

The Death and Return of Baldur: Hermoðr's Story

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by Nathan Large



Well met! I hear that you're here to honor the life and mourn the death of Baldur, most beloved of the Aesir. Well chosen! And *I* am well chosen to tell his story. After all, I was personally involved... I'm also his brother... and a messenger, by trade. I'm at least as qualified a storyteller as Hodur and definitely *faster* at it. Hermoðr, at your service.

Yes, we were all brothers. Sons of Odin. Princes of the Aesir. And of all of us, of all beings, Baldur was the best. The best-looking, of course. But also glorious of voice, kind of word, wise in thought, and pure in soul. Just standing in his presence was rejuvenating. He loved every being in creation, and every thing in creation loved him.

There were some exceptions. Not everyone *loved* Baldur. Some only liked him. But only one disliked him enough to act on it. Loki. More on that later.

And there was another exception: one whom Baldur loved a bit more than others and who loved *him* a bit more than anyone else. His wife, Nanna. The moon to his sun, as they say, the perfect reflection of his glory. Together, they produced a son: Forseti the Just, also one loved by good people.

Such wonderful times. But all things, ill or good, must end. Father Odin had foreseen the end of all things, the end of our world, the Ragnarok. He suspected, too, that this destruction would begin with harm to Baldur. Mother Frigg, too, had ill dreams, foreseeing sickness or injury to her son. Baldur himself began to have nightmares.

The All-father resolved to find the danger to Baldur. Perhaps in doing so, he might forestall the world's decay. He rode out to the gates of Helheim, finding its entrance halls preparing for a guest. Near Hel's walls, he sought out the grave of a seeress, a prophetess... a giantess, buried there. Odin woke her spirit with his magics and bid her answer his questions, giving her a false name.

He asked her, "For whom do Hel's halls prepare?" She answered, "Baldur". "And how shall Baldur come to Helheim?" "His brother, Hodur." "Who will avenge this deed?" "Vale, son of Rhind." Odin had more questions, of course. But by his reactions to her questions, the giantess knew him as Odin and an enemy, and would answer nothing more.

Odin returned to Asgard. While he was away, Frigg wasted no time waiting. Not knowing where the threat to Baldur lay, she traveled the world, demanding oaths of every creature in creation: Promise never to harm Baldur.

It wasn't difficult to get each oath. Everyone swore. Even the Jotnar, who still loved Baldur, even as enemies. Even Loki, who was afraid to refuse.

Knowing what you know of Baldur, you would swear this oath, wouldn't you? To never harm him? To his mother? Wouldn't you? Wouldn't you? Of course, you would.

Though convincing *each* being to swear was easy, traveling *everywhere* was still time-consuming and tiring. Frigg longed to return home and rest. So, she left out one thing. Just one. The mistletoe, a plant so frail it must grow on a greater tree to survive.

She returned to Asgard and spread the glad news that Baldur was safe, that all things had sworn to protect him. To prove this wonder and to show him honor, the Aesir struck upon a game. They would strike at Baldur and show how nothing would hurt him. Swords, axes, stones, arrows, fire, lightning... all bounced off harmlessly.

Only one guest did not celebrate. Loki. But being Loki, he instead re-entered the hall in the guise of an old woman and went to Frigg, asking, "What do they do in Asgard tonight?" Frigg answered, "They are honoring Baldur by striking at him. Since everything has sworn to do him no harm, nothing can hurt him." "Everything? Really?" "Well, I did get tired. I left out the mistletoe. I can't imagine *it* being dangerous. Could you?" "Oh, no, not at all."

Loki, being Loki, slipped back out of the hall... found some mistletoe... cut it down... took it to a smith... had him carve a dart of the wood... and then removed the smith's memory. Then, Loki returned to Asgard.

There, Loki found our blind brother, Hodur, sitting to the side, enjoying a drink. Loki asked why Hodur did not participate and honor his brother. "I'm blind? I couldn't throw something, I might miss and hit someone else! I'm also *really* strong. I could hurt somebody." "Well, let me help you! I'll guide your aim. And I just happen to have a dart right here!"

So thoughtful. So skillful. With Loki's help, Hodur threw straight and true. The dart struck Baldur precisely, piercing his heart and killing him on the spot.

The hall went quiet. Loki ran. Hodur stood still, not knowing what had happened. The hall erupted with anger. The guests would have cut Hodur down right then, if not for respect for the peace of Frigg's hall.

Eventually, both Loki and Hodur were punished for murder... and for breaking their oaths... but those are *their* stories.

Now comes *my* part in *this* story. Mother Frigg would not accept Baldur's death. She was not alone. Yet when she called for a volunteer to journey into Helheim and bring Baldur back, nearly none thought themselves able. Only one was brave and quick and nimble enough to accept that quest... me, the great traveler of the Aesir. And to ensure my success, Father Odin granted me his horse: eight-legged Sleipnir, the fastest mount to ever exist.

It still took me nine days and nights to get there. Meanwhile, custom dictated that the deceased be prepared right away. His body was washed, wrapped, and laid out aboard his ship, Hringhorn, alongside his treasures and goods for his final voyage. Seeing her husband so dark, so cold and so still was too much for Nanna. Her heart burst from grief. The mourners could do nothing but prepare her, too, and lay her next to her husband.

The ship was set adrift, set afire, sanctified and sent on to the next world.

Its passengers were already in Helheim before I arrived. I did have a slight delay. The gates were closed, barred and guarded. Fortunately, Sleipnir could jump the walls.

I found Baldur already seated in state, still glorious, if a bit pale. Nanna was at his side. I bid them return with me. Baldur, though, could not escape. His Wyrð held him fast; he was fated to be in Helheim. Since her husband could not leave, Nanna would not go, either. They instead gave me gifts to bring back to the Aesir, but gifts were not what I braved Hel to retrieve!

No, I went the dark queen of the dead, Hel herself... and begged her to release Baldur. I reminded her of her oath, to do Baldur no harm. She argued that keeping Baldur, according to his Wyrð, was not harm. However, she could release a spirit *if* every living creature wished him to return from death. *If* every being wept with grief for his loss.

I thought this could be managed. After all, this was Baldur. Everyone loved him! Surely, none would fail to grieve his death.

You would mourn Baldur, wouldn't you? You would cry, to hear that one so wonderful was dead. Wouldn't you? And you? Of course, you would.

I brought Hel's word to Frigg. She sent riders to every corner of the world, myself and herself included. We asked that every creature, every tree, every stone show its grief for Baldur, weeping for his return. Soon, the whole world was awash in tears.

Except, as I said, one did not grieve. Loki. Yet, again, he was not brave enough to declare himself. Instead, he disguised himself as an old giantess, the hag of the Ironwood, Thokk. (What *is* it with Loki and old women?)

When Frigg asked 'Thokk' to grieve, the hag answered: "What has Baldur done for me? If I wept, they would be tears of fire. Let Hel keep what she holds." And so, for that one creature refusing to weep, Hel could not release Baldur. He and Nanna were lost to us.

And yet, remember Hel's words. As I said, Loki would be punished. And in time, he will die, as foretold... along with many others, of course. But, afterward... there may be none left living who will not weep for Baldur.

If they remember. If we keep telling his story. If all those who live mourn Baldur's loss... then, he will return. Perhaps, if the Nornir hold any kindness, this was the reason for his early death: so that we could preserve the best of the old world and bring it into the new.

You will remember, won't you? You will weep for lost Baldur? Won't you? And you?

And if *you* won't, perhaps your descendants will.

And then, Baldur will return, joining the survivors of the world's doom.

And *I* will have succeeded in my duty at last.

On that note, thank you for hearing my message.