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## General Quagmire: Configuration 2; Operation Blend-in

Whenever you hear the word “zombie apocalypse” you immediately think of green zombies with rotting flesh that walk super slow, trying to eat everyone’s brains, sagging skin, coming up from their graves, not at all appealing to the eye. But a true zombie apocalypse is impossible. Unless of course there’s a mad scientist who finds a way to bring people back from the dead. Now that would be a true nightmare. But when all of a sudden your entire hometown is consumed in a deadly virus, that just by chance happens to make them crave brains, nothing you do will make in impact, trust me I’ve been there, and the only way we humans survived, was through a battle that lasted 9 months. Eventually, all the soldiers on both sides were so tired, they had to call a draw. Now everyone dreads the day when the war will start once more. Yet never would I have thought, that this all started from a simple secret experiment. I guess science is more dangerous than we thought.

I walked side by side with Dr. Zabrowski down the rickety old steps that led to the basement, which was currently holding several human survivors of the recent attack, it was acting similar to a hospital at the moment. He led me to a false shelf behind the stairs and typed a passcode into a keypad that was hidden behind an old vase. I stepped back and the false shelf opened its arms let us into Dr.Zabrowski’s secret laboratory. As we entered we saw Carson slumped against the wall, sleeping, with baseball bat in hand.

“Carson! Did I not tell you that you were to guard the serum while I was collecting Kaito?” His sudden entrance startled her, she woke up and swiftly replied.

“I’m sorry Professor, I only got two hours of sleep last night, I was up on guard duty until 6 am.” She yawned as she got up off the floor. I chuckled at her antics. I’ve known Carson since third grade, she was a sort of saving grace for me. Since then we had been inseparable, clinging on to each other desperately. She was the same as always, fierce, protective of those she loves, and sleepy; she was constantly sleepy. She had been like that since I remember, even before we had met. When she stood up, she was coolly leaned against the wall, next to the air conditioner. The bursts of air that came out made her messy side shave flop around, showing off the red highlights in her naturally dark brown hair. Carson was almost certainly the strongest person here, fighting whether it was necessary or not. That might be why she got in a lot of trouble too, and why she had guard duty from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. last night, and for the rest of the week as well.

“Come on Kaito, I have something to show you.” I followed him to a corner of the room that was holding a small vial of a purple liquid. “This is a prototype of the antidote, I want to try using it on our latest test subject. He directed his hand to a person slumped down in a test tube.

“Oh please! There’s no need for a serum! I’m fine! It’s not like I’m gonna eat your brains! Hahaha!” This girl, the subject, Tymber, looked human enough, if you saw her you wouldn’t give her a second glance, But don’t be fooled, she’s a turned zombie. She may not look it, but she would eat your brain in a matter of moments.

“Now Kaito, because you found her and brought her back here, decided to trust her, she’s your responsibility.”

“What?! That’s completely unfair Professor!”

"I believe it is fair, seeing as you endangered the remaining humans of this town by bringing her back!"

"Oh please, I'm completely innocent here! I did nothing of the sort! She's the one that tricked me into believing that she was human! She's the reason this virus is even a threat to our existence!" I retorted in a matter of fact tone. Then, of course, Tymber just had to chime in.

"It wasn't *my* fault that Kaito decided to be so cute!"

"Oh shut up Tymber!" Carson said with a tone of frustration in her voice, banging on the glass tube backhandedly to shut the rambling girl up.

"Oh why are *you* so mad? Do you want to date him, Carson?" I mentally gagged at the thought.

"What?! No of course not! You're disgusting!" She scrunched her nose, in a distaste for what the smirking test subject had just said.

"My work here is done." She really had no idea, did she?

"Will you all stop your bickering?! Jeez, kids these days..." Zabrowski muttered that last part under his breath. "Now take this Kaito." Zabrowski handed me a small belt, with a pouch attached to the side where my hip would be if I wore it. "I want you to take this up to the water supply, but under **NO** circumstances are you to open it." He held up a different vial of liquid, a spray-type medicine in a small glass jar closed with a cork.

"That totally doesn't seem suspicious, but sure I'll go along with whatever crazy plan you're trying to rope me into this time."

"No need to be dramatic Kaito, this is serious."

