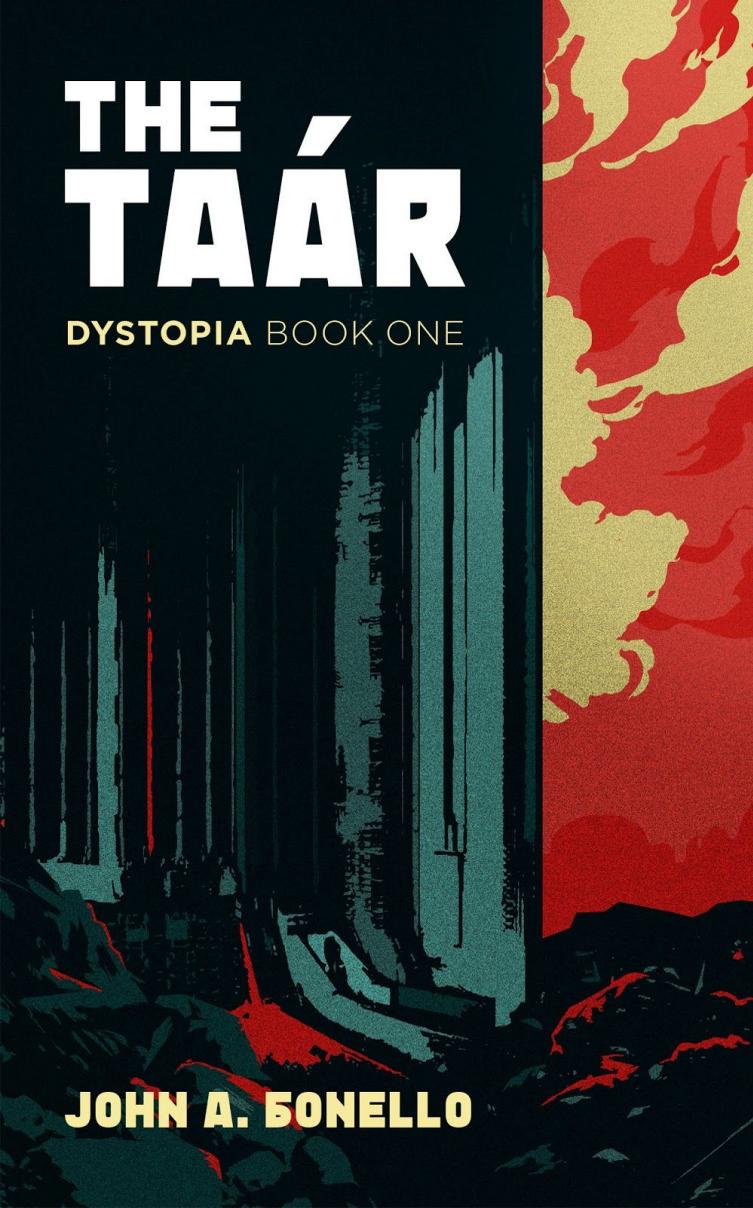


# THE TAÁR

DYSTOPIA BOOK ONE

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## Dystopia Book One

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A Serafin Books publication



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Cover illustration by Derek Fenech

<http://derekfenech.com/>

ISBN: 978-99957-1-140-5

ISBN eBook: 978-99957-1-141-2

What you're about to read took place in a distant future. It happened also in a distant past, and is probably taking place right now. Such is the nature of humanity.

# Prologue – The last girl in the tower

Ela woke up with a fright. Without thinking, she moved her hands to her big round belly, ensuring it was still there. She wondered what had woken her up.

A flash of light filled the room for just a second. The darkness returned, stronger, complete. Propping herself up on her elbows, Ela looked out of the window to her left. A silent lightning storm was raging outside, the noise completely sealed out by the thick glass. The sky flashed again. For a moment she saw rain drops dotting the glass.

A heartbeat later she felt it. The pain was slight at first, a nuisance. Then it grew stronger and stronger with each breath, until she was certain it was what had disturbed her sleep—a burning pain in her lower back. It was gone as fast as it came. Relieved, she felt a movement inside her and smiled like she did every time she felt those little kicks from within. But the smile was wiped off her face when the pain returned once more, this time stronger than before. A loud, long moan escaped her lips.

