

Still Standing

A holiday short in the Ihy Saga universe.

By Bill Ricardi

For more information on 'Rhythm', 'Cadence', and 'The Ihy Saga', visit the author's website at: <https://www.billricardi.com>

Warning: *The Ihy Saga universe is intended for older young adults, and adults who can handle scenes of violence and sexuality. If you or your young adult prefer tamer fare, you should stop reading this right now.*

Playlist: *All books and short stories in the Ihy Saga universe reference real life music. The story experience is enhanced if you listen to the music before or during the reading of the appropriate scenes.*

The song featured in this story is 'I'm Still Standing' by Elton John. Please give patronage to the artist's official YouTube page or other digital music platform.

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There are only a few places in America with honest to goodness 24 hour bars. New York City has the likes of *Finch's*, with its proper, almost sterile atmosphere. Las Vegas has rebranded chain establishments such as *West Sands*, sporting all of the commercial glitz that one might expect in a gambling town. Los Angeles has sleepy little watering holes like *Japan Donuts*, catering to everyone from the homeless who wandered in after a day of panhandling, to A-List celebrities who rolled in after a 4 AM shoot.

Auntie Cobra's was nothing like any of those other joints. Then again, New Orleans wasn't like any of those other cities.

The air inside of the establishment was leathery-sweet. The unique odor was the result of cigar smoke trailed in from the patio, mixed with the scent of spilled butterscotch bourbon behind the bar. The southern climate added to that thick, heavy atmosphere. Everything in the bar had to survive the city's punishing humidity. *Auntie Cobra's* crimson upholstery was stiff, unforgiving. Not unlike much of her clientele.

The east wall was lined with horseshoe shaped booths, most of which were occupied with small groups of rowdy young men looking for some late night action. Tables in the center of the bar were sparse, vastly unoccupied. The stained pinewood bar on the west wall was still fairly popular at 2 AM. Its tall wooden stools attracted those seeking a kind of communal solitude. New Orleans was a great place to feel completely alone in a crowd.

It wasn't too unusual to spot an early morning drinker talking to himself at the bar. *Auntie Cobra's* was hardly the only establishment to serve the transient, the mentally touched, or the regretful. Bo was all of these things and none of these things at the same time.

Even though he lacked a permanent address and significant means, Bo dressed well. In the right lighting, he could pass for a modern southern gentleman. He wore a black dress shirt under a camel coat that hung just past his hips. Tan trousers were held in place by an heirloom black alligator belt. Brown socks and loafers completed the package.

But the 19 year old inside of these clothes wasn't your typical gent. His tan hands were rough from a life of hard labour. His head was shaved nearly bald, the black stubble of regrowth just starting to make an impact. Small, white spiral scars dotted Bo's cheeks and forehead, the result of something fragile and white-hot shattering in his face. Other than a weathered gold chain hanging around his neck, Bo carried no jewellery, no precious stones, not even a watch. Besides his scratched up mobile phone, the entirety of his worldly wealth was contained within the worn brown leather wallet in his front right pocket: A few crisp twenties, a fake ID that claimed he was 22, and the key to a safety deposit box somewhere in Atlanta, Georgia.

As to why Bo talked to himself... that was a more complex subject.

Luckily, he wasn't the only person at the bar doing a little bit of muttering. Three stools to Bo's right was a rather upset looking woman. The bartender had called her 'Ally'. Ally looked like she had just come from a party, if the glitter covering her black midi dress was any

indication. Still, she didn't seem like much of a party girl. Her dark claret jeggings and black flats pointed towards 'sensible', bordering on conservative. Ally's short cropped, impeccably groomed blonde hair was reminiscent of an 80's news anchorwoman. Not even the glitter dared to break the aesthetic.

The reason that Ally was talking to herself was evident to anyone paying attention. At one of the horseshoe tables behind her, a small group of men were talking loudly, and the subject of their conversation was quite clearly her. They were covering topics that ranged from her social awkwardness, to her style of dress, to her aptitude in bed. The last topic was brought up loudly and frequently by a little black haired twerp in a leather jacket and blue jeans: Ally's ex-boyfriend. 'Ex' because he refused to stand by her after a seemingly minor and stupid social media incident. At least that's what Bo had gathered from his subtle eavesdropping over the course of the last hour.

Though her ears and cheeks bore an angry, embarrassed blush, Ally sat stoically through the verbal assault. The woman refused to simply admit defeat and slink out. As non-confrontational as she seemed to be, Ally had told the bartender that she was going to finish her Pimm's Cup before walking out of the bar with her head held high.

'Mind your own business, son. Not every battle is yours.'

Bo quickly shifted his gaze away from the upset woman to his right, instead focusing on his half finished mug of beer. The voice in the young man's head wasn't unexpected. He had lived with it for the past three years. It was the driving, defining measure of his entire existence.

'I know pops. I won't do anything stupid.'

Turns out, Bo hadn't been talking to himself after all. There was an entity inside of him; one that kept him alive and sane in a world that seemed to find joy in his suffering.

