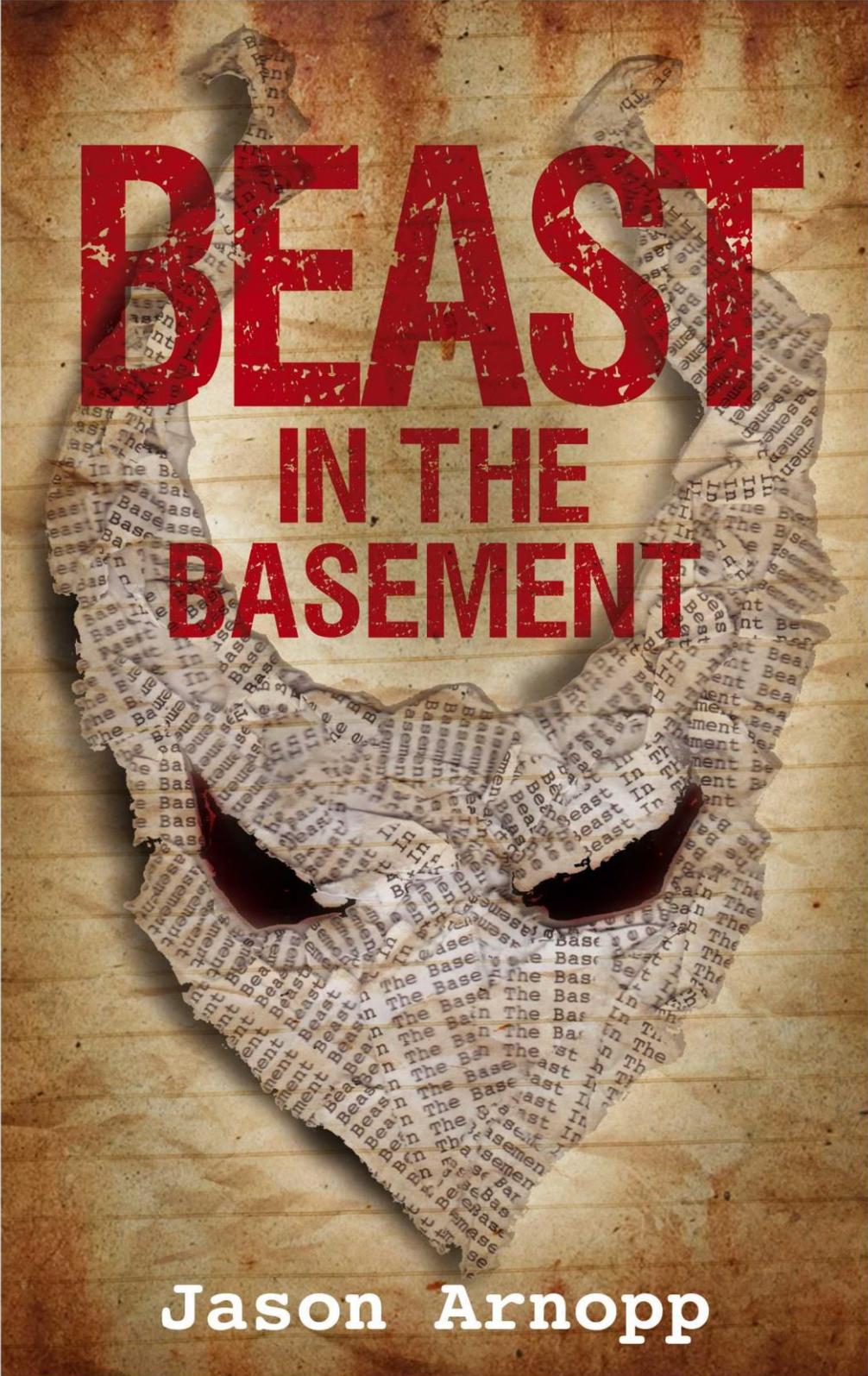


BEAST IN THE BASEMENT



**BEAST
IN THE
BASEMENT**

Jason Arnopp

PROLOGUE

I am soaked with blood, rain and what is almost certainly my own urine.

Consciousness ebbs and flows. The ceiling rolls in waves.

I'm being dragged across the floorboards on my back, gripped firmly around the wrists, my biceps by my ears. My joints groan and pop.

One of my palms is wet with red ooze. The hole in its centre delivers a napalm burn.

I know what's happening but am too lost and nauseous to do anything about it. Something has snapped inside my head. My skull feels dented, cracked, all wrong, the brain inside awash with sludgy dread and hate.

I glimpse the glowing computer screen and it hurts my eyes.

Somewhere in the background: a constant liquid hammering. Rain batters the big window pane as if mounting a rescue attempt.