"Oh, but you see, that's not dramatic, this is dramatic; Oh what a hindrance on my life your task has put, for if I shall not complete it, my remaining years will be taken from me, and I will be left with nothing to-"

"Okay, that's enough of your little play, now, **GO!** And because you're wondering, it's an air purifier, so the virus can't be airborne on the premises. If it's opened it will become contaminated"

"Alright, alright, yeesh." I took the bag from Dr.Zabrowski's hands, strapped it around my waist, and with that, left the laboratory, leaving Carson, Dr.Zabrowski, and I guess Tymber behind as well. For some reason, in the pit of my stomach, I got a feeling that something was wrong, or was going to go wrong. As I climbed up the stairs out of the basement, I pondered my thoughts, about how I had gotten here.

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*"Absolutely not! You know how dangerous it is out there!"*

*"But Commander! I can handle it out there! I was one of the origi-"*

*"No! I will hear nothing of the sort! We need you alive, and there are plenty of other people to take the job."*

*"So what? We just throw out the spare survivors into the wild to be killed? Is that your plan?!"*

*"You have no right to talk to me such way Kaito."*

*"Actually **Mom**, I do."*

*"Ugh," She pinched the bridge of her nose. "I wish I could send you to your room."*

*"And why can't you?"*

*"Because this conversation is not over! I forbid you from leaving the premises of Home Base!"*

*"UGH! I wish you would just let me help out! I'm an adult now!"*

*"You may be an adult, but you're still my son and I don't want anything to happen to you. Final command, you are dismissed!" I felt a wave of putrid anger in my stomach, but I knew she was right. I*

*couldn't fend off any zombies if they came at me. Hell, I probably couldn't even tell if they were zombies or not. But I still had to help somehow, and I was going to. I'm sorry mom.*

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At the top of the first flight of stairs, I took a left and was greeted with a familiar sight. The boiler room. I cautiously creaked the door open and saw that it was empty. I let out a sigh of relief and entered the room that was thick with humidity. I opened the flowing water supply container, and took the substance out of the pouch and dripped it in. I left the room and closed the door behind me, sighing and wiping the sweat off my forehead. Walking down the corridor gave me a moment to glaze over the events of the past few days.

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I attempted to carefully crack my bedroom window open so as to not make any sound or disturb the other people who were peacefully dreaming in my room as well, but of course, I'm not graceful, and someone caught me, literally, I fell on top of Ashton after I tripped over a stray empty can of *Canada Dry* that was laying on the floor. He caught me with his arms straight out, therefore I was drooping off of him.

"Hey there Sunflower."

"Hey Ash..." He helped prop me back onto my feet and I turned to face him. "You haven't called me Kaito since what, third grade? I guess childhood nicknames never escape you."

"Yep, never. Now, what are you doing trying to sneak out? Didn't Commander Cree specifically tell you to stay put?"

"Uh- no. It's none of your business." I stated in a prude voice. I was praying that he wouldn't tell my mom.

"Well if it's none of my business I can help you escape right?" I felt a wave of relief come over me and subside the anxiety.

"Y-yeah, if you want." I could still hear the shakiness in my voice.

"Then come on!" I could hear the excitement in his tone. I smiled at his goofiness and he got down on one knee and joined his hands together to make a ladder for me so I could step up and reach the window. He had always been this willing to help me. Or anyone for that matter. He was one of the kindest people I knew. I stepped on his makeshift step stool and reached for the window ledge with one of my hands, then gripped it with my other. Using both of my hands to pull myself up, I opened the window all the way it could go and climbed though, or rather I tried to, but I got stuck halfway through and couldn't get a grip on the shingles.

"Ashton," I said worriedly. I kicked my legs around trying to un-wedge myself but failed. I suddenly felt a sharp shove on my behind and began to tumble down the shingles. After a few seconds of rolling down coarse black shingles, I stopped and skidded on a flat surface. It was narrow, so I had to watch my step. "Gee thanks man."

"You're welcome Sunflower."

"I swear, one day I'm going to put gum in your hair."

"Gum is just glorified rubber." I gave him one last smirk and continued to slide down the remaining shingles. This time having a grip on the shingles and sliding down rather easily. The remaining street lights that hadn't yet gone out were providing me with light so I could see where I was. My feet finally landed on a

smooth surface, and I could see the ground. The sidewalk was right next to our abode, so I could easily jump down. I saw some movement out in the distance, I quickly flattened myself against the shingles so they couldn't see me, though my anxiety was through the roof at the moment a small part of me hoped that it was a squirrel or something. I saw slow movements and immediately knew what I was up against. A zombie.

