

BALDUR

Annie and Eliza Keary

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PART I THE DREAM

Upon a summer's afternoon it happened that Baldur the Bright and Bold, beloved of men and AEsir, found himself alone in his palace of Broadblink. Thor was walking low down among the valleys, his brow heavy with summer heat; Frey and Gerda sported on still waters in their cloud-leaf ship; Odin, for once, slept on the top of Air Throne; a noonday stillness pervaded the whole earth; and Baldur in Broadblink, the wide-glancing, most sunlit of palaces, dreamed a dream.

The dream of Baldur was troubled. He knew not whence nor why; but when he awoke he found that a new and weighty care was within him. It was so heavy that Baldur could scarcely carry it, and yet he pressed it closely to his heart and said, "Lie there, and do not fall on any one but me." Then he rose up and walked out from the splendor of his hall, that he might seek his own mother, Frigga, and tell her what had happened to him. He found her in her crystal saloon, calm and kind, waiting to listen, and ready to sympathize; so he walked up to her, his hands pressed closely on his heart, and lay down at her feet, sighing.

"What is the matter, dear Baldur?" asked Frigga, gently.

"I do not know, mother," answered he. "I do not know what the matter is; but I have a shadow in my heart."

"Take it out, then, my son, and let me look at it," replied Frigga.

"But I fear, mother, that if I do it will cover the whole earth."

Then Frigga laid her hand upon the heart of her son that she might feel the shadow's shape. Her brow became clouded as she felt it; her parted lips grew pale, and she cried out, "Oh! Baldur, my beloved son! the shadow is the shadow of death!"

Then said Baldur, "I will die bravely, my mother."

But Frigga answered, "You shall not die at all; for I will not sleep tonight until everything on earth has sworn to me that it will neither kill nor harm you."

So Frigga stood up, and called to her everything on earth that had power to hurt or slay. First she called all metals to her; and heavy iron-ore came lumbering up the hill into the crystal hall, brass and gold, copper, silver, lead, and steel, and stood before the Queen, who lifted her right hand high in the air, saying, "Swear to me that you will not injure Baldur"; and they all swore, and went. Then she called to her all stones; and huge granite came, with crumbling sandstones and white lime, and the round, smooth stones of the seashore, and Frigga raised her arm, saying, "Swear that you will not injure Baldur"; and they swore, and went. Then Frigga called to her the trees; and wide-spreading oak trees, with tall ash and somber firs, came rushing up the hill, and Frigga raised her hand, and said, "Swear that you will not hurt Baldur"; and they said, "We swear," and went. After this Frigga called to her the diseases, who came blown by poisonous winds on wings of pain, and to the sound of moaning. Frigga said to them, "Swear"; and they sighed, "We swear," then flew away. Then Frigga called to her all beasts, birds, and venomous snakes, who came to her and swore, and disappeared. After this she stretched out her hand to Baldur, whilst a smile spread over her face, saying, "And now, my son, you cannot die."

But just then Odin came in, and when he had heard from Frigga the whole story, he looked even more mournful than she had done; neither did the cloud pass from his face when he was told of the oaths that had been taken.

"Why do you still look so grave, my lord?" demanded Frigga at last. "Baldur cannot now die."

But Odin asked very gravely, "Is the shadow gone out of our son's heart, or is it still there?"

"It cannot be there," said Frigga, turning away her head resolutely, and folding her hands before her.

But Odin looked at Baldur, and saw how it was, the hands pressed to the heavy heart, the beautiful brow grown dim. Then immediately he rose, saddled Sleipnir, his eight-footed steed, mounted him, and, turning to Frigga said, "I know of a dead Vala, Frigga, who, when she was alive, could tell what was going to happen; her grave lies on the east side of Helheim, and I am going there to awake her, and ask whether any terrible grief is really coming upon us."

So saying, Odin shook the bridle in his hand, and the Eight-footed, with a bound, leaped forth, rushed like a whirlwind down the mountain of Asgard, and then dashed into a narrow defile between rocks.

Sleipnir went on through the defile a long way, until he came to a place where the earth opened her mouth. There Odin rode in and down a broad, steep, slanting road which led him to the cavern Gnipa, and the mouth of the cavern Gnipa yawned upon Niflheim. Then thought Odin to himself, "My journey is already done." But just as Sleipnir was about to leap through the jaws of the pit, Garm, the voracious dog who was chained to the rock, sprang forward, and tried to fasten himself upon Odin. Three times Odin shook him off, and still Garm, as fierce as ever, went on with the fight. At last Sleipnir leaped, and Odin thrust just at the same moment; then horse and rider cleared the entrance, and turned eastward towards the dead Vala's grave, dripping blood along the road as they went; while the beaten Garm stood baying in the cavern's mouth.

