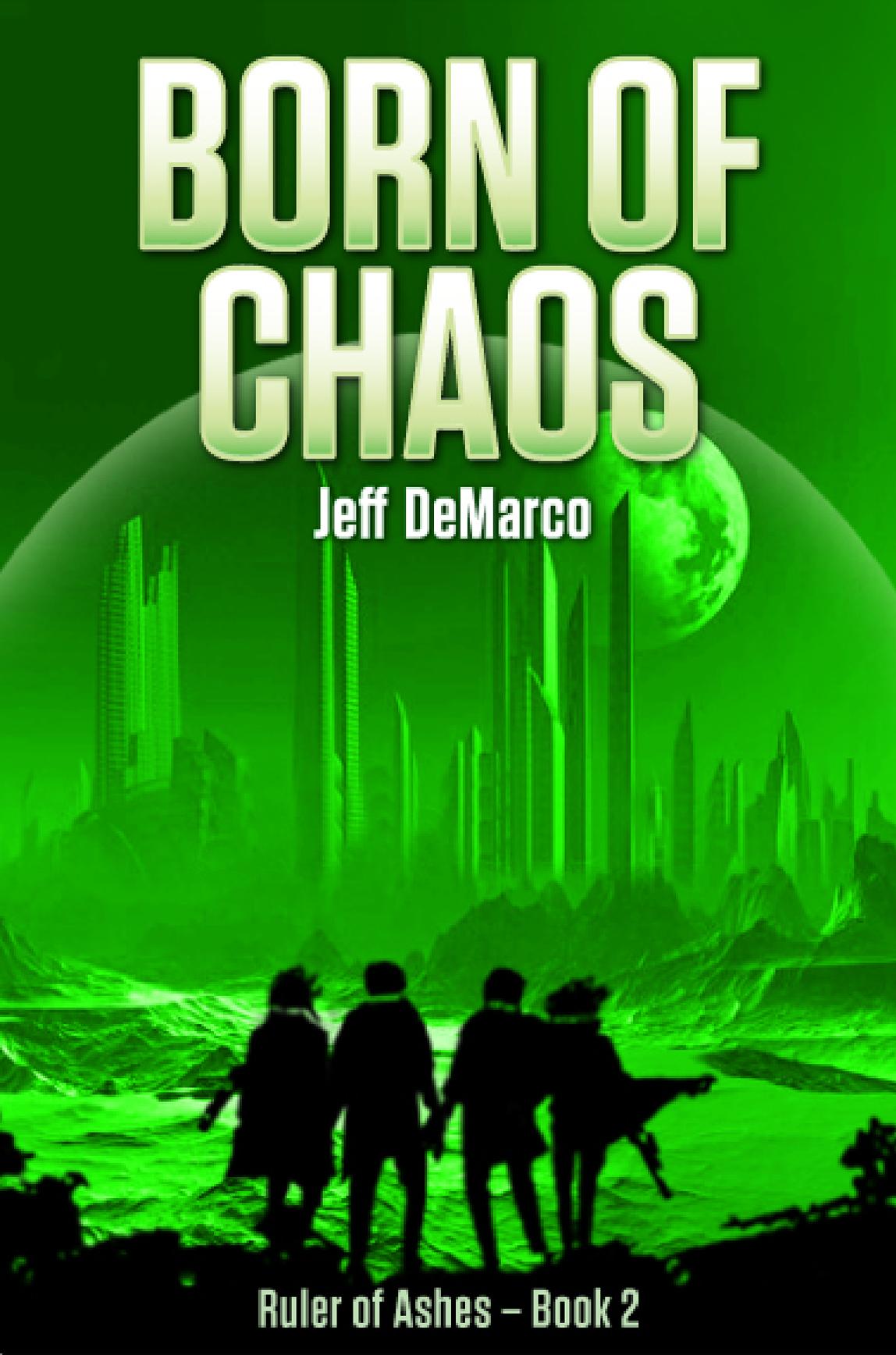


BORN OF CHAOS



Jeff DeMarco

Ruler of Ashes – Book 2

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To my daughter, Stella. I never knew how much I could love till I met you.

FOREWORD

Many thanks and my sincerest apologies to U.S. Military and government employees, of whom I've cast both protagonists and antagonists within the novel. Quick disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

I've cast certain characters to be angry, violent, addicted, misguided, arrogant, abusive and downright treasonous. I don't personally know of any such polarizing characters in real life (thank goodness, my life is much less exciting). Furthermore, during my time in the military, I had the honor of serving with some of the finest individuals this country has ever known... but this novel isn't a memoir.

At the end of the day, my characters are all just human (or close to it) and for the sake of the story- their attributes, subversive organizations or actions were necessary to support a particular character arc. Furthermore, the novel is set in the near future as opposed to the present, so fingers crossed that none of this comes to pass.

Additionally, instead of using the standard scene break, I've opted to create a unique icon for all major characters. In the event that a character's entrance into a scene is to be a surprise, I've left their icon off the scene break.

Happy Reading!

