



ARTHUR QUINN

and the
Trickster's Tale

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WEB EDITION

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THE RELEASE OF *ARTHUR QUINN AND THE WORLD SERPENT*,

ARTHUR QUINN AND THE TRICKSTER'S TALE

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Introduction

This story takes place after the events of the original *Arthur Quinn* trilogy and it heavily references *Arthur Quinn and the World Serpent*. So you should really read that first.

In the years since the first book was published, I have visited countless schools, libraries and book shops, talking about stories, and meeting young readers and future writers.

With that in mind, this short book is dedicated to **you**.

It's for anyone who read the original trilogy, whether I ever met you or not. It means so much to know that people want to spend time with these characters. So thank you!

This story is for you.

I hope you enjoy it.

Then

To say that Max Barry wasn't having a good day would be an understatement. He was hundreds of feet above the streets of Dublin, on the back of a gigantic, monstrous snake that was coiled around the pinnacle of the city's landmark, the Spire. His only company in these dire circumstances was the God of Mischief aka Lord Trickster aka the Father of Lies. Aka Loki. And right now, Loki was celebrating, because he had just caused a police helicopter to crash, and it was starting to rain.

It was starting to rain quite heavily, in fact. Water was pooling around the base of the Spire, all those hundreds of metres below. Before long, the entire city would be flooded. Maybe even the entire world.

'Aren't you enjoying yourself, Maxie?' Loki cut off from his sinister chuckling to turn back to the seven year old boy. The Jormungand — the giant snake on whose head they were sitting — huffed a little grunt at the sound of his master's voice, like a contented Labrador.

'No,' said Max. He would have crossed his arms in disgust but he was terrified of letting go of the World Serpent's scales. They didn't offer much purchase

but they might still save him from plummeting to his untimely death. ‘I’m not!’

‘Hhm.’ Then, as if something suddenly occurred to him, Loki beamed and said, ‘What do you know about mistletoe, Max, ol’ buddy?’

‘Mistletoe?’

‘Mistletoe. What do you know?’

Max was confused. To be frank, he was losing count of the number of times Loki had confused him in the past few hours so this wasn’t anything new. He looked past the god of mischief, to the Jormungand’s ginormous snout. Then he cautiously peeked down at the ground, at the people in the buildings around, who were gazing back up at the monster wrapped around the Spire.

Mistletoe? Was this some kind of trick? A distraction tactic?

Was Loki about to shove Max off the Serpent while he was mulling over mistletoe?

He looked back to the god and tentatively spoke.

‘You hang it at Christmas. And if I walk under it, Granny kisses me.’ Max scrunched up his face. ‘Which is kinda gross.’

‘I’ll bet.’ Loki had been twisted around to look at Max but now he fully flipped his legs over the Serpent’s head, so that he was comfortably facing the boy. Once settled he went on. ‘I know a lot about mistletoe, Maxie. It got its name from “mistletoe”. “Tan” being an old word for twig, and “mistle” meaning poo.’

‘Poo?!’

Loki nodded eagerly. ‘You see, birds eat the berries and then poo out the seeds. That’s how mistletoe spreads — through bird dung. And you know, mistletoe is a parasite. Do you know what a parasite is, Max?’

‘Of course I do. Mrs McKenna taught us all about them last month. Parasites are things that live on other living things.’

‘Well done, Mrs McKenna! Yes; mistletoe is a parasite that attaches itself to a tree and steals that tree’s nutrients and minerals. Over years, the tree will weaken and might even die.’ Loki smirked at that. ‘I like mistletoe.’

‘So?’ A wave of revulsion surged up in Max’s throat at the sight of the god’s self-satisfied grin. ‘Why are you even going on about mistletoe?’

‘Because, Max, we have a few minutes before the city floods. And I have a tale to tell. So get comfortable, Maxie, and focus on my voice. Once upon a time...’

