

We have planned a little brunch gathering in our apartment, before the hustle and bustle of the day begins. We just want to make sure we remember what is important. And to Bronx and me, that is family. Lenora and Milo come over and I finally get to meet Bronx's parents. 2

The first thing his mom, Sandy, does is give me a crushing hug and call me her son's saviour. A little extreme, but she's excited, so you know, whatever. I will take hugs whenever I can get them. I feel a familiar warmth coming from my hands. I quickly let go of her, feeling a little embarrassed.

"Oh! Honey, it's alright. Bronx already warned me that your energy goes into overdrive when you're happy. I take it as a compliment," she smiles warmly at me.

"Thank you, Sandy," I smile shyly.

"No no no. You call me Mom, young lady," she gives me a faux stern look. 2

She gives me a faux stern look. 2

"A-alright, Mom," I test the word in my mouth. It is going to take some getting used to. I have never called anyone Mom before. Not even my real mother. I hope the Moon Goddess understands.

Bronx has Sandy's facial features including her green eyes but with his dad, Michael's dark hair. Michael and Bronx have the same hulking size, personality, and mannerisms. Just like Bronx, Michael acts tough but can't fool me, he's a big softie. He is obsessed with making sure everyone has enough to eat. I think I win him over when I offer him an oversized snickerdoodle.

Lenora shows off her baby bump and announces she and Milo are having a girl. Sandy and I can't stop admiring her and complimenting her pregnancy glow. Milo dotes over her, not letting her lift a finger for anything. Even when she wants a refill of her water, he jumps up and gets it. It's pretty adorable. I look forward to one day when that is Bronx and me.

Everyone is elated when we announce our engagement. Sandy and Michael nod approvingly at the ring and congratulate u

...ovingly at the ring and congratulate u
s with hugs. Michael and Milo pull Bronx t
o the living room to chat. I overhear
Bronx tell Milo the good news about Saint
and Lex but he insists that Milo should
still lead the Solstice pack run. He
deserves the honor for all the hard work h
e has put in. 2

"Does this mean we can finally crack that
bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue?" Milo begs. 6

Bronx laughs and agrees. He asks Milo to
invite James, Delilah, and Marco to join
them in his office after the solstice party.

Sandy, Lenora, and I make our way to the
kitchen to start putting food away and
talking about the details of the special
day Bronx and I shared yesterday.

We say our goodbyes and confirm the
timing to meet up for the party later.

Once everyone leaves Bronx tells me he
has a gift for me even though we agreed
not to exchange gifts. He insists I need it
after our conversation about starting a
bakery. I unwrap the small box to find a
framed sheet of paper. It's a recipe for a
baguette written in French, but next to it i
s another piece of paper with the English
translation. The frame is ornate, gold.

translation. The frame is ornate, gold.

"Baguette?" I cock my head as I look at the recipe.

"Alpha Martin's in-laws own a bakery. The recipe has been in their family for generations and they wanted you to have it. Cason translated it for me. I haven't had a good time to give it to you, but after yesterday, it seems like the right time."

"Thank you so much, Sweetheart. It's perfect," I smile at such a thoughtful gift, "Can we contact them tomorrow to thank them?"

"Of course, Baby" he says as he kisses the top of my head.

...

Bronx told me Solstice is a formal party, but Lenora had taken the liberty of buying a dress for me. She was convinced I wouldn't want to spend the money on the perfect dress. She isn't wrong. I still don't have a job, after all. I have no money for a fancy dress. 2

She wants it to be a surprise, so I can't say no. So an hour before the party, she brings the dress bag to the apartment,

brings the dress bag to the apartment, along with a shoe box and takes it to the closet. I'm standing in the closet with her and Delilah looking at the bag, dreading what is inside. The side of the black bag says Givenchy in large white lettering. She smiles while she unzips the bag.

She pulls the bag back to reveal a shimmering silver dress. The color matches my hair. It is a floor-length style with spaghetti straps and a completely open back.

