

# The Death and Rebirth of Balder - Balder's Letter to Frigg

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by Nathan Large

Beloved Mother,

I know how you grieve, still. I hope this message does not tear at old wounds, but salve them to heal faster. Though we are parted, know that I still love and think of you often. I am well, as well as possible given the circumstances. I have my wife, Nanna, here beside me, a joy amidst sorrow. Our hostess is gracious and has granted us a hall of our own. My brother even visits from time to time.



Yes, *that* brother. Hodur is welcome, despite his role in my death. His was the hand that slew me, but it was not his will. No, we know who is truly to blame, and who will pay for our loss. I think, though, that you only know the half of it. One advantage of being dead is that it grants a wider perspective. I will recount the circumstances of my death and explain what even you, with your wisdom and vision, might not have discovered.

I hear that almost all the world grieved my passing, for which I am honored. From my earliest days, I remember the love showered upon me, first by you and Father, soon after by our fellow Aesir, and then by all the populations of all the worlds.

Was I deserving of this love? I did my best. But truly, the “best of all?” Was that only proud parents speaking? I was bright, but not half as bright as Sunna. I was kind, but only a shadow of your great love. I tried to be just and wise, but Tyr was always my superior, and my son Forseti surpasses us both. I strove to learn every lesson, but was I as skillful as Father Oðinn? That hardly seems possible.

Still, in one way, I suppose I did shine the brightest: in the hope and expectation I carried. People loved me, not for feats I had yet done, but because I was predicted to do great things. I would guide the Aesir to their greatest days. I would unite the worlds in new love and prosperity. Some were even so foolish as to whisper that I would avert Ragnarok, the prophesied end of all. You and I both know that was impossible, that Wyrð will not be undone, but perhaps, I might have forestalled doom for an age.

You, too, had high expectations, dear Mother. Though you and Father are long-lived, you knew that death must someday come. Father's end has been foretold, at the wolf's jaws. Yours, too, I suspect you know, but let us not discuss that further.

My death, though, you denied, even when we all saw omens of doom, even when Father returned with confirmation. Having ridden forth to the walls of Hel itself, he inquired there about my fate, spurred to action by my nightmares and yours. He found a hall being prepared for my arrival. He spoke with a dead woman and learned that I would die by my brother Hodur's hand, and be avenged in turn by another brother, called Vale. He returned when he could learn no more and told you what he had learned.

Even before Father returned from Hel, you had begun to draw oaths from every single thing in creation, to do me no harm. I would not die of old age. I would not die of disease. I would not be struck down by any hand or claw or thorn or stone. If nothing would kill me, you reasoned, I could not die. The Aesir would rule forever, regardless of the All-Father's passing.

Even Loki swore that oath! Perhaps he had not yet formed his hatred of me, in my infancy. Perhaps he thought the praises and predictions only words. Perhaps he feared your wrath should he refuse. Still, he swore. I hear his punishment for breaking that oath continues still... a just fate, if not a kind one.

Only the small, high-growing mistletoe, which you passed by, which was the actual instrument of my death, did not swear, and is so blameless. I am relieved by that, as it had no agency despite its involvement. Mistletoe is more to blame for killing trees than me!

I hope you can laugh at my jokes, still. I am not writing to torment you, but to reassure you. Perhaps, I may yet give you hope.

Hope was what I carried, what shone from me, what I tried to share with all my fellows. Even if I could not fulfill all their expectations, I would do my best and inspire faith in a greater future.

That was why it was so difficult to refuse their requests, when the other Aesir gathered one night for their revels, and asked me to demonstrate my invulnerability. It began with a boast - not mine - that nothing could do me harm. None doubted, but they wished to see. Even you encouraged the test, thinking it would inspire them.

It started hesitantly, carefully, with small objects thrown: a cup, a stone, eventually a knife. When I remained unbruised and unpierced, the missiles became more serious, and the great warriors started to try blows with their weapons. Nothing struck, nothing could harm me in the slightest. It was a great gift you granted me, freedom from fear and freedom from pain, but it went from a wonder to an amusement. The attacks became a game, with each player trying to best the others in spectacle.

I can understand how, in the midst of this madness, you were caught up... how a certain deceiver approached you, in disguise, and learned your secret. Plying you with compliments and doubts in turn, that "old woman", who was really Loki, tricked you into confessing that only the mistletoe was exempt from the oath never to harm me. It did not raise your suspicions even when she slipped from the hall, soon after, off on a terrible errand.