Now

In the south Dublin suburb of Ranelagh, amongst a labyrinth of cosy little streets and housing estates, there is one cul-de-sac in particular that interests us. The houses are modern, all boxy lines and large picture windows. At one end of this estate is a green, and at one end of the

green is a copse of trees. They're old trees, gnarled and brittle-looking, and have been there since long before the houses were built. At the rear of the thicket — as far away from the houses as a person can get within the estate — is a crumbling stone wall. And against that wall is a hawthorn tree.

Max Barry is now almost eighteen years old. A full decade has passed since the day Loki took him flying. He looks much the same as his seven and a half year old self. He's a little ganglier than he was then, and his features have sharpened somewhat, and there's the faintest shadow of facial hair under his nose.

He grew up in this estate. Every happy memory he has is set here; Christmasses, birthdays, playing soccer in the drive on long summer evenings. At this moment, when we meet Max again for the first time in a decade, he's on the green, in the grove of trees, standing by the ramshackle wall and staring up at the hawthorn tree.

It's an icy morning and the blue-tinged sunlight slicing through the treetops forces Max to squint as he studies the hawthorn. The trunk is twisted, resembling the hunched back of a witch as she stirs her cauldron. The branches, bare at this time of the year, create a spikey lattice of shadows that falls across his face. Hawthorns were once believed to be mystically powerful. They reoccur time and time again in fairy tales and spell books, and hold a prominent place in Irish mythology. Max

doesn't know any of this. He doesn't even know why he's standing here.

He had woken mere minutes ago, with an overwhelming urge to come here. Without saying a word to his parents, without checking his phone — (as he does every morning) — he got dressed and made his way to the tree. His mind is a fog; every other thought is lost in darkness but the hawthorn tree is lit by a thousand spotlights.

But now that he's here, he realises that he hasn't come for the tree itself. No. He's here for the thing that's growing on the tree; the parasite that has been leeching the hawthorn's nutrients for years, waiting for just this moment. Waiting for Max.

He's here for the mistletoe.

Then

'Once upon a time, in Asgard, there was a god called Baldr. Baldr was a son of the All-Father, Odin. And he was everyone's favourite.' Loki rolled his eyes.

'Seriously, Max. If you think that people liked Thor, you should have seen how they reacted to Baldr. He was so fair and just and kind to everyone he met. And he was so beautiful that he shined. I'm not exaggerating. He literally glowed, brighter than... brighter than that!' He jabbed a finger at the flaming helicopter on the ground. 'I hated him,' he went on, with a grimace of such malice

that a shudder ran down Max's back. But as suddenly as the look appeared, it changed, and now Loki was smirking that awful rictus grin of his. Max didn't know which expression was worse.

'But when I heard that Baldr was having dreams of his death, I was pretty pleased,' Loki said. 'You see, dreams carry some meaning for the dreamer. But for gods it's different. For gods, dreams are pure prophesy. If a god dreams that they're going to stub their toe that day, then you best believe they're going to stub their toe that day. Poor Baldr was dreaming of his death. And it wasn't just one dream. It was night after night. He couldn't tell how he died, or who killed him, except that he would be speared through the chest.'

At this, Loki paused. He tilted his head as if he was pondering something.

'Do you know the worse thing about a god's dreams, Maxie?'

Max said nothing.

'Well do you?'

'No!' Max immediately regretted his outburst and bit his lips. But Loki didn't seem to mind. In fact, he looked like he was enjoying getting a rise out of the boy. 'No,' Max said, a lot more timid this time. 'No, I don't.'

'Well, when you dream — and, by "you", I mean "humans" — you can pinch yourself and you won't feel a thing. But gods, we feel everything. So if I dream

that I stub my toe, I can feel the agony of that in my slumber. And if Baldr dreams a spear gorging into his heart... Well... You get the picture. Every night, the same dream. And every night, he would wake up, screaming, in unbearable anguish.'

Once again, Loki sneered gleefully.

Now

Amidst the skeletal branches of the hawthorn, the mistletoe resembles a furry pale green ball. It's dense with distinctive leaves and even more distinctive ghostly-white berries. Max knew it would be here, but he doesn't know how he knew. And he doesn't know why it's important, but he knows that it is.

