

# **The Children**

**By: John Hanchar**

The children were running. At first, Alexander was surprised. He jerked, trying to find the source of their fear. But there was none. No source, and no fear. Only laughter. Alexander tried to take a step, but suddenly, the field broke away from him; a ravine separated him from the children.

Alexander yelled after the children, but they could not hear him. He yelled until his voice gave out, but they were too far away, and as the field reached the horizon, it erupted in flame. And the sky thundered. And Alexander awoke, drenched in sweat, in his apartment, with the same tattered wallpaper, the same crumbling plaster as before.

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“...And with that, our fearless leaders have proclaimed official victory against Britannia!” The newsreel played out the battle scores. 7, 956, 302 casualties of war had fallen in Sydney, many after the bombs had been dropped, the government destroyed. The reporters didn’t try to conceal this fact. It was obvious as the cameras panned across the ruins, with celebrating platoons surrounded by the bodies of civilians.

The large man behind Alexander cheered as the grainy screen played a slow-motion re-cap of the moment the atomic missile had hit the capital. It wasn’t even one of the tactical ones that Britannia had used against Oahu to destroy the air-dock. It was a blatant Nuclear Warhead, designed for death, regardless of the receiving end. And the

large man cheered again as the cameras showed the houses around the white monolith disintegrate.

Alexander finished his coffee. To call it brown water would have overstated the quality, but this coffee stamp was the only kind a manager could get these days. At least his stamps came with edible bread, unlike most others in his neighborhood. As the plastic cup crumpled in Alexander's grip, someone bumped him. Slipping on the icy ground, he tumbled and rolled, colliding with a rusted drop-box.

Blearily, Alexander pulled himself up, using the blue metal box as leverage, and caught a fleeting glimpse of a young girl dashing down the street, past a boarded-up store, with two "Civil Order Supervisors" in pursuit. Both were yelling, and one of them drew his pistol and fired forward, twice. One shot exploded against brickwork, while the other collided with the girl's shoulder. She was practically thrown off her feet, and only continued another step, before collapsing against a newspaper stand.

A group of rubberneckers had begun to gawk, and again, Alexander heard a cheer. Grimacing, he swung around, and slugged the large man in the face. Alexander was rewarded with a sickening thud as the man collapsed. As he fell, the large man's fedora flew into the air, falling to the ground beside him. The "COS" officers turned. One raised his gun.

The gun-wielder cautiously approached Alexander, who was turned at an angle to face him. Beneath, sprawled out over the chipped brickwork, the large man began to moan. Blood trickled out of his mashed nose, and gently began to pool around his ears. His arm twitched slightly as Alexander stepped over it, and walked towards the gun-wielder.

The other officer cried out in surprise as the girl rose to her feet and quickly ducked between his legs. She was gone before the gun-wielder could turn to face her. As the pounding of the girl's feet dispersed into the muddled sounds of the city, Alexander was pushed to his knees. The two officers loomed over him. Each cast a grotesque shadow as they obscured the sun. The gun-wielder holstered his firearm and grinned.

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When Alexander opened his eyes next, he was restrained to a metal bench in a bare, white room. The air smelled sickly sweet, which only masked a terrible reek that would surface to Alexander's nose repeatedly. He guessed himself to be in a holding cell at one of the police stations, but did not know which one. No noise filtered in, and no windows displayed the outside world. Alexander didn't even know if he was still in the city.

He did know it was later however, because he had slept. As before, he was plagued by the dream, with the same sequence of events, and the same conclusion. Only this time, the children had turned to face him when he yelled.

When the cast-iron wall that masqueraded as a door was drawn open, Alexander was treated to his first glimpse of daylight. He had to shield his eyes, and was covering them as the dark outline of a person roughly grabbed him by the shoulders, and dragged him into a shining white hallway.

A row of doors stretched endlessly in each direction, with an armed COS guard at each. Technicians adorned with white lab coats passed Alexander, standing against the wall, as he stood facing a massive floor-to-ceiling plate-glass window.

As Alexander's eyes adjusted, he was able to focus on the man who had pulled him from his cell. Instead of the traditional riot-gear uniform of the COS, he was clad in a formal suit of a bluish color. His eyes held not the gruff demeanor of a COS goon, but something even worse. Steely hatred, and contempt burnt from the depths of his corneas, and as he adjusted his glasses with his palm, a new sensation washed over Alexander, in the form of fear. The man barely looked at Alexander before starting down the hall. The shove in Alexander's back suggested he was meant to follow.

"Mr. Croftshire." The man's voice was as steely as Alexander assumed, and as the inquisition began, Alexander tried his hardest not to look at him. The man paused to

adjust the pile of manila folders and papers, before continuing. “I was under the impression that someone of your . . . history, would tend to avoid direct confrontation.” The man drew his words out, deliberately, before taking a light sip from his coffee mug. “But just yesterday, you performed a blatant act of open hostility. That is one of the first signs of “trouble”, and we of the “Civil Order” don’t take kindly to that.” Closing his eyes, the man lightly shook his head. “Sadly, Mr. Croftshire, you have dug yourself a very deep grave, and have no way to pull yourself out of it.” Sighing, he adjusted his glasses, and rose. “I’m very sorry Mr. Croftshire. I truly am.”

The two guards approached Alexander, and grabbed him by the shoulders. They made him rise, and as he was dragged backwards, he caught one last glimpse of the man. He was smiling. With that, the door closed, and Alexander was plunged again into darkness.

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The list of “offenses” continued, but Alexander was oblivious to them. He caught brief segments, of “Treachery” and “Deceit”- they made no difference to him. But they had an adverse affect on the crowd. With each charge, they yelled and screamed, for his head, for his death. Again, their shouts didn’t affect Alexander. He was busy enjoying his last few breaths of air, and the sweet, natural fragrances that traveled with them. As his eyes gazed at the crowd, he saw the people of his city, his old workmates, and the

large man, hurling words at him. But one face was not stained with anger. The young girl. She was weeping, her hand over her mouth.

With that, the lights shut off for Alexander. For the final time, he had the dream. But this time, it was different. This time, it ended well. This time the children heard his calls, this time the children ran to him, and he held them tight. Finally, Alexander had rest.