"Lenora, everyone is going to see my scars," I feel a little self-conscious as I look at the dress. Delilah has already pinned my hair into an updo. I don't mind if people close to me see my scars, but the whole pack?

"Yes. It is time to show the real you, Kas. I'm telling you, people won't even notice the scars when they see how beautiful the dress is on you," Delilah reassures me, "They all already love you. When they see your scars, they are going to respect you even more. I promise." ①

"You're going to look amazing!" Lex says in my mind, "I am so happy you finally get to look as beautiful on the outside as

...to look as beautiful on the outside as you are in inside."

I'm so happy to have her back. She always knows just what to say.

"All right. I trust you and Lex likes the dress too. Let me finish putting my makeup on, then you can help me get into the dress."

Lenora helps me touch up my makeup and into the dress. She's right. The dress fits me like a glove. It shows off my curves and I have never felt more beautiful. I turn in the mirror to catch a glimpse of the back. The keloid scars were evident, but the dress helps distract from them. Oh also, Delilah had been right, Bronx's tattoos have almost completely faded. But he decided to wait until they were completely gone before he gets new ones, just in case there is still some sort of lingering connection from the healing.

I look through the mirror and see Bronx walk past the closet before he stops and backs up to get another look at me.

"You-you're gonna wear that, Baby?" His eyes are wide as he looks me up and

down, then turns to Lenora, "Leni, no. Find another dress."

"Uhh, Bronx...yes," Lenora retorts. She stands up from the bench and puts her hands on her hips, "And you are not going to stop her. And not only are you not going to stop her, you're not going to be jealous, either. You're going to be proud and show off your gorgeous mate. Do you understand me?"

Bronx looks like he wants to start an argument with his sister, but he knows now is not the right time.

"Fine, Lenora. But from now on, I get a say," he counters.

"Over my dead body," she crosses her arms over her chest.

There is a very awkward moment of a showdown between the two of them before Bronx growls and huffs off to the bathroom to finish getting ready.

The party is a blast. We get to watch the kids open gifts and Bronx, Milo, and Reggie give speeches thanking all the

Peggie give speeches thanking all the pack members for their hard work and dedication over the past year. They even hand out bonuses to the omegas who work in the packhouse. After we eat, we dance like there was no tomorrow.

The party ends close to midnight with Milo leading the pack run. I can tell Bronx is disappointed but he understands it's necessary. We hold back and go to his office, biding the time with kisses and soft touches until the pack gets back. Milo comes in with Lenora, James, and Delilah.

Bronx opens the bottle of Johnnie Walker, pours it into glasses, and hands it out to everyone except Lenora and me. She obviously can't drink, I have no interest in it. 2

If you ask me, it smells kind of gross, but the guys don't seem to mind. We sit around, talking and laughing until early morning before we call it a night and go to bed.

Bronx seems way drunker than he should be for the amount of alcohol he drank, but I notch it up to him not drinking since we got back from France and only having part of a liver. 2

part of a liver. 2

I go to the bathroom to freshen up, carefully putting the dress back on the hanger, pulling all the pins out of my hair, and washing all my makeup off. When I get back, I find Bronx face-planted across the bed, not leaving room for me.

I suddenly feel the sensation of deja vu as the scent of fire wafts to my nose.

No no no no no!!!!



Comments



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I look around and see the orange glow of fire in the living room. I run to the bedroom door and look around to find the room is engulfed in flames. The fake tree Ashley had set up for Winter Solstice looks like it's melting, causing noxious fumes amid the rest of the smoke. Some of the branches are starting to catch fire. I can hear people in the hallway screaming.

Oh my Goddess. We have to get out of here!

I run back into the room yelling and coughing, "Bronx! Wake up! We have to get out!"

I shake him as hard as I can but he doesn't budge. His skin is cold and he looks pale, even though the room is getting hotter by the second. I focus past the smell of fire. He smells like whiskey and wolfsbane. He's been poisoned!

"Oh shit, oh shit. What should I do?"