Panic overcame her, as she became suddenly aware of what was happening. Tiny cold beads of sweat sprouted on her forehead. *How is this possible*, she thought. *Why so early?* The due date was still nearly ten weeks away.

Without getting up, she put out her left hand and touched a part of the wall behind the bedside table. A warm yellowish glow filled the room. It was dim at first, then gradually got stronger. She sat up, slowly. The pain returned and almost made her bend double. She told herself to calm down, but could not.

Her hands found and pressed a button protruding from the wall, beneath the light switch. After a few moments the room's door slid open with a low *swooshing* noise, like two pieces of cloth rubbing against each other. A young man walked in—Kari, one of the nursing staff on night duty.

Smiling, he asked her if she needed anything. During the past five months she had often called him during the night for a glass of cold water or sometimes just to chat a little when she couldn't sleep. He was a gentle soul and she liked his company.

As soon as he saw her face contort under yet another bout of pain, his smile faded and was replaced by worry. He ran to her side.

Grabbing his left arm she implored him to call Lor, to hurry up, as the baby was coming. Kari didn't understand straight away. He asked if she might be mistaken. It was still early. Ela assured him she knew what she was saying. She was certain. Again, she asked him to call the doctor, her voice brusque, out of breath.

It seemed like ages later when the young nurse reappeared through the door followed by an ageing physician. Lor did not ask any questions. He walked right up to the bed and started feeling Ela's belly with his warm hands, putting pressure in certain areas to ensure the

baby's position within the womb. He asked her to lie back down and prop up her legs, so he could examine her better. It took him only a minute, after which he turned on Kari and asked him to go wake up everyone, then head to the delivery room and make it ready, urging him to make haste. The baby was going to be with them soon.

Kari left. The old physician looked at the girl and smiled.

No need to worry, he told her kindly. Gently, he brushed her hair away from her face, telling her everything was going to be fine. Lor joked, saying this was happening because her baby was fed up inside her and wanted to get out in the light. Had she thought of a name yet?

She laughed nervously. No, she had not. She knew it had to happen, only not this early. She had assumed her child would be born when due.

When months before they had asked her if she would be willing to help in ensuring the survival of their race, she accepted without hesitation, despite her fears. She knew the day would come when they would ask, had been expecting it from when she was old enough to understand how humans reproduced. They wanted her to be the mother of the new generation of tower people, denizens of a most peculiar future. She was young, and knew it. But the doctors encouraged her and assured her repeatedly that her body was ready to bear her children. And her children were destined to be the future of humanity.

Ela was the last girl in the tower, the last glimpse of hope in a world where all hope was lost forever. Harvested by the cruel scythe of nuclear war.

This was her moment of truth. Fear welled up inside her, strong and threatening and she knew Lor was seeing it through her eyes. They moved her to another room on the same floor, a colder room, without any windows, full of strange blinking equipment, tools and strong medicinal odours.

The pain was now nailing her down to the bed and she cried out shamelessly every time the contractions came. The physician was examining her again and saying something to another doctor.

Hold still, he told her. Bear the pain a little longer. It will soon be over. He said this in a low soothing monotone, explaining why he could not give her anything to alleviate the pain. It was too late, and they did not want to risk harming the baby. She would have to give birth the traditional way, as was done in the distant past. Holding her cold hands in his, he told her again to take heart. A woman's body was made to bear children, and the pain was part of the process that helped the birth.

Empty words. She was but a girl. And after all, it was *she* who felt the pain and no one else. Thoughts raced in her head, chiefly among them a question. *Why did I ever agree to this?*

More medical staff came in, wearing masks, surgical gloves and long white robes. They went busily around their tasks, mechanical in their movements, concentrating, silent. She knew each and every one of them, but with their masks covering their mouths and the caps on their heads they seemed like total strangers.

Lor told her to do as told, to have faith in them. Everything was going to be all right, he repeated.

But Ela's mind was elsewhere, locked up in a world of her own, made of pain and suffering. Nothing else mattered. She felt nothing, was aware of nothing. Nothing but her pain. The people moving around her were like noise. She never heard them urging her to take deep breaths, neither to wait and push only when told.