Bo's condition was best described by the message of a nameless Internet prophet, one that intoned these sacred words at the turn of the millennium:

"In the era of CCTV, when every phone was a camera and every child was born to doubt, the world had thought that the age of miracles had passed.

They were wrong.

Ihy, the Egyptian god of sex and music, appeared to the world. He offered a boon to those who would share their body with the soul of one of his 72 children: As long as music was playing, a Host was fueled with supernatural power.

The age of miracles has just begun.

Ihy is calling you."

Of course, that prophet hadn't been telling both sides of the story. Bo was visited by Ihy around three years ago. The old god didn't sugar coat things. He told Bo that becoming a Host was incredibly dangerous, explaining in great detail how Hosts were magnets for violence and bigotry. Ihy warned Bo that Rashida was one of his eldest sons, a dominating mental presence. Rashida had needs, both carnal and metaphysical. He would not be denied these experiences of the flesh and of the spirit. Once the young man said yes, there would be no going back to a 'normal' life in any sense of the word.

The voice inside of Bo snapped him out of his reverie. ***'Do you ever regret saying yes, lad?'***

Bo snorted aloud. He sipped his beer as he mentally replied to the god-son inside of him, *'I was a kid locked in a basement sweatshop, pops. Making instruments for tourists and rich assholes. If I hadn't said yes, I would have aged out. After I was more trouble than I was worth, they would have gotten rid of me. My body would probably be floating in the Gulf of Mexico by now.'*

Rashida pressed, ***'But do you regret-'***

Bo quickly reassured the god-son, *'No. I regret a lot of things. But not that.'*

The Host could feel Rashida's relief and satisfaction. This kind of question rarely came up, but both of them knew: The arrangement had been good for them. Rashida was the father that Bo never had. The Host put up with being called 'my boy' and 'my son' because it was true, at least in every way that mattered.

Rashida thought, ***'Good. Now I know you're tipsy and we're experiencing the spirit of the season and all that, but be careful. You've been low-key vocalizing your thoughts. No need to mutter out loud, I can hear you just fine in here.'***

Bo nodded somberly. He went back to nursing his beer, enjoying the warmth gathering in his chest and belly.

Ally grit her teeth as the next drunken put-down floated across the bar.

"I just couldn't put up with her social awkwardness any more. I mean, let's be real: She isn't hot enough to be that clueless."

The chorus of laughter that followed her ex's loud observation made Ally want to curl up and die. There was a kernel of truth to what Chad was saying of course. But what he branded as 'social awkwardness', Ally saw as conviction of character.

The whole mess started when Chad's friends started using social media to ostracise and plot against a perfectly harmless shop owner. The old man had objected to their use of foul language in front of families with young children, eventually refusing them service and kicking them out of his store. Ally told them that the man was within his rights, and that they should leave him alone. This apparently forced Chad into the 'impossible' position of taking sides. And it was no mystery which side he chose.

"...I mean, she **really** likes old men!"

Ally glanced up at the bartender, Bruce. He was one of the few friends that she had left after this whole fiasco. She said, "Half a Pimm's Cup left. Dignity. This is all about dignity."

The slim, auburn haired man shook his head slowly. He said, "Ain't about that, cherie. Listen, I'll call you a cab. Ten minutes or so. OK?"

She tried to sound nonchalant as she replied, "Sure. I mean, no rush. Whatever."

"Mo chagren, Ally."

As Bruce voiced his sincere apology for her situation, Ally briefly wondered why she never asked Bruce out. He was cute, in shape, and had that devastating Cajun accent. Then she remembered; he was **super** gay. Just her luck.

While Bruce was calling her a cab, Ally cast a clandestine glance to her left. The quiet young guy was still there, though he had stopped muttering to himself. She was getting an interesting vibe off of the well dressed mystery man. Every beer that he had ordered was with a 'please'. He didn't once crack a smile at the jibes coming from the booth on the far side of the room. If anything, they seemed to irritate him.

"Sorry about the racket they're making. I'm afraid it's my fault."

The mystery man looked up sharply, clearly surprised that Ally had spoken to him. His brown eyes flitted over her, focusing on her hands and midsection first. It was the kind of assessment that she had seen from military personnel when she was growing up.

He offered Ally a tight smile before replying, "No it isn't. Nobody deserves that."

Ally returned the smile, "I'm Ally, if you hadn't gotten that from their shouting."

"Bo."

She tilted her head at the sound of that unusual name. Then she tried it out for herself, "Bo. Short for Beauregard?"

Bo blinked owlishly at Ally. His response was frank, "Oh god, I hope not."

Ally couldn't help but laugh, just a little bit. She pressed, "But you aren't sure?"

Bo shook his head, "Yeah, I dunno. My parents weren't around when I was growing up, so... it was always just Bo as far as I know."

"It could be Bojangles."

"It frightens me that there's a non-zero percent chance of that being true."