I was as much at fault as anyone. I allowed the game. I enjoyed it. I let it continue long into the night, as we grew drunker and wilder. If it had ended sooner, Loki would not have had time to find a mistletoe sprig. He would not have had time to shape it into a throwing-dart. He would not have come back in time to find Hodur, my brother, sitting alone, excluded from the sport by his blindness.

As we both now know, Loki persuaded Hodur to take his turn, telling him he should not be left out in “honoring” me... honoring you, also, for your thorough work. Loki handed Hodur the dart, offering to guide his hand, so that he might aim true. Loki did not throw the weapon, but he did everything else possible to make it fatal.

I should have called a halt then, seeing them... but, as I said, I was enjoying the game. I did not suspect Loki, nor think he would violate his oath, even technically. In particular, I was happy to see my brother included, when he so often had to sit aside.

So I stood there, tall and proud, unsuspecting and fearless, as the deadly missile flew. When it pierced my chest, I barely noticed, then stared at it long moments more in disbelief. I felt my heart fail and my vision fade as the blood poured out. Then I fell, and knew nothing for a long time after.

I was spared the cries of shock, then the wails of horror, then the shouts to take the guilty. I was spared the weeping - yours first and longest, then that of all the Aesir - that followed the announcement of my death. I was spared the burning of my body, the death of my horse, and the self-sacrifice of my wife Nanna, all consumed on the longship sent out for my funeral.

I missed the immediate events that followed my death. However, I did not miss the wailing of all the worlds when you spread the news of my passing, when you begged all creatures to weep for dead Balder. By then, I was a guest of Hel, captive but still honored. It was there that my brother Hermoðr found me, already seated in my hall below, when he came to petition Hel for my release.

Hel, you see, does not consider holding her guests to be a form of harm. She has not violated her oath to you... *technically*, in the manner of her father. She does, however, treat me well, with none of the torments that the ignoble dead suffer here. Rest your mind, I do not suffer, no more than is caused by separation from the other worlds and from you.

Even so, Hel was willing to release me if every heart in the world was turned against her, if every being demanded my release. She told Hermoðr that if every thing wept for me, mourning my loss and wishing it undone, she would relent. He passed this message to you. You passed it to the world.

And again, only one being would not comply. Not the mistletoe: it readily wept, miserable to this day for its role. No, the one refusal was from a giantess, a hag who called herself Thokk, or “thanks”. That name, of course, was a cruel jest, as were her words, demanding to know what I, Balder the Bright, had ever done to her gain, that she should give her favor in return. You could not answer this argument, for who was Thokk? Had I ever given her anything? It seemed unlikely.

So, for a discourtesy done, I return one: Thokk was Loki. Did you realize it yet? Did you know then, or discover it later with your sight? If not, then let me say it. He is not only to blame for my death, in every way but the actual stroke, he is to blame for my captivity. So it is that I say his punishment is just, if cruel: a prisoner for a prisoner. A son for a son. Pain for pain.

Because of that single refusal, I was bound to Hel. I am glad we returned gifts with Hermoðr, so that Father's ring and Nanna's ring and dress would not be forever lost. And, I sent this letter. I know, some of its contents reference events which came after Hermoðr's visit. Time moves differently here, and the dead can view a wider span of Wyrð than the living. Those events that concern me are all within my sight, the future as much as the past.

That foresight is why I am content. It is why I can jest, and console, and reassure you. Yes, Ragnarok will come, as will all the unwelcome events foretold. I am sorry that I cannot aid in those trials, as you had once hoped. I am, however, spared the pain of standing by while those horrors unfold, myself unharmed as others die. It might even be for the better, as none will suffer from false hope, betrayed by their expectations. You will do as you must, and your sacrifices will have meaning, braver and nobler for having fought without hope.

But listen: hope is not gone, only changed. I am in Hel, only waiting. Hel's oaths still hold, not just the first, to spare me harm, but also the second, to release me when every being weeps for my passing.

When the end comes, when all who once reigned are gone... Loki, too, will die. The one whom even the great trickster cannot deceive, Heimdall, will see to that.

And then, provided that my story has been remembered and spread throughout the worlds, none will remain who do not mourn my death. In the darkest hour, when all else is dust, they will remember hope, and weep for its return.

Between the end days and that new beginning, we will meet again, dear Mother, if only in passing. Be ready for that time, for it may be brief. Still, I wanted you to know: despite everything that has happened and everything that will happen, you were right. The particulars might not have been as desired, but your hopes for me were correct.

I *will* carry the hope of the Aesir, the hope of the world. I am not the "best", and I was not the "brightest", not in our time... but in the darkness that is to come, I will be. I promise.

Your Son,

Balder