Gazing at the blurred ceiling, I writhe limply. Indignant, broken, fearful.

My intended growl wavers and splutters: "Let me go."

It's lucky I can speak at all, after everything I've been through.

Everything from the innocent creak of a metal flap, to the screech of brakes, the screams, the mission, Jade Nexus, the intruder, the cameras, Maddy, the red lotus, the wine, the rain, the triumph and the agony.

The Beast.

All of these things have led me here inexorably. My entire life has hurtled towards this point. Good old destiny, reeling me in.

If this is the end then there will be no regrets, but I must do my very best to fight.

A violent flurry shakes the world. My legs kick feebly out at nothing, an exhausted token gesture, as I'm hauled from the floor towards the chair. My eyes roll back into my head as oblivion descends once more, blotting everything out.

CHAPTER ONE: HELLO REALITY

I know I can do this.

I can *do* this.

Just need to pull myself together. Stay positive. This whole thing is about positivity, right? It should be a joy from beginning to end.

I started the mission, I've orchestrated this whole thing, so must press on until it's done. I must stagger through the trenches, endure all that deafening gunfire and *complete*.

Yes, I must complete this novel.

Anything less would be doing the world's children a grave disservice.

That said, I've typed nothing for the last – what – half an hour? One hour? Two?

The cursor blinks at the top of the empty computer screen, beneath the legend 'CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX'. That little flashing blob of *whatever* is steady, sure and certain, while I sit here stewing, trying to retain faith in my own abilities.

I'm going screen-blind. Microscopic light-amoeba dance before my eyes. I blink, stretch back in my chair and let my gaze wander around the study for a while.

The huge, floor-to-ceiling window has heavy curtains which I never think to close. I like the view during the day, then forget that people can see in at night when the window has become a mirror.

Yes, the countryside is so comprehensively dark at this hour that the window may as well be a black rectangle painted on the wall. I can see neither the field nor the dense woods which frame it. The neat little cottage which faces this house clearly remains unoccupied, so no illumination there.

Way out here, there are none of your big city street lights. No car lamps. No moon. Not even a cat to puncture the thick darkness with laser-beam eyes.

I turn my attention to the wall above the desk. To the first of three large, ornate, golden picture frames.

The first frame contains a beautifully illustrated book cover. My eyes dance over the words.

Jade Nexus And The Four-Headed Witch, by PT Sparks. Sure enough, there on the cover is a witch with four heads. A perfectly respectable novel, I always thought.

Not so the next. Its cover sits in the second frame: *Jade Nexus And The Great Leveller*, by PT Sparks. I detest that one with every fibre of my being. If I could delete it from the universe, fast as a backspace key, I would gladly do so.

Still. Too late now. All I can do is write the next one.

The third and final book in the series is under my control. Mine and mine only. No matter what Murray or the publisher might think.

The third picture frame is empty. It hangs there, an open mouth, hungry, expectant. Mirroring the ice-cold corporate world which will publish the book, caring about nothing except profit margins.

My job here, my mission, is to finish this book the way it deserves to be finished. The way which will do the most good for the children who flock to absorb it.

I am determined that *Jade Nexus And The Cathedral Of Screams* will not repeat the terrible mistakes of *Jade Nexus And The Great Leveller*.

Despite my strong resolve, however, there's a voice in the back of my head. A voice asking questions. Questions like...

How much longer can I hold out here? How much longer can I *maintain*, before someone unmasks me as a charlatan, a faker? How long before I'm paraded through the streets by a rowdy mob, shackled, tarred and feathered?

I know all authors feel this way, and I do have confidence. Yet deep down, I know the truth.

You can only live in a world of make-believe for so long, before reality comes calling.

It always does.

One question in particular, I try to keep locked behind a cast-iron – *no, no, God no, don't say that next word, don't even think it. The word must be banished forever. Shred it now.*

One question in particular, I try to keep locked in a secure chest, rammed against the back wall of my consciousness.

A question too unnerving to face.

What am I going to do about the Beast in the basement?

Yesterday afternoon, I printed the novel in its entirety. All 32 chapters of the first draft.

I sat there by the printer, gulping wine like water and stared nervously at the pages which splurged all but soundlessly from the machine.

The pages mounted higher and higher. I didn't want the printing to end. When it did, I would have to actually read the novel, which I knew would be a painful experience.

While waiting, I noticed that a couple of workmen had parked up beside the cottage across the field. They were carrying a pane of glass. Maybe someone was about to move in, but I gave this little thought as I watched pages glide from the print-mouth.

I soon had that fat, warm manuscript on my lap as I stretched out along the chaise longue. I had already sunk the bottle and was opening another. Of course, a bottle of wine has little effect on me these days. In the three months since Jamie died, I've become so accustomed to drinking. All too accustomed. Wine barely touches the sides.