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Walking down the lavish corridor that hides the hideous boiler room, I arrived at the small banister staircase. It was large enough to slide down, and far enough down for me to be too lazy to walk all the way down. I sat down on the railing and began to spiral around, and near the foot of the banister, I saw Ash walking up the stairs. I wanted to say hello and thank him for the other night, I tried to jump off of the railing right in front of Ashton, but instead ended up falling face first, and rolling down the stairs. I attempted to grab onto one of the stairs but my hands just ended up slipping each time until I ended up at the foot on the stairs, dazed, and with a throbbing head. I heard thumping footsteps coming towards me and I hazily looked up. Ash was crouched over me now, the ceiling light from above was creating an aura around his head, making him look like an angel. I squeezed my eyes shut then opened them again to clear my vision and sat up, leaning against the wall.

"You okay Sunflower?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. This happens all the time right?" We chuckled, simultaneously remembering how I got my nickname.

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"Better catch up slowpokes!" I ran like the wind, my feet taking me straight ahead, as Ashton and Carson desperately tried to catch up behind. I look back and saw that Carson had collapsed onto the field, exhausted. Ashton was still chasing me though and was intent on catching me. I was still running ahead, but I was looking at Ash and how his hair was flying through the wind, and how he had to keep adjusting it so he could see where he was running.

"Kaito watch out!" I wasn't looking where I was running through and slipped off of a small muddy cliff. I tumbled down and hit a lot of stalks on the way down. I couldn't see what I was hitting, but it felt tough. After a little while of tumbling, I stopped and sprawled out on the dirt. I felt a stinging sensation on my arm, I looked at it and there was a small cut with blood oozing from it, it wasn't so painful I couldn't bear it, but I was still surprised that there was blood. I tried to get up, but then realized I was stuck under three sunflowers. They were surprisingly heavy for my 8-year-old twig arms. What a twist. I tried with all my strength but couldn't get them off by myself. "Kaito! Where are you!?!!" I could hear Ashton yelling from where I was.

"Down here! I'm stuck under some sunflowers! I can't get them off!" I cried in a moment of desperation.

"Okay were coming to help you!" I could hear Carson say as she started to carefully find her way down the slippery cliff side. It wasn't a far drop, just a dangerous one, as I had just found out. Carson and Ash made their way over to me and saw how helpless I was, sprawled out underneath three surprisingly heavy sunflowers. They helped lift two off, and I slipped out under the last one. I got up off the earth and

dusted the dirt off of my clothes. I looked up at Carson and Ash, who a fair few inches taller than I was and hugged them. I was always getting into trouble with them like this.

"Now come on, let's get home Sunflower Boy!" Ashton exclaimed and ruffled my hair. I let go of them and followed them back up the slippery hill, they had to eventually pull me up because I couldn't climb it. "Do you promise not to fall in sunflowers again?" I chuckled and Carson slapped the back of his head.

"I promise."

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"Let's get you up to the infirmary, make sure you don't have a concussion." Ashton helped me onto my feet.

"I'm fine, I just need to lay down a little." Ashton led me down the stairs, and Carson also happened to be there, eating a bowl of one-minute ramen. She really did love the stuff.

"Hey Carson," Ashton greeted his cousin. "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in the basement with Tymber?"

"She was starting to get on my nerves, so I came upstairs for a snack.

"Hasn't it be like, what? Forty-five minutes?"

"Not the point!" She exclaimed, obviously annoyed. "Besides, I skipped breakfast..."

"You know, I heard eating is good for you." Ashton chuckled at his comment.

"I overslept!" She said defensively.

"Again?" He questioned her.

"Don't judge me!" She went back to eating her ramen. I stood up on my feet steadily, getting off of Ash.

"It's fine I don't need to go to the infirmary, I'm just gonna go lay down. I turned back around and started sauntering up the stairs, leaning on the railing for balance. My mind went back to the day I found Tymber, and the day she betrayed me.

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The closer I looked, the more I noticed that the person, it looked like a girl, was moving less like the zombies and more like someone pretending to be one. Though of course, *I* didn't know, and I wasn't about to take my chances. I waited a few moments for them to pass and silently jumped down. I swiftly ran through the grass, and onto a path that led to the supply center. The sun was starting to rise and I started seeing other figures around, so I took on a fake zombie stance, slouched and relaxed. I began to walk forward when I saw a girl from my science class, Tymber, walking around out of the corner of my eye. She walked toward me and I prayed that she was faking.

"Hey Kaito, how's the apocalypse treating you?"

"Ahaha, you know, same old same old." What was I saying?

"Well I know you're human, you can stop faking now." I let out an audible sigh of relief.

"You're human too? That's great!"

"I somehow avoided the virus on my own."

"Would you like to come back with me? I live with a bunch of other humans, and it's safe there!"

"Really?! You would let me?!" She genuinely sounded happy.