He steps forward. It is neither a tentative action nor a brave one. It is automatic, as if Max is doing nothing but moving forward in a queue. When he reaches the tree, his hand stretches up — again, as if by itself — and plucks off a small twig of mistletoe.

It tingles between his fingertips, like pins and needles or holding an ice cube for too long.

He inspects it, twisting it this way and that. And, as he does, its shape changes in the speckled light under the treetops. It lengthens, straightens, sharpens.

Yes. Now Max knows what he must do. As he leaves the hawthorn behind, and steps out into the bleached sunlight

of a winter morning, he feels strong. Invincible. Anyone that sees him, would just see a teenage boy carrying a sprig of mistletoe. But he knows that it's not just mistletoe. It's something else. Something devastating.

Then

'The other gods were concerned about their precious Baldr,' Loki continued. 'But how do you stop a prophesy? It would take a great deal of work to ensure Baldr's safety and his mother, Frigg, was willing to put in the effort. Do you want to guess what she did, Max?'

The boy shrugged. 'I dunno. Did she make everyone promise not to kill him?'

'Of course not, you idiot! If she did that, Baldr could still just trip up and fall onto a sharpened spear! What a stupid thing to say, Max. Why are you so thick?!'

'I—'

'No,' Loki went calmly on as if he hadn't just raged at Max. 'Frigg went one step further. She travelled the nine realms and she made every weapon swear not to kill Baldr.'

'What?! You can't do that. Weapons can't—'

'Excuse me, Max, but are you a Viking god?'

'Uh, no.'

'No. And do you know who is a Viking god?'

'You?'

‘Precisely. So when I tell you that a Viking goddess can make weapons swear not to kill someone, then you better believe that a Viking goddess can make weapons swear not to kill someone. Got it?!’

Max nodded mutely.

‘Good. Now, where was I? Right, the weapons. Well, Frigg didn’t stop there. She went to every piece of metal in the nine realms next, and made them take the same oath not to harm Baldr. Then, for good measure, she went to every single object in the all nine realms — just in case any of them could be used for murdering — and had them promise to leave Baldr alone too!’

Max had a hard time buying all of this, but on the other hand, he was currently sitting on a gigantic snake that was coiled around the Spire as the city flooded with magical rain, and a few hours ago, he would have had a hard time buying that any of this could happen. So he kept his mouth shut.

‘But there was one thing that Frigg didn’t make swear, Max. Any ideas what it could be?’

Max could guess. There was only one thing it could be. The thing that had started Loki off on this tale of his.

‘Mistletoe.’

‘Bingo!’

Now

Arthur Quinn wakes in a sweat. This is nothing new for him. Since the stuff with Loki all those years ago — (*Ten years, he thinks. Where has the time gone?!*) — he has suffered from recurring nightmares. In them, Loki has won, and Arthur has failed. The world is under water, everyone Arthur loved is dead while Arthur himself is kept in a cage in the trickster god's throne room, where Loki tortures him on a daily basis.

Last night's dream wasn't like that. It wasn't even scary. But he wakes with a start regardless, pulse racing. He has sweated right through his sheets which hasn't happened in—

Arthur turns his head to sniff the pillow. That's not sweat. It's saltier, and mildly fishy, like seawater.

Seawater?!

Back when Loki was around, Arthur frequently woke to find his bed soaked with seawater. This always happened after a prophetic dream; a vision of sorts to help him stop the Father of Lies. He hasn't had one of those Dreams-with-a-capital-D in almost a decade. Could this be one, or he could be imagining the whiff of seawater?

He sits up hurriedly and makes his way into the bathroom to shower. What had last night's dream even been about? It's already starting to fade. He can remember a tree. And some mistletoe, which is really weird since Christmas is

still weeks away. No mention of Loki, no gods, no trips to Asgard.

‘It was just a dream,’ he tells his reflection. ‘Just a dream.’ But he isn’t sure if he’s actually convincing himself.

