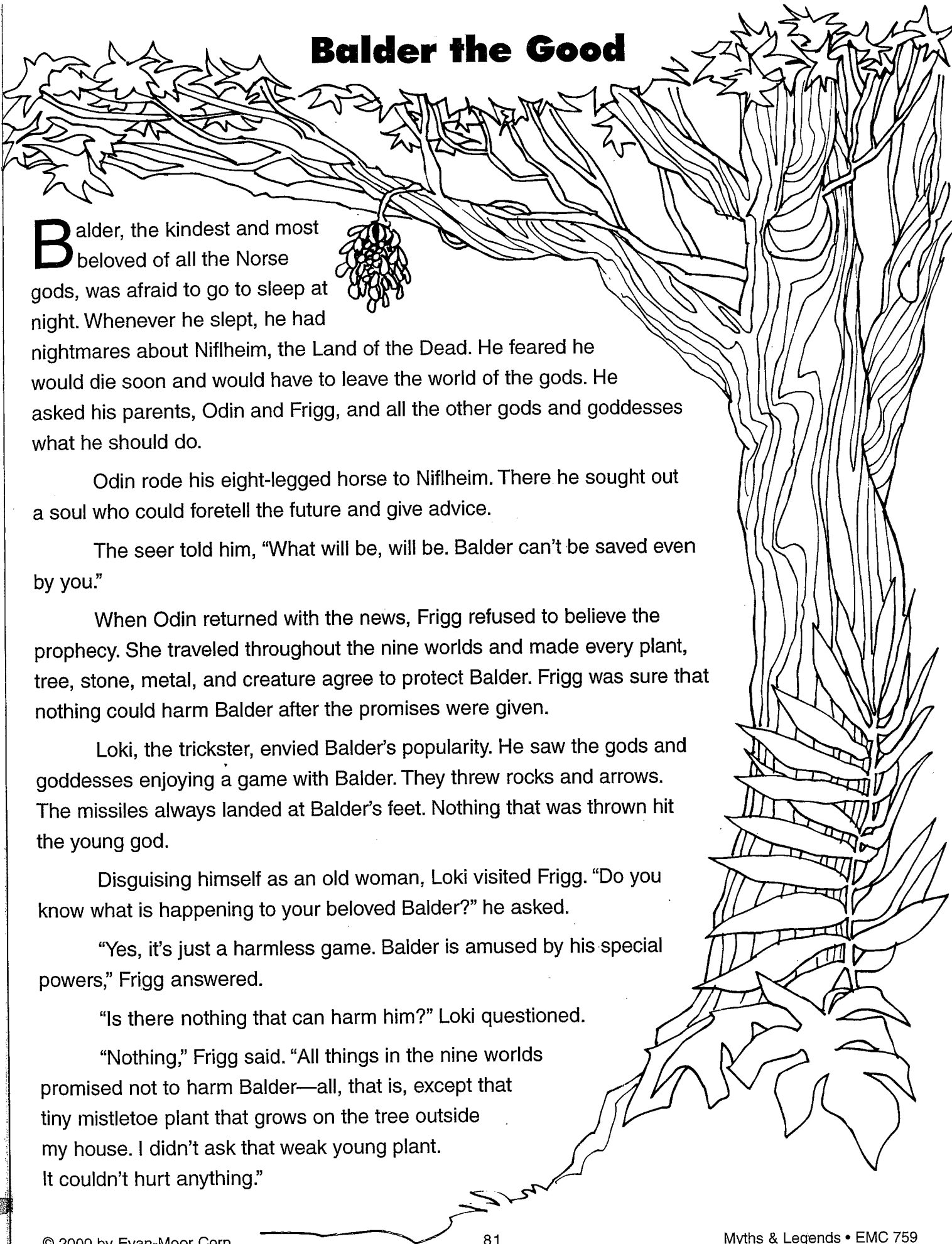


Balder the Good



Balder, the kindest and most beloved of all the Norse gods, was afraid to go to sleep at night. Whenever he slept, he had nightmares about Niflheim, the Land of the Dead. He feared he would die soon and would have to leave the world of the gods. He asked his parents, Odin and Frigg, and all the other gods and goddesses what he should do.