"Don't panic, Kas. You're a healer, you can save him. We learned about this. Come on!" I hear Lex call out.

Come on!" I hear Lex call out.

"Lex, are you strong enough? Can you help me?"

"I can try Kas. Go ahead. Let's save our mate. But hurry, we have to get out of here!" she sounds confident. I wonder if it is for my benefit or if she really feels that way.

I fight back tears of panic as I strain to roll Bronx over on his back. Once he is prone, I do my best to take a breath. Then I place one hand on Bronx's chest and one on his forehead and let the breath out. The familiar healing warmth fills my hands as energy flows through me. I feel the poison releasing from his body, being absorbed into mine, and starting to dissipate but not faster than I'm absorbing it. I feel the numbing tingles of the poison in my fingertips but he still isn't waking up. Am I too late? Please Moon Goddess, don't let me be too late. 2

I put my hands on him again, trying to hold back tears. Now is not the time to break down, Kas. Keep your shit together!
"BRONX! Wake UP!"

I send a surge of energy through his body. His skin is still cold and pale. I lean my

His skin is still cold and pale, I lean my face against his chest. He's not breathing.

"No no no no no - this is not happening! Not today! No! Lex, I need you to give me every ounce you can. See if you can connect with Saint. We need everything right now!"

"Alright, Kas. Try again. I'm concentrating all my energy."

I put my hands on him one more time. The fire is burning my lungs now. I feel the healing warmth but also the glow of my spirit opening up further than I think it should. I can feel the heat of the fire getting closer, making me start to sweat. The momentary lapse of concentration makes me release too much energy at once and accidentally burn his chest slightly.

Suddenly, Bronx sits up with a gasp, gulping the tainted air and coughing as if he had been underwater too long.

"Bronx, we have to go! There's a fire!" I feel drained but Milo and James were also drinking from the bottle, I have to get to them also or they will meet a worse fate.

"We have to get to Milo and James, Bronx. That whiskey was poisoned. They're going to die!" I choke.

Bronx scoops me up in his arms and puts my blanket over my head. He sprints out of the apartment. I can hear people running and smoke alarms going off. In the distance, I can hear sirens. 2

I hear Lenora crying, "He won't wake up. Something's wrong."

Bronx finally lifts the blanket off of me. Milo is laying on a sofa. Just like Bronx was, he is pale and lifeless.

Just like Bronx, I put one hand on Milo's chest and one on his forehead.

"Please save him! Please!" Lenora sobs behind me. I hear Reggie and Ashley pulling her out into the hall, while I try to save Milo. He doesn't have as much poison in his system as Bronx did. I feel it spreading through my body, building up inside me. It seems like forever and the flames are making me choke and cough but he finally sits up, gasping for a fresh breath that isn't available.

breath that isn't available.

Just then, firefighters come bursting into the room in full gear. They help Bronx carry Milo and they pick me up, rushing all of us outside into the snowy night. 1

Once we are safely outside, Bronx wraps his arms around me. I can still feel the poison in my system, but it is fading from the surface and settling deep inside me, making me feel nauseous. 1

