

## Underlyers

Brandy runs out of the burning building carrying a woman in both of his hands. He puts her on her feet where some of the other victims are being escorted away and assures her that she's fine.

"It's okay, young lady, you're safe now." He consoled the woman, "Hey Charlie! Why is it taking you so long to put out the fire! It's been nearly an hour and a half! You really don't know how to use that thing!"

"The water is doing absolutely nothing. I've tried everything. The only thing I can do is contain the fire to the vicinity of the building." Charlie said as he aimed the hose towards another burning area.

Brandy shakes his head and turns around to go back inside. In a split second, a big chunk of the building fell into a huge pile of ash, still burning. A gush of smoke rapidly went into the air, leaving a disgusting black stain in the sky. Time was running out to save the other citizens, he needed to get back into that fiery structure before another part falls. As he reached the entrance of the collapsing building, his friend, Theo, meets him at the front of the door.

"Brandy, the Captain needs your help on the third floor, a man is trapped in a room and we need to open it." Theo said gruffly as he wiped the sweat off his forehead running down from his short, brown hair.

"How's he trapped?" Brandy asked with a sense of urgency.

"The door to the room has gotten stuck somehow and we can't move it by ourselves."

He followed his friend up through the smoke and rubble. The heat from the fire nagged on the two as they climbed up the flights. Theo and Brandy climbed the final few steps that led them to the captain. He was trying to reassure the man that help was on the way.

"Sussy! I got Brandy." Theo stated, running towards the captain with Brandy right on his heels.

"Good, we don't have that much time before this whole place falls so we need to do this fast," Sussy continued, "Brandy you're the strongest one out of us all, I'm going to need you to try and lift this door off its hinges. There's a small opening at the bottom of the door just big enough for hand. Since im the smallest one, if you can open it wide enough, I can go in and get the man."

"How's the man doing?" Brandy asked Sussy.

"I don't know, he said he had to go get something and stopped talking before I could tell him not to. We have to get him out of there, he's losing oxygen."

Brandy fixed himself into a position to get under the door. He reached under and caught a grip of the sides of the door. He winced as the splinters on the door injected

like a needle into his glove and hand. Using all his mustered strength, Brandy tried to create space just big enough for a person to get through but the door was completely stuck between the hinges. He decided to give up on lifting the door, he had another idea that just might work.

“I’m going to ram into the door.” He choked as the smoke started to seep out of the opening in the door. It burned his throat like he was eating a bunch of chili peppers at the same time.

Both Theo and Sussy were surprised at what he just said. Theo shook his head at Brandy, “No, you’ll hurt yourself trying. Let me just get the battering ram and-”

Theo was interrupted by the crackling noise of burning wood breaking and the shaking of the building

“We don’t have time, this place is set to fall at any minute.” Brandy claimed. He paced back a few steps and got ready to run into the door. He looked at Theo and nodded at his friend.

“ You’re putting yourself at risk, Brandy.” Theo warned, a worrisome look in his eyes.

Another crackling sound exploded, yet this time it was a lot louder than before, making the three of them cover their ears.

Brandy looks at the two again and smiles, a glint of excitement was shown through his hazel eyes, “I did that when I applied for this job.”

He lets out a sigh to compose himself for what he was about to. Getting a running start, Brandy crashes into the door. A cracking sound burst through his ears. At first, he thought it was his arm that broke, but he was able to move with little to no pain. He looked up at the door to see that a huge crack was running through the middle of the door, almost perfectly.

“Another good hit should do it.” He said to himself as he sprinted toward the door.

Right before the collision, he braced himself and ran straight through the door. A sharp crack and the door broke through the hinges. An instant surge of heat blasted towards him. He squinted his eyes out of reflex, even though the goggles blocked any heat from entering that area.

Theo and Sussy came in seconds after Brandy. The man wasn’t anywhere in the room. Sussy told them to start searching until the man was found. He jogged into the dining room to begin this very important game of hide and seek.

They searched around for him until Brandy found him on the bathroom floor with the sink turned on. He called out to the captain and looked at the man. His mind went to the worst thought.

“Is he...dead? No.” He said to nobody, not even himself.

Old memories started to fill his head. He tried his best to force them out of his mind but they kept coming back.

“Sam! Sam!” A voice whimpered.

Brandy looked around to find the source of the voice but it was nowhere to be found. Something red was coming out of the lying man’s nose.

“Is that blood?” Brandy asked.

The crackling of the fire blurred out of his mind, he could only hear the hard ringing noise coming from his ears. He accidentally wobbled a few steps back, tripping over nothing. He called out to Theo. Did they leave? His legs began to weaken and everything blurred. At the same time, his head began to spin as the memories of an all too distant past enter his mind. Memories that he’s tried so hard to push away. To forget them. Everything turned sideways in one fluid motion. The ringing faded out as the sound of leaves brushing against each other faded in. He called out Theo’s name one last time until he finally allowed the darkness to consume him.

