aandra placed a hand on her son's shoulder. "I'm sure you can defeat this manticore."

Arnar ignored his fears and bolted out of the bushes with the intention of launching a sneak attack before the monster could notice him.

The manticore had finer senses than that. It dodged Arnar's sword and scratched his torso with its claws, ripping his white shirt and making him fall unconscious on the ground.

Aandra jumped, ran and smashed into the manticore's head with a shoulder tackle. That attack must've damaged something inside the beast's skull, because it ran away screaming.

Aandra knelt beside her son and stared in shock at the wound. Arnar was losing blood fast and started convulsing because of the poison in his body.

It was common knowledge that a manticore not only had a poison-tipped tail, but also poisonous claws.

Aandra carried Arnar all the way back to the village, where the local doctor healed the boy as best he could.

After a week, the boy woke up. Aandra had been staying next to him all that time so she was the first to welcome him back.

"Sorry," said Arnar. "Fighting's not my forte."

"No, I'm the one who should apologize to you," Aandra hung her head in shame. "You grew so fast I sometimes forget you're still a kid."

"It's fine."

Despite Arnar's words, his mother scowled and grit her teeth.

"You think you've repeated your past mistake? With your first son," said Arnar. "I'm not a baby anymore. If I felt like I couldn't take on the manticore, I just wouldn't have listened to you. It's not your fault." The boy touched the scar on his chest. "Plus, I now have this badass scar I can show off."

It was the first time Arnar saw his mother cry.

He offered her a hug.

She took it.

On his fourteenth birthday, Arnar's mother fell ill. She was diagnosed with bonerot, a disease that made your body weaker and weaker in a short amount of time. It started with the bones, then the muscles, then the organs.

Arnar took care of her as best as he could, bringing her water, food, keeping her awake with bad jokes and stories from Earth.

"Arnar, was I a good mother?" asked Aandra one night. Her skin was wrinkly, her eyes ghostly. Her voice was weak.

Arnar sat next to the bed she had been lying in for the past few months.

"You were," he answered. "Also, I never got to thank you for saving me from that sky temple."

Aandra smirked: "The old sage that tipped me off to that temple told me I would find riches beyond belief."

"He was lying." Arnar shrugged.

"He was right." Aandra took her son's hand in her own.

"You're flattering me."

"Yeah. You were a fussy little baby. You would always hide from me when I had to change your diaper."

Arnar rolled his eyes: "Come on, don't remind me of that."

"Son, I would like to spend the night in the forest."

"You know we can't do that. It's dangerous."

"I'm dying, anyways. I don't want to waste away in a bed."

"You just can't sit still, can't you?"

Aandra grinned: "No!"

The stars in the sky shone a little bit brighter that night.

Bonerot was supposed to end one's life in two months. Aandra was born a warrior, so she held on a lot longer than expected.

But she deteriorated all the same, until finally, she passed away.

The warrior died in her bed and her son was there to watch over her. He felt like he should cry, but he couldn't.

"Even after everything you did for me, I can't bring myself to cry for you. I should feel sadness, rage even. But I feel nothing." Arnar lowered his head. "I guess nothing changed. It's a new world and I'm still the same piece of shit."

To say that he felt nothing was a lie. A growing hate toward himself was starting to consume his heart.

It was Arnar's fifteenth birthday.

Chapter 3: I never got to let go of my regrets.

According to the "Hero's Journey", the protagonist of a story is supposed to start their adventure after a life-changing event happens. That event is what's supposed to push them to fight the demon lord, to get revenge on the one who's wronged them, to search for the thing that's supposed to satisfy them.

But that's not real people.

Real people value comfort and safety a lot, even if they don't realize it.

In the end, even the death of a loved one doesn't change much.

You're affected, but you still go on with your life, don't you? The routine doesn't change. The dreams stay forgotten. You still stay at that job you hate. You still spend your time with those people that don't mean much to you.

Change, real change is hard.

Real change means stepping into the unknown.

In that aspect, Arnar resembled his past, twenty-first century self.

There was no grand revelation after his mother's death. There was no inspiration to explore the world. There was no motivation to do anything other than the bare minimum in order to sustain his passable life.

His head and heart were empty the day he buried his mother in the garden behind their little hut.

The next day came, as did the next and the next.

After the funeral rites for his mother, he discovered a sealed letter under the pillow where Aandra had slept.

Those could have been the last words of his mother.

Arnar chose not to read it. He opened the first drawer that caught his eyes and dropped the letter inside.

The next day came, as did the next and the next.

Arnar did hunting, fishing and gathering for the village. He was liked by almost everyone there. On his days off he lazed around, reading from the little number of books available, or sleeping through the day. He took care of his garden and learned a few more skills like sewing, how to make colors and cooking. He also experimented a little with the plants found in the wild and managed to make a few potions, creams, and pills.

Every night, when he would go to sleep, he would constantly say that he hated himself, that he wanted to do more with his second life. Then, he would fall asleep. And he would repeat this cycle for many, many days.

Humans are extremely good at forgetting.

Arnar was no different.

But then, life has a weird way of reminding.

Arnar was delivering a few aromatic herbs to the village blacksmith, a stocky, muscular man with dark hair, when he said this: "I don't want to pry into your private life, but I see that you haven't found a wife yet. My daughter fancies you."

"Dad!" His daughter punched him in the arm with a scowl.

The blacksmith's daughter was named Emma. She was short, but cute. She had freckles and her hair was tied behind her back.

Arnar gave a weak laugh: "It's a bit early to think about marriage, isn't it?"