I drew in a deep, trepidatious breath and began to read.

To my surprise, I found myself enjoying it. My drinking slowed. I became embroiled in the world of Jade Nexus, as she strove to finally rid the Earth of The Great Bug Lord's power. I cheered her on while making red-pen notes, directly onto the manuscript, of things which didn't work at all. I would right these wrongs during my imminent final draft.

Many glasses later, as the story sped towards its climax, an uneasy lump materialised in the pit of my stomach. That lump grew as brave Jade finally confronted The Bug Lord in his Opal Dream-Nest.

By the time I laid eyes on the words 'The End', I was seeing red. I gathered together a wedge of the final pages – chapters 26 to 32 – and tore them in half, again and again.

“Wrong. This is so wrong!”

I rolled my chair over to the shredder, switched it on and fed the fragments into the machine. Watched with relief as tiny, churning blades effortlessly mangled all those stupidly misjudged words.

Urgently pulling myself over to the desk, I booted up the PC. As it whirred and clicked itself into life, I steadied myself on the desk, feeling like a man coming undone.

Angry tears exploded on the mouse mat.

This was so very deeply, unutterably wrong.

Jade Nexus must not die, even if she does save Earth in the process.

I tried to console myself with the fact that, at least, I had time to correct this fundamental error. The rot had set into the story after Chapter 25, which meant I would need to rewrite the final seven sections in full.

This was achievable. This could be done. I told myself this mantra until the panic and nausea subsided.

I opened up the Microsoft Word file entitled *Jade Nexus And The Cathedral Of Screams – Draft 4*.

I scrolled down to the end of Chapter 25.

I highlighted everything after that and hit delete.

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I saved the file, then deleted all previous versions on hard drives both inside and out.

Yes. Now we were in business. I could get this story back on track.

Three storeys down, in the depths of the house, I could have sworn I heard The Beast gnash its teeth.

Come 3am, cocooned in silk sheets, I wonder when sleep will finally take me.

Maybe it won't – and I know exactly why. More than a whole day later, the new Chapter 26 still doesn't exist. Neither do any of the chapters which need to follow.

Perhaps if I catch a few hours' rest, I can dream it into existence before dawn. Perhaps I'll awake refreshed and full of ideas. Tactics. I once read that the brain does most of its creative heavy-lifting while adrift on the REM Sleep Sea.

Maybe that's true. Maybe–

Smash. Clatter.

The sound of glass breaking, followed by the tinkle of shards against tiles.

It came from downstairs. Almost certainly the ground floor.

The kitchen?

I find myself unable to swallow. I try again, then again, fearing I'm going to choke to death on nothingness, until finally I manage it – all the time listening attentively for further sounds.

Is The Beast somehow loose? That cannot be.

You can only live in a world of make-believe for so long, before reality comes calling.

It always does.

In contrast to the unshaven, malnourished mess which currently passes for me, the wooden baseball bat feels cool, smooth and reassuringly solid.

Standing at the top of the staircase which winds down to the second floor, I stare down into all that gloom.

Here in the darkness, wooden beams and fixtures become unnerving shadows.

I only moved in a few days ago, to finish the novel, so none of this is familiar. For all I know, that upright thing down on the second floor could be a grandfather clock, or a phantom staring balefully up at me.

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I'm pretty sure it's a grandfather clock. Or was that on the first floor?

The house is so painfully quiet, I fear another sudden noise might kill me.

A sudden spike of indignance. This is *my* house. Why am I hesitating to turn on the damn light?

My left hand spider-scuttles up the rough wall, searching for the switch.

Click. The landing's bulbs flicker into action, illuminating the second floor and making me blink. One of the bulbs just keeps flickering, intermittent. Must remember to change that thing, if I survive this night.

Might The Beast really be at large? Is this actually possible?

No. Once again, no. If The Beast is loose, then why did the window break inwards? Had it been punched outwards, those shards would have struck the soundproof cushion of grass.

This must be some other intruder. One whose impudence I cannot, must not, accept.

Emboldened by the light, which allows me to see the grandfather clock in all its comforting glory, I muster the courage to speak.

My first attempt is a dry, nondescript croak. I clear my throat and try again.

"Hello? Who's there?"

My voice comes out far softer, far more timid, than I had intended.

I listen for a reply, straining to catch the slightest sound.

Nothing comes.

Steeling myself, I descend, leaving the safety of the light pool. Below, the first floor remains cloaked in night and I keep one hand clamped on the banister, unsure of my footing. In my haste, back in the bedroom, I'd been unable to find my shoes. Still, these socks lend me the advantage of silent movement. Stealth socks. Those aside, I'm wearing my badly creased trousers and a shirt, with only the lowest button secured.

As my foot lands on a new stair, the creak makes me freeze.