"Of course!" I forgot all about the supplies and started leading her back to Home Base. That might have been the biggest mistake of my life. As I led her in through the secret passage a loud ringing of several alarms went off and twenty guards came and cornered us, while another two pinned us to the

ground. They shoved me inside and took Tymber away. I had no time to process what was happening, but I got a bad feeling in my stomach. Mom, of course, found out and grounded me for two weeks, I couldn't leave my room. Tymber was confined for experimentation, but she was too lenient about it. Then something went wrong.

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As I fumbled up the stairs, the alarm system started to blare again. My stomach dropped, it was either a break-in, or Tymber had escaped. And I had a feeling it was both. I started to run up the stairs but my head was throbbing. Carson and Ashton started dashing up the stairs and Carson casually threw me over her shoulder, I wasn't surprised. I was banging against her back as they hurried upwards. We got back to the corridor and I was promptly thrown on a floor mattress. The door was barricaded, and I reached for my pocket and got my taser out. Hey, it's a zombie apocalypse, right? I need some sort of weapon. The alarm turned off, and everyone who was in a panic started to calm down. I could feel my anxiety dimming down, but it was still there. I felt someone grab me by the neck from behind and suddenly I was being dragged silently to a corner, as everyone's eyes were currently one the barricaded door that was now being banged on by a presence with superhuman strength. A zombie. I elbowed the person who was dragging me from behind in the stomach and they crouched over, holding the place where they were hit. I turned and pointed my taser at them, only to find it was... Tymber? How did we not notice her? Everything that just happened, so quickly, it's all a blur. Suddenly the door behind us broke down and everyone started shooting, hitting, and aiming at the figure there, and while I wasn't focused, took a blow dart tube, and spit a tranquilizer dart into my neck, I promptly ripped it out and threw it on the floor. I knew it would take a while to set in, so I attempted to hit her with my taser but missed. She dodged out of the way and stepped to the side. I kept attempting to hit her, and she kept dodging.

"You know, it's almost like we're dancing." She smiled, and I was disgusted by the possibility. I then pointed the taser at her and shot to the side. She stepped into the beam of shock and fell to the floor spasming. I was taken aback by what I had just done. She wasn't dead, but it looked like she was having a seizure.

"I would say that dance was pretty fun." I put my taser away and looked down on her. She was pathetic.

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A few hours after the attack, Tymber was taken into custody and I had taken my notebook and started piecing together all the parts that fit into her master plan.

1. The outbreak began at the school me, Carson, Ash, and Tymber went.
2. The timing was perfect, right after school ended when Dr. Zabrowski went on his bathroom break.
3. She knew the mannerisms of fake zombies and tricked me into believing she was one, as there was no possible way I would have known she released the serum.
4. She did all this because she had a crush on me. Ew.

I heard a knock on my door. Ash and Carson were sitting with me in my room, going over what I had pieced together.

"Come in!" Creaking the door open, my mom and Dr. Zabrowski were standing there.

"Kaito, we'd like you to come with us. And bring your research." I was a bit confused, but I collected my notebook from Carson and Ash and followed the two adults, to a room that was isolated from the others. I had a pretty good idea of who was there. I entered, and inside was a table, two chairs, and Tymber

tired to one of them. I sat down on the remaining chair, and Dr. Zabrowski and Commander Cree stood behind me. The glared at her, and she began talking to me.

“So, I’m sorry for starting the apocalypse, but to be fair, the serum was right there. It was my ticket out of this dump, and into a better life with you.” If I was being honest, I had no idea why she even had a crush on me in the first place. “Well, see you around I guess.”

“I have one question.”

“Mhm?” Her eyes lit up.

“Why do you even like me?”

“Well, you’re kinda the only person who was ever nice to me.”

“That’s not true. Carson’s nice to you.”

“Really? I guess I didn’t notice.”

“Yeah! She eats breakfast with you when she can, she volunteers to guard you, even when she hasn’t had any sleep, even tries to talk to you, and keep you from getting in trouble.”

“Ha, I guess you’re right. Thank Kaito.”

“No problem. Well, bye I guess.” I wasn’t really certain how to bid her farewell in this situation.

“Bye.” I was then led out of the room and Dr. Zabrowski pulled me aside to talk.

“Kaito, there’s something you need to know.”

“What?”

“The serum, the virus, it isn’t from this world.” My jaw dropped in disbelief.

“Kaito!” my mom called for me, and I went to her side.

“What is it?”

“A war’s about to begin, and you have a lot of experience with the zombies so I was thinking-” She took a deep breath. “If you’re ready to take on the task, how would you like to be a General?”