The blacksmith roared with laughter: "Early? You're twenty, aren't you, Arnar?"

Those last seven words broke something in Arnar.

Ever since Aandra's death, the boy hadn't celebrated his birthdays.

"Five years have passed..." Arnar whispered to himself. "What have I been doing..."

"Arnar, are you alright?" asked Emma.

"I'm sorry." Arnar ran away to his house.

There, he prepared a backpack as fast as he could and took off, resolved to leave Kunia, his home village.

The little wooden gate that separated his comfortable lifestyle and the rest of the world seemed like an impossibly tall, iron wall. This gate even surrounded the forest where he hunted every week, so it was no exaggeration to say that he was about to step into the unknown.

But, his heart was filled with resolve.

The brave young man opened the gate and stepped outside.

His heart skipped a beat. He broke into a cold sweat. His heart beat incredibly fast. The scar on his chest started throbbing.

All he could see was the manticore from his youth. The beast that almost claimed his life. He could feel its yellow, dangerous eyes on him. He could feel the cold, uncaring breath.

In the end, after five steps, Arnar curled into a ball and stayed there for a few minutes.

He calmed down and went back to his house, where he wrapped himself in multiple blankets. He felt a bliss unlike anything he had experienced before. It was as if he had been just pardoned from an execution.

The next day, there was a celebration for the birthday of another member of the village.

Of course, Arnar was there, getting drunk.

In his stupor, he decided to talk with Emma.

"I'm sorry I ran away yesterday," he started.

Emma laughed. Her cheeks were red. Arnar glanced behind her at the ten empty tankards of beer on the table behind her.

"My father can be a little frank, but don't take what he says seriously," she said with a charming smile.

"No, I just realized that five years passed in the blink of an eye..." Arnar took another swig from his tankard.

Emma looked right into the young man's eyes: "Say, do you not like me? Or do you already have someone else?"

Arnar blinked at her like a dumbass: "It's not like that. I think you're really cute, but... I don't know."

Emma blinked back at him: "But... what?"

"Is this all life is? Find a job, find a partner, make a child and... that's it? Happily forever after?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, it's just..." Arnar let out a frustrated sigh. "I had a dream, but I can't remember what it was. I don't know. I think I was meant for more."

"Would a life with me really be that torturous?" asked Emma.

"No! Of course not!"

"But a simple life is beneath you."

"I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did." Emma took Arnar's hands in her own. "Arnar, a lot of people are suffering right now. They would give everything to have the life we're having. The life we could have. Living surrounded by those you love is a privilege."

Emma left with a smile.

Arnar banged his head against the table.

"Didn't know you were a wordsmith, too, Emma," he talked with himself. "Got my ass..."

Although he failed the first time, Arnar would try multiple times to leave the village, all ending with a panic attack and a return to first base.

One day, after a particularly bad panic attack, Arnar started verbalizing his thoughts.

"I've been trying to leave Kunia for a month now, but I've never asked myself why. Why do I want to leave so bad?" He sighed. "I guess the fact that I'm twenty lit a fire under my ass." He let out a dumb smile. "I still remember my mom pressuring me to get a job. I wanted to laze around and play video games all day."

Arnar's eyes widened. His gaze fell upon one of the drawers in his home.

He opened it and found a letter. He felt his heart beating faster and faster.

Put it back inside, said a voice in his head. *Whatever's in there will just hurt you.*

Arnar sat on the floor and opened the letter.

'Dear Arnar,

First off, I hope you buried me in the garden. If you didn't, I'm going to be very upset!!!

Second off, I wanted to thank you for saving me. After the death of my first son, I was done with life. I thought all that remained for me was despair and suffering. Instead, I found you, in that impossible place, as if we were meant to meet each other. And my last fifteen years were filled with love and laughter.

It is no exaggeration to say that taking care of you, teaching you, and then seeing you take care of me made me grateful to be alive.

I hold a greater debt to you than you could ever imagine.

I wanted to say this to you when I was alive, but I was never able to. I was too embarrassed!

Third off, I don't know when you may be reading this, but I'll still give you these words, no matter your life situation.

You once told me that you committed suicide in your previous life because you thought life held no meaning anymore.

Although I may not know your whole story, I know this. During the fifteen years I've spent with you, I've come to know a handsome, smart and curious young boy. If you could see what I see and feel what I feel, you would never doubt yourself.

After I almost got you killed, I realized I want you to stay in Kunia and live a long and happy life. Above all, I want you to be safe and healthy.

However, if you do decide to explore the world, I would like to leave you with a bit of wisdom my father taught me.

It all starts with a goal. No matter what you do, you must have a clear, simple and actionable goal that you can take small steps toward.

It's through these numerous goals that you get better as a person.

To help you get started, I left you a notebook somewhere in the house. Write your goals there.

The outside world is tough and dangerous, and sometimes you may feel like you're destined to fail, even if you're trying your best.

Through all these hardships, always remember that I trust you and believe in you, even when you don't believe in yourself.

Love, mom.'

Every emotion since his reincarnation, his second life with Aandra, his mother's death, his wasted five years, came crashing.

Arnar's tears were filled with frustration and regret.

His chest felt heavy.

His hands trembled.

And however much he wanted to, the tears didn't stop. Forty-five years of shortcomings, regrets, failures, and antipathy wouldn't allow that to happen.

Time moved so slow, yet it rushed so fast.

And through that avalanche of emotion emerged the first item on his Bucketlist. The first of many.

'Things to do before I die:

- make mom proud'