Arthur is twenty-two now and, like Max, he hasn’t changed that much. He’s a harder, more stretched-out version of the boy that defeated the God of Mischief. He still wears a leather eyepatch over his left eye, the eye Loki blinded. The one big difference nowadays is that his hair is a lot shorter. He started shaving it tight a couple of years ago — a change his parents still aren’t fully used to. The other change is the tattoo on his left arm that reads *It’s kind of fun to do the impossible* in hand-written type. It’s a quote from Walt Disney, one of his heroes, and Arthur chose to get it tattooed because it encapsulated a lot that had happened in his life.

He’s in third year of college now, studying to be an animator. For the longest time in secondary school, he couldn’t decide what to do. It wasn’t until his mum pointed out how much he has always loved cartoons that he settled on a career path. Arthur has spent the last few weeks working on his first big college project, a short animation about a boy battling a snake monster. Its working title is *Al Lately and the Jormungand*.

Fully showered and dressed, Arthur gives himself one last reassuring look in the mirror. The memory of the dream

is dispersing like morning mist. *Best not to mention it to anyone*, he decides as he leaves his room.

Ash is sitting at the kitchen table, crouched over her laptop with a bowl of untouched cereal by her elbow. They've been living in this flat together since they started college. It's on George's Street in Dún Laoghaire, over a busy hairdressers that plays loud pop music every day from 9 to 6. Ash is studying some kind of computer coding thing that Arthur can't understand. In her spare time, she builds apps. She built one such app while they were still in school, to help users easily sort their recycling. If someone was confused how and where to recycle a certain type of plastic, Ash's app would tell them. The app was so successful that she won some awards, and then sold it to a big tech company. She used the money to buy the flat and so Ash became a proper homeowner at eighteen. Her and Arthur aren't the only people living there, and she rents the other rooms to two college buddies; Russell who's studying animation with Arthur and Simon who's in the year behind Ash.

Now, as Arthur enters the kitchen, she blows a fringe of hair out of her eyes and looks up at him.

'You're up early,' he says, pouring himself a mug of stale coffee from the pot.

'You're up late.' She goes back to the laptop, and types another string of indecipherable code. 'You didn't sleep well?'

‘Nah. Same old nightmares.’ He takes a sip of the piping hot coffee and nods at the laptop. ‘You been up long?’ ‘Since five,’ she says, still typing.

‘Five?!’

‘Hhm. I had a brainwave. If I can get the algorithm to recognise when a backchannel is used then...’ Ash trails off when she notices Arthur’s vacant expression. ‘Never mind. Computer stuff.’

‘Computer stuff,’ he says with a knowing smile, and sits across from her. After years spent staring at computer screens or tiny electronic components, Ash wears glasses now. They’re black-rimmed and round, and really suit her. Her ponytail is gone and she’s had a bob for years that reminds Arthur of their other friend Ellie Lavender. She’s trim and fit, and has been training for a marathon for the past few months. Arthur doesn’t know where she finds the time. Or the energy.

‘Mornin’ all.’ Russell shuffles in, still in his pyjama shorts and T-shirt. He scratches his scraggly beard as he takes the free seat at the table. Arthur met him on the first day of college, and they’ve been good friends since. The fact that he gets along with Ash, Max and the rest only makes Arthur like him more. He points at Ash’s forgotten bowl of Cornflakes and says, ‘Anyone eating those?’

Without looking, Ash slides the bowl across to him. He gratefully takes it and dives in.

‘Aren’t you two late?’ Ash says, taking a fraction of a

second to note the time in the corner of her laptop screen. Russell's gob is too full to answer, so Arthur does it for them. 'No. We just have afternoon classes today. We—'

The door buzzer interrupts him.

All three look up. They never get visitors during the day. 'I'll get it,' Russell says, dropping the now empty cereal bowl in the sink with a clatter. He goes into the hallway, where the intercom handset is, and picks it up.

'Y'allo?... Oh hi... Yeah, yeah, no problem. I'll buzz you up.'

With that, he hits the button that unlocks the front door and replaces the handset.