She couldn't take it any longer, could not wait. She felt the need to push with all her might, and push is what she did. She pushed and pushed, trying to drive the pain away.

And at last she felt herself being emptied. A sense of loss as something drifted out of her. She heard cries, but they were already distant. She felt light as a feather, moving away, soaring, soaring higher, eyes closing in a peaceful dreamless sleep that engulfed her entirely.

Ela, the last girl, the last mother, gave birth to a boy. Just one child. Then it was over. She closed her eyes forever.

Part One

The Desolation

# 1 Under the Rubble

The large concrete block he had been trying to dislodge, finally gave way, exposing what lay underneath. It tumbled down the side of the rubble heap upon which he was working. Echoes of the crash resounded all around before gradually dying out. A massive cloud of dust rose up, quickly dispersing in the strong south easterly wind.

He straightened up, his chest heaving with the effort, and for a few moments looked around, first to his immediate vicinity, then letting his gaze drift farther away. The height of the mound where he stood gave him a good vantage point. Nothing had changed. No movement could be detected as far as his eyes could see. From the indistinguishable mounds of rubble that were once buildings, to the familiar gleaming tower in the distance and beyond, all was still.

Behind his protective mask, dark bird-like eyes moved up to the reddish sky, completely overcast with dust clouds. The sun, permanently hidden by that heavy crimson blanket, would soon go down in the west. Only a couple of hours remained in which to find something of value. His mates, working in pairs on similar mounds in that same zone, had not been luckier than him so far.

Bending back to his work, the boy squeezed through the irregular shaped hole exposed by the block. But once

more, any hope of finding something was crushed when he realized the way down was blocked by more rubble. He climbed back out immediately, moved to another part of the heap, and started all over again. Rocks and debris tumbled down the heap as he carefully searched for a way in. He made an effort to keep focused on the rocks he removed. If he dislodged one that held other boulders in place he would end up crushed or worse. It wasn't the first time the rubble had caved-in underneath him, as had happened so many times to other scavengers, including long lost friends and relatives. He had been lucky so far, although his body was covered with scars and bruises as a reminder of the ever present peril.

He worked as fast as he could, glancing up every now and again to ensure there wasn't any danger. Cold wasn't the only thing that followed darkness in that place. The devil-dogs hunted in packs and the closer it got to sunset the greater the risk of encounter.

Removing the mask—a breathing apparatus without which he would end up inhaling only sand and dust—the boy wiped sweat and grime from his brow with the back of his hand. He wore the mask all the time when he was out scavenging. They had plenty of them back at the temple, but he was one of the few who wore them. Others preferred using a common piece of cloth to cover their noses and mouths.

The boy replaced the mask and went on working. He had already gone back empty handed the day before, and if he went back today and told the Taàr he hadn't found

anything, the old man would burst out in anger and probably beat him to a pulp.

He removed a narrow but long piece of concrete, than another. As soon as he touched a stone the length of his arm, a section of loose dirt and rubble collapsed inwardly, revealing a new hole, wide enough for his head to go through. He fished out a little torch light out of a large pouch sewn at the back of his trousers, and switched it on into the hole. *At last*, he thought.

Through the hole he saw a room—a square space, once part of a house that like every other building in that desolate place was swept away in the blink of an eye. Doomsday. That’s how those who survived the day referred to the massive atomic strike that changed the Earth forever. He had seen hundreds of similar rooms, most of which led to plentiful loots—things of value to the Taàr’s people. Some led to nothing, so he didn’t build his hopes up too high. Not just yet.

He widened the hole slightly, enough to squeeze through—he was pitifully thin, like others his age. He had just turned fourteen and had been out scavenging the zones since he was six. At first just gathering wood and other fuel for fire, later assisting older boys when looking for food or water. Kids in his clan had to start helping out from an early age. There was no other way.

Just two years before he and his brother had been inseparable. They scavenged together until the day Rorik ended up buried alive inside a building that collapsed just as he was coming out with the last load. From that day on, the boy never wanted anyone with him, choosing to work

alone. The Taàr disapproved of this, and said so many times, but until now had never taken any action. The rest of the Younglings, as their band called themselves, silently accepted the boy's decision and left him alone most of the time.