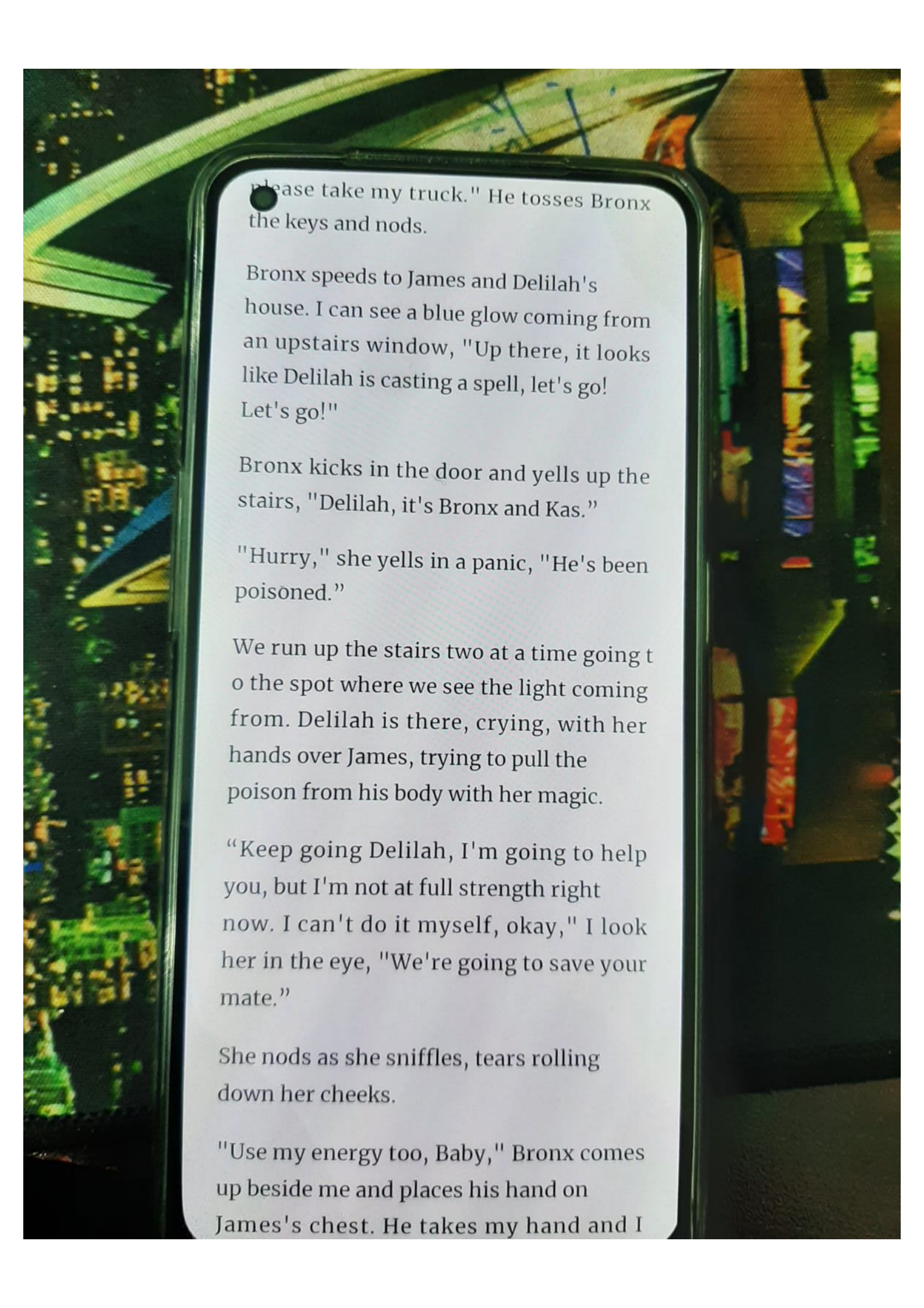
"Bronx, I have to find James! He and Delilah were drinking that whiskey too!"

"Baby, his house is over a mile away. Can you shift? Lex can get there quicker."

"Kas, I can't shift. I am so sorry! I'm so weak from fighting off all the poison already. I can give you my energy if you get to him on time, but not if I shift first. That will just make me weaker," she cries in my mind.

I feel tears welling up, "Lex isn't strong enough, Bronx, I've absorbed all that wolfsbane from you and Milo. If I shift, I won't have the energy to heal James."

The fire chief is standing close by and overhears us, "Alpha Regent Bronx, please take my truck." He tosses Bronx



"Please take my truck." He tosses Bronx the keys and nods.

Bronx speeds to James and Delilah's house. I can see a blue glow coming from an upstairs window, "Up there, it looks like Delilah is casting a spell, let's go! Let's go!"

Bronx kicks in the door and yells up the stairs, "Delilah, it's Bronx and Kas."