'Who was it?' Arthur asks through the door.

'Ash's brother,' said Russell. 'Max.'

Then

'Why didn't she?' said Max.

'Huh?'

'Why didn't Frigg get the mistletoe to swear?' He hated that he was getting into the story now.

'Oh! Well mistletoe was young at that point in creation. And Frigg had a soft heart. Pathetic really. And she believed that nothing as young as mistletoe could be forced to swear. So...'

Loki fanned out his hands.

'Mistletoe didn't have to take the oath. And not many people knew this little tidbit. But I was lucky enough to be one of them. So I went and I found some mistletoe

and I whispered some special words to it and I hid it in my cloak.

‘The next day, the gods of Asgard celebrated. They were all so pleased with themselves. They had stopped the prophecies from coming true; Baldr would live. I’m not one to pass up a good party, so I went along, too. After all the food and the wine was gone, we started playing games; challenging each other to feats of strength, singing, dancing, fighting. One game was to throw a stick the furthest. Hodur was one of Baldr’s brothers, and he was blind. He was also not very good at this game. So, when no one was looking, I gave him my sprig of mistletoe, and told him that it was a very special stick, and that no stick would shock the other gods as much. ‘Hodur, the fool, believed me.

‘He threw the mistletoe.’

Loki stopped and looked off into the middle-distance, seeing the memory clearly, reliving his moment of terrible triumph.

‘It was beautiful.’ His voice was quieter as he went on, full of awe and wonder at his own genius. ‘You should have seen it, Max. The mistletoe was like an arrow, slashing through the air. And when it transformed, before everyone’s eyes, it was too late. It became a spear, blade and all. And that spear plunged straight into Baldr’s heart.’

Now

Max's progress up the staircase sounds slow and heavy, not at all like the usual way he bounds up them. Arthur swallows drily.

Then

Loki didn't speak for what seemed like an eternity. Max, unsure what to say, also remained quiet.

Finally, the Father of Lies looked back to Max and smiled broad.

'That's my tale,' he said brightly. 'Did you enjoy it?'

'It was... okay. But why...'

'Why what?'

'Why tell me?'

Loki chuckled to himself.

'What are stories, Max? Do you know? They aren't just things that might have happened or might not have happened. They aren't just beginning, middle and end. Stories have power. They get in your head and they stay there. Until one day, years later, something sparks your memory of that story, and it wakes up and you live it all over again. Do you see now?'

Max shook his head, slowly.

'Stories live in you. They take up space in the dark reaches of your mind. Stories can't live without you.'

Stories, Max, are parasites.’

Once more, Max didn’t know what to say.

‘So I’ve told you my story. I’ve told you my tale. And no matter what, you will never forget it.’ He looked out over the city. The flood was covering the first storey of the buildings, and gradually creeping up to the higher levels. ‘I will not be defeated today, Max. I will win. I will destroy this city, and the world. But—’

He turned back to Max.

‘I haven’t gotten where I am without having some back-up plans. If this scheme doesn’t work, then the next one will, or the one after that. Or—’ He shuffled closer to Max. ‘—the one after that.’

‘What are you—’

‘In the green on your estate, there are some trees, Max. At the back of that little wood, is a hawthorn tree. I planted some seeds there. Mistletoe seeds. Do you know how long mistletoe takes to reach maturity?’

Max didn’t say a word. He didn’t move. He was rigid with fear.

‘Ten years, Max. Ten years. So listen carefully.’ His eyes met Max, and Max, no matter how hard he tried, couldn’t break the gaze. ‘Stories have power. Stories are parasites. I’ve told you my tale and it’s now embedded in your mind, living off you, controlling you. If I fail today, you will be my revenge.’

‘I—’

‘Sshh.’

And Max found himself powerless to fight.

‘In ten years, you will get up. You will go to the hawthorn tree I described, and you will take some mistletoe. Then you will find Arthur Quinn.’

A grin grew on Loki’s face, like a knife carving out a Jack O’Lantern.

‘And you will kill him.’