Rorik had been ten years his senior, a skilled scavenger, never one to take uncalculated risks. Maybe that was the reason why the younger brother could not accept his death. Or maybe it was because he had been the only family he had left—other than their Uncle Sam, but he considered him a stranger more than anyone else. Rorik had been the only living soul who could tell him about his mother and father whenever he felt like hearing stories about them. Both parents died when he was just a year old. He and Rorik had been the only two children to survive out of eight siblings.

His brother had often recalled the cruel fate that befell the other six. Three had been still-born, two were born severely malformed and lived only a few months, and another one lived to three years, then got sick and died in a matter of days. Everyday incidents for the people of Tartarys. The toxic radioactive environment made for difficult living conditions. It made for a hard, ruthless life.

He thought of his brother as he went down through the hole. In moments like those, Rorik used to take a large breath, hold up two crossed fingers and make a wish. *Let's hope we find our share today.* He imagined him there, beside him, saying those words in his gruff voice. The boy murmured those words. Maybe it was a way to keep the tradition alive. Or maybe to keep his brother alive.

The hint of a smile had appeared on the boy's lips as soon as Rorik's memory welled up inside him. But now the smile wore off as he focused on the new dim surroundings. The room he had lowered himself into had once been a bedroom. Someone, more than seventy years in the past, had lived in that luxury. Someone was lucky enough to have a room for themselves, with a bed and matching furniture now rotting, with a small desk still covered with pencils and pens and three shelves full of books that were now only ash. Everything turned to ash, eventually.

The boy could only imagine the room as it had once been. He had never experienced any of that sort. All he knew was hardship and suffering, a life of darkness. And ash.

Moving to a corner of the room, he went through an open doorway into a short corridor filled with bits of concrete that had fallen from the ceiling. There was enough space for the boy to crawl through to the end, until he came to a stairs that went down into complete darkness. He projected the small light in front of him and descended carefully, as quiet as a mouse. Now that he had gone below, the noise of the wind had completely subsided and the silence was total. He could hear his breathing through the protective mask, his footsteps on the ash covered tiles, and he thought he could even make out his heart beating fast in his chest.

The stairs led down to a floor with two more bedrooms, a bathroom and a large kitchen. He went into the latter, shaking the torch every few minutes to recharge it. The tiny light silently revealed the contents of the room. First to be exposed was the table, where the remains of a

human being lay. The person had probably been seated at the table when death walked into that kitchen. The skeleton was still intact from the hips up, with the arms and head resting on the glass surface, while the rest of the body lay in a heap of dust under the table. He had found similar scenes during their scavenges, and he could never understand why some skeletons remained intact while others became dust. Rorik's theory was that it all depended on what the persons ate during their lifetime. The boy walked beside the skeleton and touched the head. He wanted to check if it was in good condition so he could take it to Pat, who collected skulls. But it disintegrated as soon as his fingers touched the yellowed bone. Only the teeth remained, shining in the torchlight.

The boy turned his light on the rest of the kitchen. He spotted some utensils still in the sink, hanging cupboards that had long since crashed down, china plates and bowls scattered across the floor, some broken, some intact. He was not interested in these artefacts—they had thousands of similar items in their stores. What he picked up was a small earthenware saucer, decorated with tiny red flowers. This he pocketed before continuing the search for food or drink.

Opening one of the bottom cupboard doors, he found dozens of cans of food. The wrapper around the cans was yellowish, crumbling, but the cans looked in good condition. He picked one up, shook it, and with satisfaction heard a slosh inside. He suddenly relaxed, feeling the tension within him dissipate into tiredness.

His stomach grumbled with hunger. It pleaded him to open one can and feed himself. He hadn't eaten since the day before. All he had taken since that morning was a glass of water. But he quickly abolished the thought. Vivid memories of what had happened when he once dared open a can of food came rushing back to him—the thousands, if not millions, of roaches and rats that surrounded them when he had not even finished eating the whole can, then the furious devil-dogs that ran after him and his brother, perhaps more because they had heard their screams than because they smelled the food. And after all that mess, the beating they got from Sal. Shuddering at these thoughts, he opened more cupboards and found more canned food, as well as bottled drinks. Sometimes liquids would be too rancid for consumption, but more often than not, they would find acceptable ones.

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