

The Death and Return of Baldur: Hodur's Story

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Part I. Birth, Marriage, and Doom



Good day to you. From the warmth and the sounds, I gather this is a sunny day. So why am I, blind Hodur, embodiment of darkness and chill, about on this Midsummer? Why have I climbed the tree up from Hel's depths?

Well, because you opened the gate, you called my brother's name, and he and I are never far apart. You wanted his story... and I know more of it than even he. Or say instead that I know more of the important parts.

Baldur and I were born together, brothers in the womb of our mother Frigg, children of father Odin. Where I was sightless and dark, he was fair and bright.

How do I know? Because all creatures proclaimed him so. All the gods and all mortals and all things in creation gloried in his presence, his beauty, his purity. And I have ears. I could hear his wonderful voice, the runes carved into his tongue, so that each word was a blessing and a spell. I could hear his wisdom. And just being in his presence, you could feel the life pouring out, the healing and renewal in his touch.

So, as I said, all loved him and the good that flowed from him. Even I was made brighter in his reflection. As we grew into manhood, he was desired by many. Goddesses and women already married would have left their husbands for him. But only one found his love in return. Not the most beautiful in Asgard, nor the most talented, but Nanna was his equal in purity, his equal in steadfast loyalty. She reflected him wholly, the moon to his sun. Baldur was not the sun, but he shone almost as bright. Nanna was not the moon, but she glowed almost the same. They were perfectly matched. In time, she bore him a son, Forseti, whose justice merged the honor of his mother and the wisdom of his father, beloved by all who are equally righteous.

Yet as our father foretold, all glorious things would eventually end. The doom of the gods was already in its making. First would come the loss of all we held dearest... Baldur included.

It began with ill dreams: Baldur had nightmares, as did our mother Frigg. He began to sicken from worry; she began to fret, unable to name the threat. The worst omen was when Baldur's own horse turned his leg and fell lame, a thing that should never happen.

Father Odin resolved to seek out the danger against Baldur. He rode out, to the gates of Hel itself. Finding the gates guarded and barred, he rode east to seek an easier entrance. There he found the hall of Delling, red elf of the dawn. The hall was decked out as if for a guest, with banners hung and golden rings strewn, and servants bustling about in preparation.

Odin asked them, “for whom do you prepare your hall?”, but none would answer.

Instead, he returned to Hel’s wall and found there the grave of a prophetess long dead. Through magic, he woke her and bid her speak. When he asked, “who does Hel prepare to receive?”, she answered “Baldur”. When he asked, “How shall Baldur come to Hel?”, she answered “Hodur will slay him.” When he asked who would avenge Baldur, she answered “Vale, son of Rhind.” Odin then asked how I would kill my brother, but the prophetess knew him then, knew he had lied about his identity, and would answer no more... for she was a mother of giants, and his enemy, and vowed to answer no more questions until the Ragnarok came to pass.

With heavy heart, father Odin rode back to Asgard, there to reveal what he knew.

Part II. Oaths, Death, and Aftermath

While father Odin was away, mother Frigg lost no time. Not knowing where the threat lay, she rode about, demanding oaths of every being in creation: every god, every mortal, even the trees and stones and the smallest grains of sand. She begged them swear never to do harm to Baldur. And as I said, all loved him, and all swore, even me. Especially me.

The only thing exempted from that oath was the smallest twig of mistletoe, a plant so weak it relies upon a greater tree, the oak, for its existence. Frigg passed it by, thinking it no danger at all.

She returned to Asgard and told all that Baldur was safe, that nothing could harm him now. There was great rejoicing and we celebrated this glad news with a feast. Baldur was made guest of honor, and to honor his power, the guests hit upon a game. They struck at Baldur without effect, for their oaths bound them to harm him not. Swords, too, had sworn the oath, and bounced off his skin. Missiles of all sorts were powerless, and it cheered us to see him so protected.

Odin returned to see this scene and wondered if the prophesied fate had been averted.

But one among the gods did not celebrate. Instead, Loki was jealous, resentful of Baldur’s glory, contemptuous of our rowdy games. He slipped into the hall in the disguise of an old woman and crossed to Frigg, asking, “What is it they do in Asgard tonight?”

Mother Frigg answered, “They honor Baldur by assaulting him, but nothing can harm him, for all have sworn oaths to do him no harm.”

“Everything?” asked the old woman.

“Well, not quite,” admitted my mother. “The little mistletoe did not have to swear. Can you imagine it ever being a threat? I had to rest sometime.” I heard her, my listeners. I heard Loki, too. And I did not remark upon it.

Well, of course Loki ran from the hall and went straightaway to find mistletoe. Plucking a sprig, he took it to a smith, whom he beguiled into crafting it into a dart, then forgetting the visit. Returning to the hall, he sought me out.

“Why do you not join the revels?” the deceiver asked. “Why do you not honor your brother as the others do, attempting to strike him down?”