BORN OF CHAOS

by

Jeff DeMarco

PROLOGUE



“I go to visit the dark places of my mind,” my father had said. “Only then, will light shine into them.” He was a hero of sorts; a hero to me, and among the many of this story. He was also a villain, though it depends on how you look at it. That is to say, I am the hero of my own story, but not to all; and not to say that I’m the hero of *this* story, nor is it to say that I’m one bit heroic. I was born against all odds—true, but I wasn’t the one to fight for it, to kill for it, to bleed for it. No... I haven’t fought for anything except to live, and not in the way they did. Perhaps one day soon. Hopefully not.

People follow me; they listen to me because I have something to give them and expect nothing in return. Knowledge is what I call it, but it’s more than that. A gift.

The same people call this the “end of days.” I remind them of the food in their pantries, the roof over their heads and the friends and family at their table; a tribulation perhaps, but not so great as the many holy books foretold. Where one thing ends, another begins. True, these are dangerous times we live in, but no more dangerous than the war that I was born into. Just different.

There were heroes on both sides; all sides, in fact, and villains as well. But the villains were the heroes of their own stories; each of them with a picture of their own personal truth—the nature of existence, what it means to be ‘right.’ I don’t lend much credence to that ideal, ‘being right,’ since so often, it’s relative to where you stand.

In the ‘Last War,’ as it’s been called, no one was right, as all armies stood ready to destroy one another, but we’re not quite there yet.

In the wake of the crimson sky, humanity lay in chaos. Erica, my mother, had been given a family back. She had killed for the first time in her life. As it was shown to me, Luca and his brothers had attacked Fort Sill, Oklahoma; released tens of thousands of the Hunters against their defenses; rained steel down from the skies. Her father Army fought them, their forces useless against the ceaseless onslaught. She fought through the horde to face Luca and defeated him, killed his brothers, brought him to the brink of death; in doing so, destroyed who she was, her persona, her psyche; however one chooses to name it. The betrayal had meant an end to her old life and thus, she sought to end her life entirely. In death, rebirth—an end and beginning. Others would find the need for rebirth in the days to come.

Luca was mangled and imprisoned, but alive; his body destroyed by the Hunters. Jacob's forces had scattered across the map, in control of key military installations, poised to control the U.S.

The Order: Vice President Kreuson and Lieutenant Colonel Petersen, among others, once sure of their superiority, were driven beneath the earth; the safety of sealed bunkers. Alliances would shift; new threats would emerge - ancient and advanced.

The Earth, however, had been given back itself. Large swaths of land had begun to purge the concrete megaliths that sullied its pristine growth. In the arid southwest sands blew through the streets, eroding the once bustling pavement. Further east, what was known as Carolina, vines and moss began to grow wild, as life does spring in the desolate places.

The Hunters were hungry, as no creature worth eating was safe; nor would they be in their rebirth.



"It's like the others," Senator Vivian Kreuson whispered, her eyes dark in the poorly lit annex room. "Three of them. Pristine condition—perfect cylinders, all sealed."

A single overhead light burned at the nervous air in the room. "Blood?" Director Stevens whispered.

"No." Vivian slid a photograph across the desk. Her face was placid, yet her cunning eyes, her sharp gray suit and tone suggested otherwise. "Analysis is almost complete. It's something... more."

"This one." He tapped his pen against the photo. "Why's it gray?"

"Silicone based."

He looked up. "And the writing?" his voice trembled.

"Same." Vivian pulled another set of photos from her briefcase. There stood a stone obelisk; its dead language circled in fine red marker, notations scribbled along the margins.

He put his reading glasses on and stared intently at the handwritten text—"To Destroy the Wicked," he mumbled. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It's a weapon," a voice whispered from the shadows.

Stevens spun around. "And what do you need me for?"

“We’ve assumed control of a facility,” the voice whispered, just outside the light. “Underground in New Mexico. It’ll need to be staffed. Your Department of Homeland Security personnel.”

He looked back, a single bead of sweat running down his forehead.

“There a problem, Stevens?” Vivian whispered.

“No, I…” He wrung his hands under the table. “Have you considered the ramifications of this?”

“Seven sites around the world.” She glared at him. “Five claimed by other nations. The technology is a threat. We must protect our nation, our people…”

“Human testing,” Stevens whispered to himself. “Conspiracy… I can’t be a party to that.”

“You’ve sworn an oath to our cause,” Vivian whispered. “An oath to God and our Order. You are charged. Now act.”

“I swear.” He stood, knocking his chair to the ground. “I will never breathe a word of this to anyone.” He edged backwards towards the door.

Agent Flynn stepped into the light, young still, dark hair and sharp features to match his fitted black suit and tie. He pressed in on Senator Stevens. Vivian put her hand on Flynn’s arm, stopping his advance. Stevens slipped out of the room.

“Tonight,” she whispered. “Make it look like a heart attack.”

Another man waited in the shadows, Senator Petersen, the dull ember of his cigarette illuminating his withered face. “Who’s next on the list?”



The sun dipped down into a blood red sky. “This is it,” Captain Duggan whispered to himself, looking down at the text message on his phone.