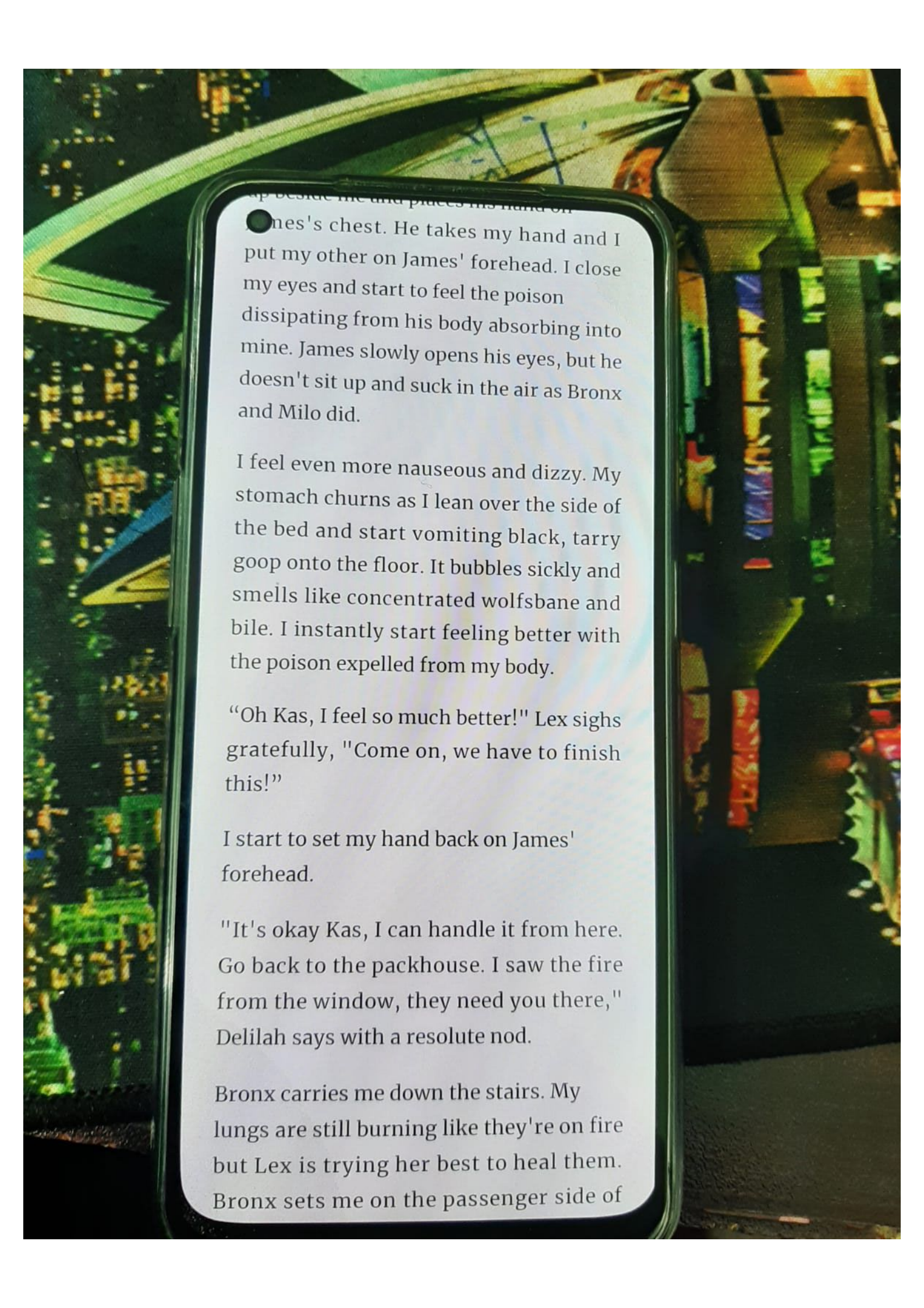
"Hurry," she yells in a panic, "He's been poisoned."