Odin rode his eight-legged horse to Niflheim. There he sought out a soul who could foretell the future and give advice.

The seer told him, "What will be, will be. Balder can't be saved even by you."

When Odin returned with the news, Frigg refused to believe the prophecy. She traveled throughout the nine worlds and made every plant, tree, stone, metal, and creature agree to protect Balder. Frigg was sure that nothing could harm Balder after the promises were given.

Loki, the trickster, envied Balder's popularity. He saw the gods and goddesses enjoying a game with Balder. They threw rocks and arrows. The missiles always landed at Balder's feet. Nothing that was thrown hit the young god.

Disguising himself as an old woman, Loki visited Frigg. "Do you know what is happening to your beloved Balder?" he asked.

"Yes, it's just a harmless game. Balder is amused by his special powers," Frigg answered.

"Is there nothing that can harm him?" Loki questioned.

"Nothing," Frigg said. "All things in the nine worlds promised not to harm Balder—all, that is, except that tiny mistletoe plant that grows on the tree outside my house. I didn't ask that weak young plant. It couldn't hurt anything."

"I see," answered Loki, and he left quickly.

Loki changed back into his own form. He carved a sharply pointed stick from the mistletoe plant and returned to where the game was being played. He saw Balder's brother Hoder standing alone. "Hoder," Loki said, "why aren't you taking part in the game?"

"You know I am blind," said Hoder. "I don't know which direction to throw a stone or an arrow even if I had one."

"I will help you," Loki said. He handed Hoder the pointed stick made from the mistletoe and showed him how to aim it.

Hoder threw the stick at Balder and it hit him. The point pierced Balder's heart, and the young god died.

All the gods and goddesses wept when they saw what had happened. They knew Loki was to blame, but he had escaped while all were mourning for Balder.

Frigg asked Hermod, one of Odin's sons, to go to Niflheim and talk to Hel, the Queen of the Dead. Balder's return was worth any ransom Hel could ask. Hermod assured Hel that all creatures, plants, and objects grieved for Balder. "The gods and goddesses fear the worlds will suffer without his wisdom and kindness," said Hermod.

Hel agreed to release Balder if everything in all nine worlds wept for him. "You must prove that everything loves Balder. If there is anything that refuses to weep," she said, "he will stay here with me."

Hermod assured the dreaded queen that no blade of grass or rock would remain tearless.



The gods and goddesses traveled the nine worlds. Each object, creature, and all plant life agreed to shed tears for Balder. But at last, one horrible giantess refused to shed a single tear. So Balder had to remain in Niflheim.

It was soon discovered that the giantess who refused to cry was Loki in disguise. The gods and goddesses searched everywhere for the wicked trickster and vowed to punish him.

Loki hid from the gods by changing his shape whenever they were near. He fled to a mountain and built a house with a door facing each of the four directions where he could see anyone coming. As the gods and goddesses approached his house, he jumped into a nearby stream and changed into a salmon. But the visitors were not fooled. They found a fishing net that had been invented by Loki himself and plucked him from the stream.

The gods and goddesses took Loki to a cave and bound him with a tie that couldn't be broken. A poisonous serpent was positioned over his head so that its deadly venom dripped from its fangs onto Loki's face.

Loki remained in the cave until the time of Ragnarok, the end of the world, when the mountain and cave crumbled in an earthquake. Loki, Hel, and an army of dead souls joined the giants to fight the gods and goddesses. Almost all who fought were killed. Fire and flood destroyed the nine worlds.

Then, once more, land rose up from the sea. Balder returned from the dead, and life began again for the few who survived Ragnarok.