Jesus Christ. What's wrong with me?

Did fear get me this far?

No. I've accomplished too much to let anyone scare me into submission. Mentally vulnerable I might be, but I'm a 46-year-old man, not some frail fucking pensioner.

I take the stairs faster, ignoring my heart as it pumps hard and hot. I swear I hear it thump my ribs.

Arriving on the first floor, I scurry across the pitch-black landing to the light switch.

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Click. All is revealed. I look around hurriedly, gripping the baseball bat so tightly. Dreading a heart-stopping confrontation with some lurker.

Since Jamie died, I've believed in the afterlife. Before that, I was a man of science who scoffed at ideas like heaven and angels.

We believe what we need to believe, don't we?

The empty landing seems to brood.

If I believe in an afterlife, I must believe in ghosts. Great – just when I needed a reassuring thought.

Could this be a ghost?

"Hello? Who the hell is down there?"

This time, my voice does not yield. It stays strong.

Again, no reply.

More angered than afraid now, I march down the final staircase to the ground floor.

A tremor, deep within, as darkness swallows me up.

In the hallway, I can't find the light switch. It's not where you'd expect to find it.

I shiver, as though a feather has been swiped across the nape of my neck.

I can at least dimly make out the shape, the layout, of the corridor. I see open doors on either side.

Holding the baseball bat aloft, ready to strike man or ghost, I creep breathlessly.

The darkness and the silence encompass all.

I realise that I'm standing right beside the door to the basement.

Nervous, I snake a hand down to the round door-knob.

I twist it and test the door.

The wooden frame jolts as the lock resists.

The Beast is secure. A mercy.

Continuing along the corridor, I reach the first of the open doors.

I remember this one leads into the kitchen. Peering in, I catch the glint of broken glass on the floor. A sliver of moon has fought its way through cloud to reveal the room in smeary monochrome.

I see a jagged hole, a deformed star, in the kitchen door's upper pane.

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I see the outer door is ajar.

I step into the kitchen, my senses alive and keener than they've been in some time.

The room is empty and still. I find the light switch and flick it, wincing as the room blossoms into sharp colour.

I turn back towards the dark corridor.

Whump. Something lashes out of that darkness and hits me hard in the face. Something cool, metallic, angular.

A tooth comes loose, pivoting back against my tongue.

Tasting red copper, I blindly swing the baseball bat, but it whooshes through thin air. I lose my balance and am falling, like an idiot.

Somehow, the side of my face ends up slamming on the cold tiles.

Movement above. A grunt. Hasty breath. Looking up, I see a boy-man, a long-haired teenager with a bulging blue rucksack hump. In both hands, he carries a metallic, silver machine – the thing which hit me. I briefly catch his face, no doubt rendered all the more snub-nosed and thuggish by this low angle, before he strikes again.

His boot very deliberately connects with the back of my head and I groan, a human football. With a white flash, a high tide of sickness crashes over me.

There was no need for that, I think. No need for that final humiliation.

He's running. Struck dumb, I watch his lower legs as he wrenches that kitchen door fully open, then darts off into the night.

For what could be five minutes or fifty, I stay down here on the floor. Trying to regroup. Trying to process what just happened.

Part of me feels powerless, a bullied child. The rest, the majority, is blurred with anger.

Finally, I raise myself, ending up on all fours.

The room swims, indistinct. I gag and retch onto those tiles.

Wiping my mouth, I force myself upright and stagger to the outer door. I slam it shut so hard that the top pane's remaining fragments come loose and shatter on the tiles, shrinking as they multiply.

Every filament in the house is ablaze.

I wander around the whole place, still disorientated, looking for missing things. Not the easiest task in a house you barely know.

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The thieved items are of little concern to me. It's the invasion of my space, my *bubble*, which brings the rawest pain. Nevertheless, it's easy enough to deduce that the DVD and Blu-Ray players are missing from beneath the flat screen TV. The Boy Man must have been carrying one of those in his dirty little paws and smashed me with it.

My broken tooth is bent at an angle but still attached. How can something feel so alien, in the place where it belongs? It seems to fill my entire mouth.

Soon, I find myself sitting on a chair in the kitchen, facing the locked and bolted outer door. I knock back some painkillers with wine – double the recommended dose of both, but so what? I don't have a dentist out here and, for all I know, there may not even be one in town. So I'll just have to self-medicate. Sit it out.

And I do. I sit in that chair, drinking straight from the bottle, crying out every time the smooth glass snags my wayward tooth.

I sit here and await the dawn. By the time golden light enlivens the hedgerows, I find myself sobbing wildly, out of control.

Yet again, trying to purge something which will never, ever be fully purged.

Once again, the bubble has burst.

Hello reality. I was expecting you.

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