When Odin came to the grave he got off his horse, and stood with his face northward, looking through barred inclosures into the city of Helheim itself. The servants of Hela were very busy there making preparations for some new guest-hanging gilded couches with curtains of anguish and splendid misery upon the walls. Then Odin's heart died within him, and he began to repeat mournful runes in a low tone to himself.

The dead Vala turned heavily in her grave at the sound of his voice, and, as he went on, sat bolt upright. "What man is this," she asked, "who dares disturb my sleep?"

Then Odin, for the first time in his life, said what was not true; the shadow of Baldur dead fell upon his lips, and he made answer, "My name is Vegtam, the son of Valtam."

"And what do you want from me?" asked the Vala.

"I want to know," replied Odin, "for whom Hela is making ready that gilded couch in Helheim?"

"That is for Baldur the Beloved," answered the dead Vala. "Now go away and let me sleep again, for my eyes are heavy."

But Odin said: "Only one word more. Is Baldur going to Helheim?"

"Yes, I've told you that he is," answered the Vala.

"Will he never come back to Asgard again?"

"If everything on earth should weep for him," answered she, "he will go back; if not, he will remain in Helheim."

Then Odin covered his face with his hands and looked into darkness.

"Do go away," said the Vala, "I'm so sleepy; I cannot keep my eyes open any longer."

But Odin raised his head and said again: "Only tell me this one thing. Just now, as I looked into darkness, it seemed to me as if I saw one on earth who would not weep for Baldur. Who was it?"

At this the Vala grew very angry and said: "How couldst thou see in darkness? I know of only one who, by giving away his eye, gained light. No Vegtam art thou, but Odin, chief of men."

At her angry words Odin became angry, too, and called out as loudly as ever he could, "No Vala art thou, nor wise woman, but rather the mother of three giants!"

"Go, go!" answered the Vala, falling back in her grave; "no man shall waken me again until Loki have burst his chains and Ragnarok be come." After this Odin mounted the Eight-footed once more and rode thoughtfully towards home.

PART II THE PEACESTEAD

When Odin came back to Asgard, Hermod took the bridle from his father's hand and told him that the rest of the Aesir were gone to the Peacestead--a broad, green plain which lay just outside the city. This was the playground of the Aesir, where they practiced trials of skill one with another, and held tournaments and sham fights. These last were always conducted in the gentlest and most honorable manner; for the strongest law of the Peacestead was, that no angry blow should be struck, or spiteful word spoken, upon the sacred field; and for this reason some have thought it might be well if children also had a Peacestead to play in.

Odin was too much tired by his journey from Helheim to go to the Peacestead that afternoon; so he turned away and shut himself up in his palace of Gladsheim. But when he was gone, Loki came into the city by another way, and hearing from Hermod where the Aesir were, set off to join them.

When he got to the Peacestead, Loki found that the Aesir were standing round in a circle shooting at something, and he peeped between the shoulders of two of them to find out what it was. To his surprise he saw Baldur standing in the midst, erect and calm, whilst his friends and brothers were aiming their weapons at him. Some hewed at him with their swords,--others threw stones at him, -- some shot arrows pointed with steel, and Thor continually swung Mjolnir at his head. "Well," said Loki to himself, "if this is the sport of Asgard, what must that of Jotunheim be? I wonder what Father Odin and Mother Frigga would say if they were here?"

But as Loki still looked, he became even more surprised, for the sport went on, and Baldur was not hurt. Arrows aimed at his very heart glanced back again untinged with blood. The stones fell down from his broad, bright brow, and left no bruises there. Swords clave, but did not wound him; Mjolnir struck him, and he was not crushed. At this Loki grew perfectly furious with envy and hatred. "And why is Baldur to be so honored," said he, "that even steel and stone shall not hurt him?" Then Loki changed himself into a little, dark, bent old woman, with a stick in his hand, and hobbled away from the Peacestead to Frigga's cool saloon. At the door he knocked with his stick.

"Come in!" said the kind voice of Frigga, and Loki lifted the latch.

Now when Frigga saw, from the other end of the hall, a little, bent, crippled old woman come hobbling up her crystal floor, she got up with true queenliness and met her halfway, holding out her hand and saying in the kindest manner, "Pray sit down, my poor old friend; for it seems to me that you have come from a great way off."

"That I have, indeed," answered Loki in a tremulous, squeaking voice.