I stated the obvious: “I am blind. I cannot throw at him... I might strike someone else!”

“Let me help you,” said Loki. “I will guide your arm. Here, I have a dart ready!”

I was a fool. I let myself be led, guided to the floor and aimed toward my brother. My great strength was turned to Loki’s end, as he aligned my arm and I let fly. I knew from the silence afterward that something awful had happened. They tell me the dart flew straight and true, burying itself into the heart of my brother.

The hall erupted in chaos. I could hear the calls, “Hodur has killed Baldur!” “How did this happen?” I could hear Loki’s laughter as he backed away. There were cries to strike me down, that second, but the peace of the hall held. None would do violence there and break their troth.

In the tumult, Loki vanished, hiding elsewhere in the worlds. He would be found and punished in time, but that is another story.

And the crime was not wholly his. I broke my oath, even unwilling, even misled. Perhaps my true fault was to heed the words of a liar, to rely upon another’s judgment and not my own. I should have refused... I should have known the offer was false.

I, too, would be punished for my misdeed, slain cleanly at least. I was given the grace to join my brother eventually in Hel. But that is also another story. We are speaking of Baldur, and there is more to tell.

Part III. Funeral, Grieving, and Return

What do you do when the best among you has died? You sit here now in this glorious light, this valuable warmth, but what will you do when it is gone? You grieve. You remember. You hope for its return. But what do you *do* to ensure that return?

We began preparations for Baldur's funeral, grieving and remembering and honoring his life. But Frigg was not content. She called to the Aesir, asking who would venture into Hel and bring Baldur back from death. None could meet her demand, except one: our brother Hermod, swiftest of the gods, messenger to all the worlds. He alone could pass into Hel and return. Odin granted his son use of his horse, eight-legged Sleipnir, and Hermod raced away on his errand.

While he rode, we went ahead with Baldur's funeral. His body was laid out aboard his great ship, Hringhorn, with all his treasures and goods for his voyage. Even his horse and all its trappings were loaded aboard. Odin gave his son his own fabled gold ring, Draupnir, a sign of rulership. Seeing her husband, her lover, her light stretched out dead was finally too much for Nanna, and she collapsed, her heart burst from grief. We laid her next to Baldur, so they would travel on together.

Thus laden, the great ship proved too heavy for even the Aesir to cast off... or perhaps we were too weakened from sorrow. We had to seek aid of a giantess to push it free of the sand. Then the fires were lit and the pyre sanctified by Thor's hammer, and Hringhorn sailed away aflame.

Below, Hermod rode for nine days and nine nights, until he reached the gates of Hel. He found them again barred and guarded, but being resolved, leapt over the wall and continued on. He found Baldur therein, already seated in rulership and gloriously attired, though worn from the lingering pain of death. Nanna sat beside him, as always.

Hermod begged them return with him, but Baldur said he could not; he could not escape Hel's fated hold. Nanna was not so fated, but she refused to leave her husband. They sent Hermod away with gifts for the Aesir: Baldur returned Odin's ring, and Nanna sent another ring, a bride's ring for Fulla, and a linen dress for Frigg our mother, and other gifts besides.

So Hermod went instead to the queen of death, Hel, and begged her release Baldur. He told her that every creature in the Nine Worlds wept for Baldur's loss, that nothing existed that did not desire his return. Hel softened, and said that if this were true, if every thing in creation wept for Baldur, she would abandon her claim. With this bargain struck, Hermod rode back to Asgard.

He notified Frigg, and straight away, our mother sent riders to every corner of the worlds. She herself traveled as well. The riders bid every creature show their grief for Baldur, to weep for his loss. They spread the plea far and wide, until the whole world wept... save one being. Loki would not mourn Baldur, whom he hated. But he disguised himself as a giantess, the hag of the Ironwood, Thokk.

When Frigg came to Thokk, she asked her, "Will you not weep for Baldur, my son?" Thokk (or Loki) answered, "What has Baldur done for me? If I weep, they would be tears of fire. Let Hel keep what she holds." And so, because that one creature would not weep, Hel would not release Baldur; he and Nanna were lost to us forever.

Did I say forever? Well, for the Aesir, Baldur was forever gone. But we did not have eternity. Our doom was yet to come, sped along by the loss of my glorious brother. I was slain myself, as I have said, joining my brother in that dark hall. With us wait the mortal mother and father of the world yet to come.

When the old world has ended, when the gods meet their ends or are scattered, only then will Hel release what she holds. There will be none left who remember Baldur, and also none left to refuse to weep.

Then we will emerge: the progenitors of the next world, with Baldur and Nanna to rule us. The old world lost Baldur's glory, but this was necessary, as Odin foresaw. Baldur's light was preserved in the darkness so that it might be reborn, untarnished by the horrors of Ragnarok. Baldur remained pure, a source of inspiration to all who might come after.

And I will return, as well, to serve as I might. Perhaps this is my role, to remember and to retell our story. Thank you for listening.