We run up the stairs two at a time going to the spot where we see the light coming from. Delilah is there, crying, with her hands over James, trying to pull the poison from his body with her magic.

"Keep going Delilah, I'm going to help you, but I'm not at full strength right now. I can't do it myself, okay," I look her in the eye, "We're going to save your mate."

She nods as she sniffles, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Use my energy too, Baby," Bronx comes up beside me and places his hand on James's chest. He takes my hand and I



ap beside me and places his hand on
James's chest. He takes my hand and I
put my other on James' forehead. I close
my eyes and start to feel the poison
dissipating from his body absorbing into
mine. James slowly opens his eyes, but he
doesn't sit up and suck in the air as Bronx
and Milo did.

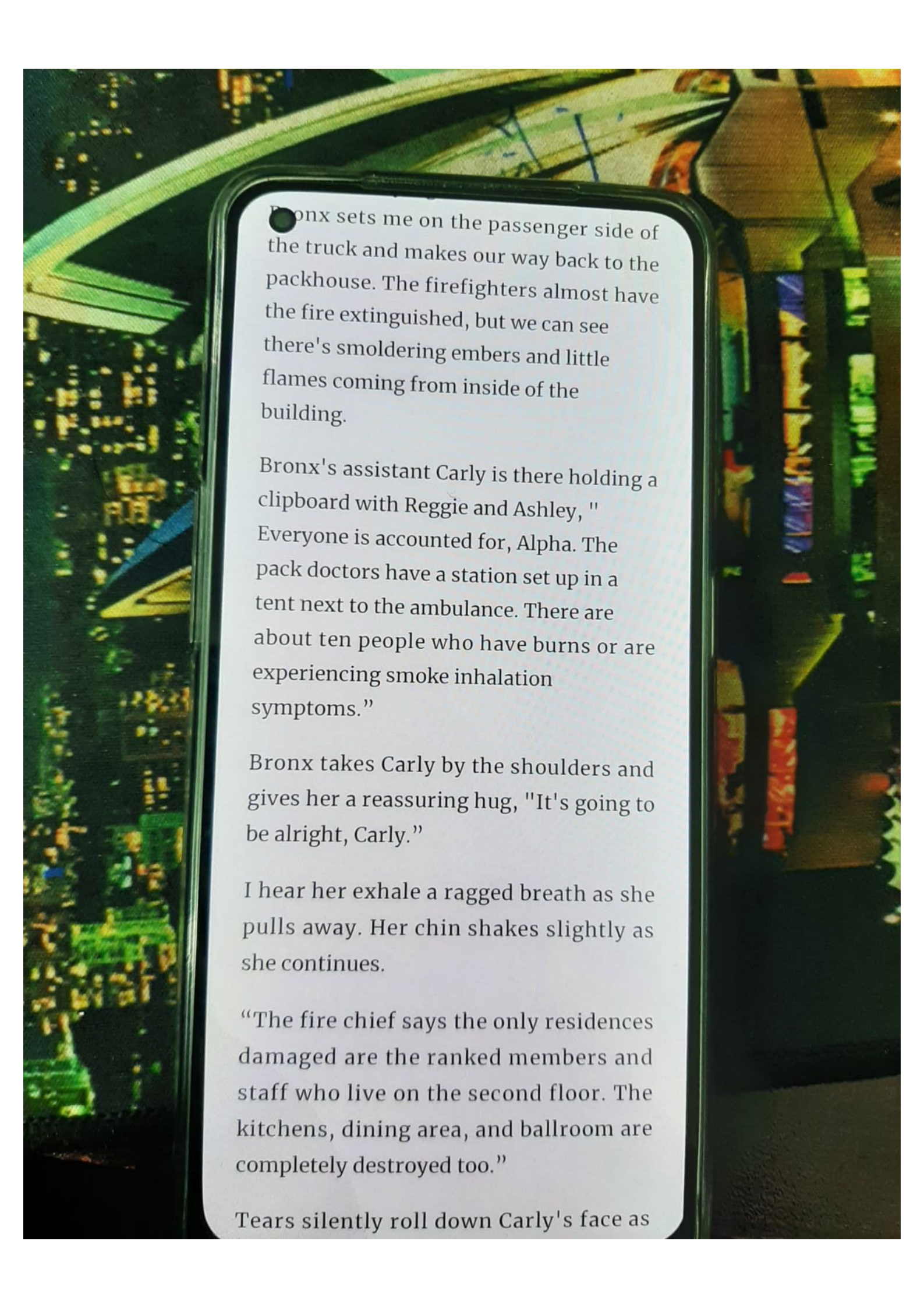
I feel even more nauseous and dizzy. My
stomach churns as I lean over the side of
the bed and start vomiting black, tarry
goop onto the floor. It bubbles sickly and
smells like concentrated wolfsbane and
bile. I instantly start feeling better with
the poison expelled from my body.