He pulled in to the Normandy - Bastogne housing community, passing unit insignias and stars on red flags. He pulled up in the driveway of Lieutenant General Nichols, Airborne Corps commander.

Nichols eyed him conspicuously through the crack in the door. “Can I help you, Captain?” he asked with a hint of annoyance, running his hand over his bald head.

“Time is short, Sir.” The young officer peered back at him through the doorway. “There’s been an attack.”

Nichols’ brow furrowed as he stepped on to the porch.

“The Order of the Double-Edged Sword, Sir.” He handed over the unlocked phone, along with a silver coin - a sword surrounded by seven stars.

Nichols scrolled through—‘Biological attack imminent—Seek cover immediately.’ His eyes widened. “Say I believe you...” He looked back up at Duggan, fingers tracing the coin. “... you’re admitting you’re a party to this... *Order. Yes?*”

Duggan nodded. “I’ve seen what they can do, Sir. Many will die if we don’t act.”

“And you understand what this will mean for your career? For your life, your freedom?”

Duggan nodded.

Nichols pursed his lips. “Come in.”

PART 1

CHAPTER 1



A sweet smell of autumn decay hung heavy in the air; it stirred in the night as nightmare creatures raced along the forest floor. Hunger had driven the hunters to move. Their food stores exhausted, each of the pack felt it: the shakiness, a drive to feed. Twenty of them, twenty hungry mouths, their jaws now fully formed and growing, long sinuous arms and legs, curved talons and mottled gray skin.

The pack traveled overland, galloping on all fours, stretched out in single file. The leader had stopped, motioned the pack onward with a low shriek and click of his jaw. It hadn't been a decision for the pack leader, so much as an impulse. Hunger had built until it was insatiable. He waited in the brush, his eager muscles coiled.

He felt the ground, an injured 'thump... thump-thump,' growing closer. He leaped, his talons shot forward—and he ripped into her side, knocking her to the ground.

She let out a painful shriek.

The pack stopped, converged on the sound.

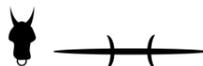
The leader slashed at her spine - a 'snap,' and tear of cartilage.

Her legs slacked as she tried to roll over, slashing in defense. A deep slice across his face; blood poured from the wound.

The pack gathered; anxious for a victor, anxious for a meal.

He bit in to her neck, his razor teeth tearing through her trachea in animalistic rage, blood spurting from the jagged flesh. He bit in to a bullet wound on her chest, tearing the entry open, exposing muscle and bone. He cracked the ribs open, exposing the organs. Her heart continued to beat, faint and fading; her eyes open, staring out at the glimmer of morning light.

He buried his face, gorged himself on her as the others circled, waiting to have their turn feeding on their fallen sister. Deep in him, sorrow grew in the darkening pit; that place in its mind that held the last remaining shred of his humanity.



Jacob reached for Kristen in the darkness, an empty spot, still warm from her body heat. Her scent hung heavy in the air.

Marines sat outside the hotel door, keeping watch for the creatures.

He heard the trickle of water; ran his fingers through dark messy hair, an attempt to put it in some sort of order.

Kristen stood naked at the sink, bathing with a cold, wet washcloth. “Wake up.” Her whisper had a sense of urgency. The shimmer of light from her head lamp reflected off the mirror, enveloping her silhouette.

Jacob walked to her, wrapped his arms around her waist, his bronzed hands pressed to the pale flesh of her exposed stomach. “Luca can wait.” He brushed her blonde hair aside and kissed her shoulder.

Her body tensed, suppressing the urge to recoil entirely. “That’s not how you felt yesterday.” She felt his hands slide up the length of her body; spinning, she cocked her elbow, pushing him back. “Only person you think of is you.”

He looked at her blankly.

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

“I...” He cleared his throat. “I’m not about to risk an attack head on, without support. I’m not stupid.”

“Selfish, Jacob. Not stupid.”

Silence.

She turned and continued bathing.

“If that’s how you feel,” he whispered. “Why have you followed me for so long?”

“Fear... and hope.” Her eyes still focused on her task. “That maybe you’d grow up one day. Lead us to some sort of... salvation.”

“Salvation...”

“It was inevitable.” Her tone matter of fact. “They can’t make a weapon and *not* use it. If you hadn’t released the virus, someone else would have. At least this way we had a fighting chance.” She slipped her shirt back on and threw a towel at his face. “Hurry up. They’re coming.”

Jacob stepped into the darkened hallway; tacky print carpet and spackled walls were illuminated by their flashlights. The two Marines rose to attention; the shuffle of talons from down the hall. Jacob flipped his flashlight off.

The Marines lowered night vision goggles from their helmets and took aim. Six creatures rounded a corner, sprinting on all fours. Pitch black, shots rang out; bursts of muzzle flash, Kristen looked at Jacob in the strobing dark, her icy glare urging him to act.

His eyes narrowed on her. He reached his hand out; the creatures stopped. His fingers spread apart. With a tug, their limbs ripped from their bodies, bloodying the hallway.