"And did you happen to see anything of the AEsir," asked Frigga, "as you came?"

"Just now I passed by the Peacestead and saw them at play."

"What were they doing?"

"Shooting at Baldur."

Then Frigga bent over her work with a pleased smile on her face. "And nothing hurt him?" she said.

"Nothing," answered Loki, looking keenly at her.

"No, nothing," murmured Frigga, still looking down and speaking half musingly to herself; "for all things have sworn to me that they will not."

"Sworn!" exclaimed Loki, eagerly; "what is that you say? Has everything sworn then?"

"Everything," answered she, "excepting, indeed, the little shrub mistletoe, which grows, you know, on the west side of Valhalla, and to which I said nothing, because I thought it was too young to swear."

"Excellent!" thought Loki, and then he got up.

"You're not going yet, are you?" said Frigga, stretching out her hand and looking up at last into the eyes of the old woman.

"I'm quite rested now, thank you," answered Loki in his squeaky voice, and then he hobbled out at the door, which clapped after him, and sent a cold gust into the room. Frigga shuddered, and thought that a serpent was gliding down the back of her neck.

When Loki had left the presence of Frigga, he changed himself back to his proper shape and went straight to the west side of Valhalla, where the mistletoe grew. Then he opened his knife and cut off a large branch, saying these words, "Too young for Frigga's oaths, but not too weak for Loki's work." After which he set off for the Peacestead once more, the mistletoe in his hand. When he got there he found that the AEsir were still at their sport, standing round, taking aim, and talking eagerly, and Baldur did not seem tired.

But there was one who stood alone, leaning against a tree, and who took no part in what was going on. This was Hodur, Baldur's blind twin-brother; he stood with his head bent downwards, silent whilst the others were speaking, doing nothing when they were most eager; and Loki thought that there was a discontented expression on his face, just as if he were saying to himself, "Nobody takes any notice of me." So Loki went up to him and put his hand upon his shoulder.

"And why are you standing here all alone, my brave friend?" said he. "Why don't you throw something at Baldur? Hew at him with a sword, or show him some attention of that sort."

"I haven't a sword," answered Hodur, with an impatient gesture; "and you know as well as I do, Loki, that Father Odin does not approve of my wearing warlike weapons, or joining in sham fights, because I am blind."

"Oh! is that it?" said Loki. "Well, I only know I shouldn't like to be left out of everything. However, I've got a twig of mistletoe here which I'll lend you if you like; a harmless little twig enough, but I shall be happy to guide your arm if you would like to throw it, and Baldur might take it as a compliment from his twin-brother."

"Let me feel it," said Hodur, stretching out his uncertain hands.

"This way, this way, my dear friend," said Loki, giving him the twig. "Now, as hard as ever you can, to do him honor; throw!"

Hodur threw--Baldur fell, and the shadow of death covered the whole earth.

PART III BALDUR DEAD

One after another they turned and left the Peacestead, those friends and brothers of the slain. One after another they turned and went towards the city; crushed hearts, heavy footsteps, no word amongst them, a shadow upon all. The shadow was in Asgard, too --had walked through Frigga's hall and seated itself upon the threshold of Gladsheim. Odin had just come out to look at it, and Frigga stood by in mute despair as the AEsir came up.

"Loki did it! Loki did it!" they said at last in confused, hoarse whispers, and they looked from one to another,--upon Odin, upon Frigga, upon the shadow which they saw before them, and which they felt within. "Loki did it! Loki, Loki!" they went on saying; but it was no use repeating the name of Loki over and over again when there was another name they were too sad to utter which yet filled all their hearts--Baldur. Frigga said it first, and then they all went to look at him lying down so peacefully on the grass--dead, dead.

"Carry him to the funeral pyre!" said Odin, at length; and four of the AEsir stooped down and lifted their dead brother.

With scarcely any sound they carried the body tenderly to the seashore and laid it upon the deck of that majestic ship called Ringhorn, which had been _his_. Then they stood round waiting to see who would come to the funeral. Odin came, and on his shoulder? sat his two ravens, whose croaking drew clouds down over the Asa's face, for Thought and Memory sang one sad song that day. Frigga came,--Frey, Gerda, Freyja, Thor, Hoenir, Bragi, and Iduna. Heimdall came sweeping over the tops of the mountains on Golden Mane, his swift, bright steed. AEsir the Old groaned from under the deep, and sent his daughters up to mourn around the dead. Frost-giants and mountain-giants came crowding round the rimy shores of Jotunheim to look across the sea upon the funeral of an Asa. Nanna came, Baldur's fair young wife; but when she saw the dead body of her husband, her own heart broke with grief, and the AEsir laid her beside him on the stately ship. After this Odin stepped forward and placed a ring on the breast of his son, whispering something at the same time in his ear; but when he and the rest of the AEsir tried to push Ringhorn into the sea before setting fire to it, they found that their hearts were so heavy they could lift nothing. So they beckoned to the giantess Hyrrokin to come over from Joetunheim and help them. She, with a single push, set the ship floating, and then, whilst Thor stood up holding Mioelnir high in the air, Odin lighted the funeral pile of Baldur and of Nanna.