"Oh Kas, I feel so much better!" Lex sighs
gratefully, "Come on, we have to finish
this!"

I start to set my hand back on James'
forehead.

"It's okay Kas, I can handle it from here.
Go back to the packhouse. I saw the fire
from the window, they need you there,"
Delilah says with a resolute nod.

Bronx carries me down the stairs. My
lungs are still burning like they're on fire
but Lex is trying her best to heal them.
Bronx sets me on the passenger side of

A night scene of a fire at a building. Firefighters in red gear are visible near a fire truck. The building is dark with some lights on. The scene is illuminated by the fire and emergency lights.

Bronx sets me on the passenger side of the truck and makes our way back to the packhouse. The firefighters almost have the fire extinguished, but we can see there's smoldering embers and little flames coming from inside of the building.

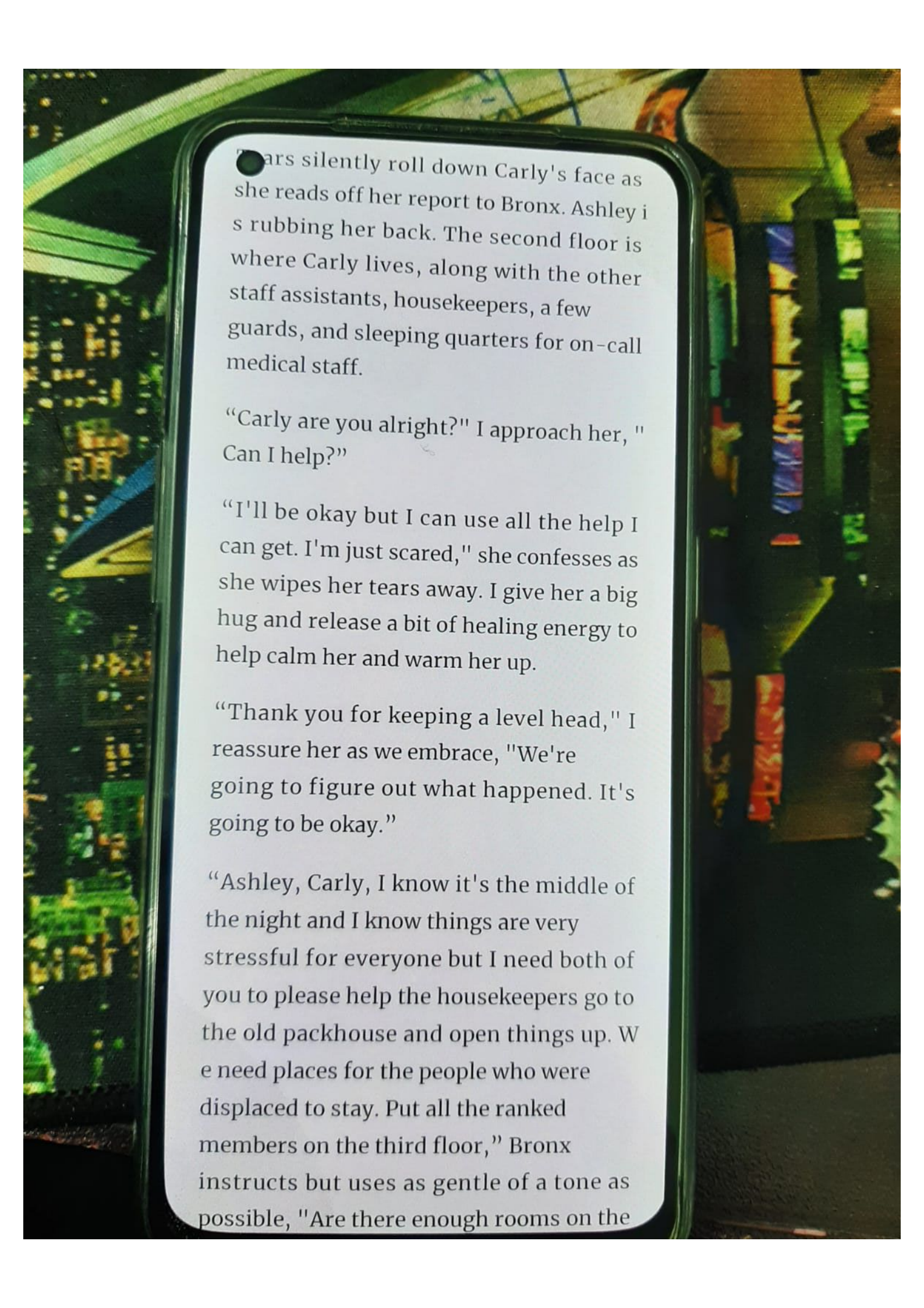
Bronx's assistant Carly is there holding a clipboard with Reggie and Ashley, "Everyone is accounted for, Alpha. The pack doctors have a station set up in a tent next to the ambulance. There are about ten people who have burns or are experiencing smoke inhalation symptoms."