Brandy woke up in a bed. A rather large one at that. The soft tapping of rain hit the roof as a strange smell filled his senses. It smelled more or less like sheaves of hay given to horses. Multiple blankets were wrapped around him. His head felt cold. Reaching up to see why, he sees that a bag of ice is on his head. He sighed at the realization at what happened. He must've have fallen unconscious at the burn site. The Captain and Theo probably had to carry him back to the apartment. He wondered how they got both him and the man out of there in time, and if Charlie ever put out that stupid fire.

He threw the blankets off his body and slowly got up. The rain grew louder and it gave Brandy a headache. He left the room and entered the hallway. Trying to search for the living area, he walked down the corridor. It seemed to be that no one was here at the apartment. Trophies and certificates were scattered around on shelves, next to plants or pictures.

At the end of the corridor was a flight of stairs and Brandy took his time walking down them. As he reached the bottom of the stairs, he walked to the couch in the middle of the living area and sits down sighing again. His nagging headache disappeared but his right hand started to shake slightly. He uses his other hand to try and stop the shaking.

"We weren't even supposed to be at the burn site, y'know." Someone stated.

The sudden voice startles Brandy and he looks up to the direction of it. It was Theo, who was dropping a bag of hay at the entrance.

Brandy only nodded at his friends statement although he disagreed with him. They were the closest people who could do that job, if they didn't go, a lot of people could've been killed.

"The fire corps is supposed to handle things like that, not the patrol corps." Theo explained, "too bad they had another fire to worry about."

Brandy didn't know that there was another burnsite, "Wait, there were two fires at the same time? That's...weird."

"They happened within ten minutes of each other. The cause of both fires is also unknown." Theo answered as he sat down next to Brandy on the couch.

"Then it would be safe to say that the fires could be from....?" He hesitated before saying the rest of the sentence.

"The Underlyers? Yeah, that's probably it. Either that or invisible lightning struck both buildings." Theo jokes.

Brandy smiled at the joke and looked out the window in front of him. It was still raining outside and he couldn't help but think that it would've been helpful for the rain to have occurred the other day. It may have been a lot easier to put out the fire if that were the case.

Theo looked at his friend frowned at him, his natural smile completely left his face, "Speaking of the Underlyers, it happened again, didn't it? You saw the unconscious man and you fell unconscious as well, right?"

"Yeah, at the worst time. Haha." Brandy admitted.

Theo shook his head as the tapping on the roof got louder. He raised his voice at Brandy and barked, "No, No. This is not a laughing matter. You almost died in there! When we found you, the fire was slowly inching towards you. If I came any later, you and that man would have..."

Theo massaged his forehead to calm himself and let out a sigh. He stood up and went to the kitchen door.

"How is he by the way? The man." Brandy asked to try and change the conversation.

"He absolutely fine but that's not the point."

"Why wouldn't it be? Were supposed to protect him and other citizens. That's what the personnel of the Protection Association is supposed to do." Brandy replied.

Theo furrowed his eyebrows for a second, contemplating on what to say.

"Whatever, my brother, Charlie, asked me to help him feed the horses hay and I buy my mother's medicine so I'll out for awhile." Theo said.

He waited for an answer and figured he wouldn't get one so he grabbed his jacket and opened the door to leave.

"Oh, I almost forgot, Captain Sussy needs us to meet him at Headquarters by 4:30, don't be late." Theo stated.

The door closed behind him and clicked in place. Brandy grabbed a can of soda and an old newspaper to read as he listened to the tapping rain diminish into mist. The sun's light started to seep through the windows, bathing some of the plants in heat.

About three hours later, Brandy left the apartment to head to the Headquarters. Each step made his shoes squeak as he unintentionally made tiny eruptions of splashing water leftover from the morning rain. He turns the corner of the house and almost bumps into a man.

"Oh, hey Brandy!" It was Theo's brother, Charlie.

Brandy smiles at him and extends his hand out for a hand shake. He noticed that another crewmate, Venise, was with him.

"Wait, your back from vacation already, Venise?" Brandy asked, confused.

She nodded while he long, brown hair bounced along with her, "Yeah, I go on a trip for five days, and you guys almost die in a fire."

"Sure, but if Charlie actually knew how to work a hose, we would've been fine." Brandy said jokingly and nudged Charlie.

"In my defense, the manual said it was a two person job." His ocean blue eyes widened.

“You could of asked one of us to help, then.” Brandy teased again.

The three kept talking and laughing for the rest of the walk. They caught up with Venise and learned that she traveled by boat to get home, which is one of the most expensive forms of transportation to use.

After a couple of miles, they reached the headquarters of Protection Association. It was a mountain among other buildings, towering over all other structures in the city like a palace meant for a giant. Inside was no less grand. The entire population of the city could have on the first floor of the stone building. Four huge, copper pillars in the middle of the room extended to the ceiling, holding up the building by themselves.

They signed in by using their Protection Association badges. The fifth floor is where Captain Sussy told everyone to go so they walked up the flights and entered the board room. The Captain was in the room along with Theo and a woman with short hair holding a bunch of papers. Her eyes were completely brown, like mud that was still drying off from the rain. Brandy noticed that her face expressed no emotion. It didn't look natural, it looked as if she was forcing to hide the emotions.