So Ringhorn went out floating towards the deep, and the funeral fire burnt on. Its broad red flame burst forth towards heaven; but when the smoke would have gone upward too, the winds came sobbing and carried it away.

PART IV HELHEIM

When at last the ship Ringhorn had floated out so far to sea that it looked like a dull red lamp on the horizon, Frigga turned round and said, "Does any one of you, my children, wish to perform a noble action and win my love forever?"

"I do," cried Hermod, before any one else had time to open his lips.

"Go then, Hermod," answered Frigga, "saddle Sleipnir with all speed and ride down to Helheim; there seek out Hela, the stern mistress of the dead, and entreat her to send our beloved back to us once more."

Hermod was gone in the twinkling of an eye, not in at the mouth of the earth and through the steep cavern down which Odin went to the dead Vala's grave; he chose another way, though not a better one; for, go to Helheim how you will, the best is but a downward road, and so Hermod found it--downward, slanting, slippery, dark, and very cold. At last he came to the Giallar Bru--that sounding river which flows between the living and the dead, and the bridge over which is paved with stones of glittering gold. Hermod was surprised to see gold in such a place; but as he rode over the bridge, and looked down carefully at the stones, he saw that they were only tears which had been shed round the beds of the dying--only tears, and yet they made the way seem brighter. But when Hermod reached the other end of the bridge, he found the courageous woman who, for ages and ages, had been sitting there to watch the dead go by, and she stopped him, saying:

"What a noise you make! Who are you? Yesterday five troops of dead men went over the Giallar Bridge and did not shake it so much as you have done. Besides," she added, looking more closely at Hermod, "you are not a dead man at all. Your lips are neither cold nor blue. Why, then, do you ride on the way to Helheim?"

"I seek Baldur," answered Hermod. "Tell me, have you seen him pass?"

"Baldur," she said, "has ridden over the bridge; but there below, towards the north, lies the way to the Abodes of Death."

So Hermod went on the way until he came to the barred gates of Helheim itself. There he alighted, tightened his saddle-girths, remounted, clapped both spurs to his horse, and cleared the gate by one tremendous leap. Then Hermod found himself in a place where no living man had ever been before--the City of the Dead. Perhaps you think there is a great silence there, but you are mistaken. Hermod thought he had never in his life heard so much noise; for the echoes of all words were speaking together--words, some newly uttered and some ages old; but the dead men did not hear who flitted up and down the dark streets, for their ears had been stunned and become cold long since. Hermod rode on through the city until he came to the palace of Hela, which stood in the midst. Precipice was its threshold, the entrance hall, Wide Storm, and yet Hermod was not too much afraid to seek the innermost rooms; so he went on to the banqueting hall, where Hela sat at the head of her table and served her newest guests. Baldur, alas! sat at her right hand, and on her left his pale young wife. When Hela saw Hermod coming up the hall she smiled grimly, but beckoned to him at the same time to sit down, and told him that he might sup that night with her. It was a strange supper for a living man to sit down to. Hunger was the table; Starvation, Hela's knife; Delay, her man; Slowness, her maid; and Burning Thirst, her wine. After supper Hela led the way to the sleeping apartments. "You see," she said, turning to Hermod, "I am very anxious about the comfort of my guests. Here are beds of unrest provided for all, hung with curtains of weariness, and look how all the walls are furnished with despair."

So saying she strode away, leaving Hermod and Baldur together. The whole night they sat on those unquiet couches and talked. Hermod could speak of nothing but the past, and as he looked anxiously round the room his eyes became dim with tears. But Baldur seemed to see a light far off, and he spoke of what was to come.

The next morning Hermod went to Hela, and entreated her to let Baldur return to Asgard. He even offered to take his place in Helhelm if she pleased; but Hela only laughed at this and said: "You talk a great deal about Baldur, and boast how much every one loves him; I will prove now if what you have told me be true. Let everything on earth, living or dead, weep for Baldur, and he shall go home again; but if one thing only refuse to weep, then let Helheim hold its own; he shall not go."