Bronx takes Carly by the shoulders and gives her a reassuring hug, "It's going to be alright, Carly."

I hear her exhale a ragged breath as she pulls away. Her chin shakes slightly as she continues.

"The fire chief says the only residences damaged are the ranked members and staff who live on the second floor. The kitchens, dining area, and ballroom are completely destroyed too."

Tears silently roll down Carly's face as



Tears silently roll down Carly's face as she reads off her report to Bronx. Ashley is rubbing her back. The second floor is where Carly lives, along with the other staff assistants, housekeepers, a few guards, and sleeping quarters for on-call medical staff.

"Carly are you alright?" I approach her, "Can I help?"

"I'll be okay but I can use all the help I can get. I'm just scared," she confesses as she wipes her tears away. I give her a big hug and release a bit of healing energy to help calm her and warm her up.

"Thank you for keeping a level head," I reassure her as we embrace, "We're going to figure out what happened. It's going to be okay."

"Ashley, Carly, I know it's the middle of the night and I know things are very stressful for everyone but I need both of you to please help the housekeepers go to the old packhouse and open things up. We need places for the people who were displaced to stay. Put all the ranked members on the third floor," Bronx instructs but uses as gentle of a tone as possible, "Are there enough rooms on the

ossible, "Are there enough rooms on the second floor for all the staff that have been displaced?"

Carly looks down at the clipboard and sniffs back tears, "Yes, sir, I believe so."

"Okay, ladies go do your thing. Make it happen. I'll find you to get the list of everyone you place. Beta Milo and I can check on them when we're finished here. Reggie, you're with me."

"Yes, Alpha," the girls say in unison before they walk away.

"Kas, how do you feel, Baby?" Bronx looks at me carefully as he takes my hand. He is trying to hide his worry, but I can feel it coming off of him.

"I'm okay. Whatever came up at James and Delilah's house was holding me back, but I feel better now," I reassure him.

"Alright, do you think you can manage helping the people getting medical attention? I am sure the doctors could use as much help as they can get."

"Of course," I nod, looking over at the tent. He leans down and gives me a quick kiss and sends me on my way.