Now

Max steps into the doorway, brushing past Russell. His eyes are entirely focused on Arthur. In his right hand, he’s gripping a sprig of mistletoe.

Only it’s not mistletoe. Arthur can see what it really is. He can see it with the eye behind the patch. Loki took Arthur’s sight in that eye but the other gods gave him a way to see through Loki’s lies. The thing in Max’s grasp is flickering around the twig like bad TV reception and emanating a green glow. It’s long and pointed at one end. It’s nothing special; it’s not golden or ornate or anything like that. But it would do the job quite nicely. It would kill Arthur if he gives Max a chance.

It’s a spear.

‘Max, don’t—’ is all he manages to get out before the friend he has known since he was twelve raises his arm. Later, it will seem as if time slowed but in reality,

everything happens in the matter of seconds.

Russell, confused about Max's behaviour takes a step back.

Arthur tries to move. He stumbles back off the chair, tripping and almost falls.

Max launches the mistletoe.

As in Loki's tale, it transforms mid-flight. Into the spear.

The point is headed straight for Arthur's heart.

And it stabs through, making a crunching sound, into Ash's laptop.

She had reacted quickly and decisively, using the training she'd had in the battles against Loki. Noting Arthur's fear, she had turned to her brother, had seen the mistletoe change, and had flung her precious laptop upwards. The computer catches the spear as it soars over her head, sending it spiralling off course. A shower of sparks rains down on them as the spear and laptop tumbles. They land on the ground with a crash and slide across the tiles before finally coming to a stop by the fridge, a smouldering mess of wood, plastic and electronics. And before any of them can so much as speak, the spear

withers away, like an un-watered flower. For a brief moment, it resembles the mistletoe twig once more, but then it's gone.

It's several minutes later, and Arthur, Ash and Max are sitting around the kitchen table, with fresh cups of coffee. The laptop, still smoking, is on the table between them. Russell, thankfully, is gone back to bed. They'd managed to convince him that there had been no spear, that he must have still been dreaming, and that Max had just been playing a prank. Russell seemed grateful for the explanation; it was a lot easier to buy than what his eyes were telling him.

'I'm so sorry,' Max says to Ash. 'All your work...'

'It's okay. Everything was backed up anyway.'

'And Arthur—' Max turns to him, unsure how he can possibly apologise. But Arthur waves him away.

'No need. Just tell us what happened.'

Max lets it all spill out. He can remember it now. The instant the mistletoe disappeared, it all came flooding back; Loki's tale all those years ago, his hypnotic instructions, waking up with the urge to find the mistletoe.

'That story has been there all those years,' Arthur says when he's done, 'locked away in your head.'

'Like a parasite,' mutters Ash.

'What now?' Max asks.

'Now, I reckon we get a gardener or someone to make sure

to dispose of all of Loki's mistletoe,' says Ash.

'Good idea,' Arthur says. 'But I'm guessing that since the spell is broken, we should be safe.' Suddenly, Arthur starts to laugh.

'What's so funny?' Ash says.

'Loki!' he says. 'What else? All these years later, and the Trickster God still had another trick up his sleeve.'

'Let's just hope it's the last one!'

'Even if it's not, now we'll be ready.' Arthur looked up at the ceiling, imagining the sky beyond, and eternity beyond that. 'Y'hear that Loki? We're ready. No matter what, we'll always be ready. And you'll never win!'

Somewhere Else

Loki falls.

His existence for the past ten years has been falling. His existence for a thousand years more could be falling.

Maybe longer.

But he's patient. He's always been patient.

He falls through all the knowledge in the universe, things that were, things that could be. And as he falls through all the wisdom that ever was and will be, a voice comes to him, louder than all the noise of the universe.

'We're ready. No matter what,
we'll always be ready...

‘And you’ll never win!’

Loki recognises the voice. How could he not? It may be deeper now, but it’s still the voice of his greatest foe.

And Loki, falling through knowledge, smiles to himself.

And laughs.

And laughs.

And laughs.

And

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The trickster has one more
trick up his sleeve.

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