"Every one will weep willingly," said Hermod, as he mounted Sleipnir and rode towards the entrance of the city. Baldur went with him as far as the gate and began to send messages to all his friends in Asgard, but Hermod would not listen to many of them.

"You will so soon come back to us," he said, "there is no use in sending messages."

So Hermod darted homewards, and Baldur watched him through the bars of Helheim's gateway as he flew along.

"Not soon, not soon," said the dead Asa; but still he saw the light far off, and thought of what was to come.

PART V WEEPING

"Well, Hermod, what did she say?" asked the AEsir from the top of the hill as they saw him coming; "make haste and tell us what she said." And Hermod came up.

"Oh! is that all?" they cried, as soon as he had delivered his message. "Nothing can be more easy," and then they all hurried off to tell Frigga. She was weeping already, and in five minutes there was not a tearless eye in Asgard.

"But this is not enough," said Odin; "the whole earth must know of our grief that it may weep with us."

Then the father of the AEsir called to him his messenger maidens --the beautiful Valkyrior--and sent them out into all worlds with these three words on their lips, "Baldur is dead!" But the words were so dreadful that at first the messenger maidens could only whisper them in low tones as they went along, "Baldur is dead!" The dull, sad sounds flowed back on Asgard like a new river of grief, and it seemed to the AEsir as if they now wept for the first time--"Baldur is dead!"

"What is that the Valkyrior are saying?" asked the men and women in all the country round, and when they heard rightly, men left their labor and lay down to weep--women dropped the buckets they were carrying to the well, and, leaning their faces over them, filled them with tears. The children crowded upon the doorsteps, or sat down at the corners of the streets, crying as if their own mothers were dead.

The Valkyrior passed on. "Baldur is dead!" they said to the empty fields; and straightway the grass and the wild field-flowers shed tears.

"Baldur is dead!" said the messenger maidens to the rocks and stones; and the very stones began to weep. "Baldur is dead!" the Valkyrior cried; and even the old mammoth's bones, which had lain for centuries under the hills, burst into tears, so that small rivers gushed forth from every mountain's side. "Baldur is dead!" said the messenger maidens as they swept over silent sands; and all the shells wept pearls. "Baldur is dead!" they cried to the sea, and to Jotunheim across the sea; and when the giants understood it, even they wept, whilst the sea rained spray to heaven. After this the Valkyrior stepped from one stone to another until they reached a rock that stood alone in the middle of the sea; then, all together, they bent forward over the edge of it, stooped down and peeped over, that they might tell the monsters of the deep. "Baldur is dead!" they said, and the sea monsters and the fish wept. Then the messenger maidens looked at one another and said, "Surely our work is done." So they twined their arms round one another's waists, and set forth on the downward road to Helheim, there to claim Baldur from among the dead.

After he had sent forth his messenger maidens, Odin had seated himself on the top of Air Throne that he might see how the earth received his message. At first he watched the Valkyrior as they stepped forth north and south, and east and west; but soon the whole earth's steaming tears rose up like a great cloud and hid everything from him. Then he looked down through the cloud and said, "Are you all weeping?" The Valkyrior heard the sound of his voice as they went all together down the slippery road, and they turned round, stretching out their arms towards Air Throne, their long hair falling back, whilst, with choked voices and streaming eyes, they answered, "The world weeps, Father Odin; the world and we."

After this they went on their way until they came to the end of the cave Gnipa, where Garm was chained, and which yawned over Niflheim. "The world weeps," they said one to another by way of encouragement, for here the road was so dreadful; but just as they were about to pass through the mouth of Gnipa they came upon a haggard witch named Thaukt, who sat in the entrance with her back to them, and her face toward the abyss. "Baldur is dead! Weep, weep!" said the messenger maidens, as they tried to pass her; but Thaukt made answer:

"What she doth hold,
Let Hela keep;
For naught care I,
Though the world weep,
O'er Baldur's bale.
Live he or die
With tearless eye,
Old Thaukt shall wail."

And with these words leaped into Niflheim with a yell of triumph.

"Surely that cry was the cry of Loki," said one of the maidens; but another pointed towards the city of Helheim, and there they saw the stern face of Hela looking over the wall.

"One has not wept," said the grim Queen, "and Helheim holds its own." So saying she motioned the maidens away with her long, cold hand.

Then the Valkyrior turned and fled up the steep way to the foot of Odin's throne, like a pale snowdrift that flies before the storm.