“You guys are late, just like always.” Theo said with a sigh of irritation. He handed some more papers to the woman who took them and put them in the stack.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I'd think I would get at least an hour to unpack my crap. But I guess that's unacceptable now, is it?” Venise said sarcastically.

“Alright, enough. We're starting the meeting now. Carry this on after.” Sussy commanded, his eyebrows climbed his forehead, almost reaching the beginning of his buzz cut.

Everyone in the room found a seat and waited for the captain to begin. Sussy took his reading glasses off the stand and put them on. “As a request from the Chief of Protection,” He read, “The first regiment of the Patrol Corps will be collaborating with the Fire Corps.”

“ And why is that, Captain?” Charlie asked.

The captain looked at Charlie and then at the woman whom he gestured to talk. She nodded at Sussy and put down her papers, “Yesterday, something strange occurred. Two different fires started at the same time. Your regiment had to take the place of the fire corps for one of the burn sites. If you guys weren't able to get to that burn site, there could have been a bunch of casualties. We have to make sure that doesn't happen again.”

“I'm sorry but I'm a little confused here. Who are you?” Charlie asked with his arms crossed.

“I'm Hana, one of the captains of the fire corps. I'll be working with you guys for the entirety of the collaboration.” She said.

Her monotone voice made the air around Brandy feel weird. Like he was in school learning how to factor.

“You said that we’re supposed to prevent these fires from happening. We won’t know the fire has started unless it has already started.” Venise insisted.

“These aren’t any ordinary fires,” Sussy replied, “These fires are intentionally started by members of the Underlyers.”

At hearing the words “Underlyers”, Brandy sat up and listened more intently.

Theo raised his hand and when allowed to by the captain, he began. “Where did this assumption come from. I mean, it makes sense but where’s the reasoning behind accusing the Underlyers?”

“ Because, 9 years ago, Hana used to be a member of the group.” The captain answered.

Everyone, except Captain Sussy and Theo, stared at Hana, not knowing whether they should trust her or fear her. Brandy tensed up, the comment that the captain made hit one of his nerves. She noticed their looks and sighed, “ I’m not apart of them anymore,” She stated dully.

Brandy spoke for the first time since the meeting, “So you’re saying that she was apart of a terrorist group and she’s allowed to be a captain of the Fire Corp?”

“The Underlyers wasn’t always a terrorist group.” Hana began, “They used to be a part of the Caratian government, a big part. In fact, they were the ones to set up Caratia. However, nine years ago, people in the city started to stray from the Underlyers ideals. They decided to make a new government and it left the Underlyers powerless. The group wasn’t dangerous until one of the leaders died and a second one submerged. The new leader concocted a plan to take back this city that they lost a few months before. I left when he started to talk about burning building to set up as bases and... other terrible things.

“Yeah, like killing people. And spare us the history lesson, we already know all of that.” Brandy said, not moving a muscle.

Venise elbowed him lightly to tell him to stop.

He looked at Venise, “What? We all were thinking it. I’m just stating the obvious. But, you see, what’s not very obvious to me is how we can trust a former Underlyer so easily.”

“Because there has been background checks done on her before she could apply for the P.A. Come on, Brandy, keep your focus on the task at hand.” Theo sighed.

Brandy had to force himself not to talk out again, he wanted so badly to leave the room and think about this on his own time, but Sussy still had some topics to discuss.

The next 30 minutes went by rather quickly. They learned that the Underlyers are most likely to burn the Central Building and The Caratian Museum, two wooden buildings, in two days. It was decided that their regiment would patrol the Central Building because they have the smaller team. Finally, the Captain ordered that everyone will be split into groups of two. Each pair will patrol either the entrance, the

back entrance, and the perimeter of the building. On that note he excused everyone for the day.

Brandy found Theo at the end of the meeting filing papers.

“Hey Theo, sorry about my sudden outburst in the meeting. It’s just that I don’t trust her at all.” He whispered.

“ It’s fine. I get how you feel, especially with what happened before. But just don’t be so vocal about it. All that matters right now is protecting those people from these fires.” Theo said with a soft smile.

Brandy bounced his head up and down in agreement. He waited for Theo to finish filing the papers and they left the room together. You could hear the thumping of the steps as the two walked in silence. It wasn’t until Brandy remembered that Theo visited his mother today that he decided to talk to his friend.

“By the way, how’s your mother?” He asked.

Theo heavily sighed and smiled, “She’s fine,” He replied, “It’s just that her medicine is getting really expensive. Me and my brother’s salary is barely enough.”

“You never told me that!” He exclaimed.

“You never asked.”

“Let me put some money in there.” Brandy insisted.

“No”

“Why not? With a third salary. You’d have more than enough money to pay for your mother’s medicine.”

“True, but I don’t want you to because you should use that money for yourself. Buy what you want. You’re already paying for our rent anyway, along with Venise’s.” Theo replied.

“I want to use my money on your mother.” Brandy urged on.

“I appreciate your concern, Brandy, but let me and Charlie handle this on our own.”

Brandy found it best to end the topic at hand. If he kept trying they would just keep arguing. Instead of talking about something else, the two decided to just walk in silence for the rest of the trip. As they turned the corner to the apartment, the first few drops of rain descend and land lightly on top of their heads.