Ally took another sip of Pimm's. Then she said, "Maybe it's French. Beau means 'handsome' in French."

Bo replied, without missing a beat, "Oh, well it must be that."

Before Ally could respond to Bo's repartee, Bruce accidentally tipped over a small pile of coasters. They went tumbling off the side of the bar in a cascade of blue and red, landing in between Bo and Ally. Instinctively, Bo hopped off of his tall stool and crouched to pick them up.

As Ally watched the young man gather the cardboard disks, she made a mental assessment. *'Funny **and** thoughtful.'*

'I'm not sure we should be trying to pick her up, son. That might cause a ruckus.'

Bo's mental reply to the god-son was defensive, *'Hey I'm just being nice. I'm being nice! Doesn't mean I'm just going to hop into bed with her.'*

Rashida's snort seemed to reverberate within the confines of Bo's mind, ***'Yeah right. There are less risky targets you know. Four stools down, there's a brunette who's been trying to catch your eye.'***

The young man thought, *'That's fine pops, if that's what you want. I can try to talk her up. I just thought that Ally here could use a friend tonight, given what she's been through.'* Bo knew that Rashida's link to the physical plane was rooted in the human experience. Without regular social and carnal interaction, a child of Ihy would eventually separate from their Host and fade away.

'Listen, I'm not opposed. And sure, I could use a little action to 'recharge'. Just wait until her cab comes and make your move outside.'

As Bo stacked the coasters and started to get back to his feet, he thought, *'Maybe I will.'*

"What the *fuck* is that?!"

The exclamation was loud enough to cut through the din of other conversations taking place throughout *Auntie Cobra's*. Though most of the other patrons were ignoring the outburst, Bo had a sudden sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

The gold chain had slipped out of the front of Bo's shirt while he was retrieving fallen coasters. Hanging upon it was Rashida's one conceit: A golden ankh. It was the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol for 'life'. But it had also become a symbol of the Church of Ihy in the modern age.

As Bo handed the coasters back to Bruce, he absently used his off hand to tuck the necklace back under his shirt. But the damage had been done. A group of locals at one of the horseshoe booths across the room had taken notice. They were nudging each other and eyeing Bo.

'Shit. Let's get out of here, boy.'

Bo reached for his wallet. He murmured to Ally, "Hey it was nice meeting you. I need to go. Is there a back exit?"

It was Bruce who answered, "Yeah, best ro-day quick, friend. Door past the cahbins, alarm's off."

Bo managed to correctly identify the Cajun slang for 'bathrooms'. He handed the man a crisp 20 before turning to address the slightly confused and now pouting Ally. "I'm sorry. Have a better night."

And with that, Bo tucked his hands into his pockets. Head down, the young man walked into the hallway that led to the bathrooms. Without breaking stride, he pushed the bar on the emergency exit and slipped out the back.

Ally stared at Bo's back as her quarry made an escape. She sighed and made a mental list of all of the good qualities that the mystery man displayed in the last five minutes: The state of his hands meant that he was clearly hard working. He had been polite to a fault. Bo's tan trousers did nothing to hide what a nice ass he had. He was clearly in shape. Clever, quick witted. Bo was everything that her drunken, slur-spouting ex was not.

"Give me that twenty Bruce, I need to extract a fingerprint."

The bartender offered Ally a gentle, sad smile, "He's not fer you cher. Don't boude all night. That boy's too dangerous."

That's when Ally noticed the half dozen yokels throwing money onto their table and rushing towards the back. She frowned and asked, "What in the hell did he do?"

Bruce shook his head. "Prays to the sun, that one. Them boys don't like his gree."

Ally knew that some people down here were funny about religion. To them, everything from Voodoo to Christianity was fine. But stray outside that range, and you're asking for trouble. She stared at the emergency exit as it swung shut again behind the locals. Ally murmured, "He's smart, and he had a head start. He'll be fine."

'I told you we should have taken a right.'

'You did no such thing pops! It's alright, we'll just double back. I'm still not getting any signal here.'

Bo jogged back up the dimly lit dead end alley, holding his phone out in front of him to see if he could get enough of a signal to call a cab. The back door of the bar was just up ahead, so they could take the next sharp left to get back to the street.

For better or for worse, Bo's cellphone acted like a canary in a coal mine. As his hand broke the plane of the turn that they would need to take, a two by four whistled through the air. The wooden board devastated Bo's phone and sent it flying from his numb hand. The Host watched in shock as the fragile electronic device hit the far brick wall and shattered into a million pieces.

Bo hopped back and said the first thing that came to mind, "Ow! What the hell?!"

Slowly, the half dozen locals made their way around the corner. Only the brutish leader was armed, but the posture of the others indicated their desire to throw down.

Rashida's next statement hit Bo like a bucket of ice water, ***'Son. That phone was our music.'***

Panic started to take hold of Bo. The old spirit was right. Their MP3's were on that phone. Without music, the Host couldn't tap into his supernatural powers.

'De-escalate.'

Bo held up both hands, "H-hey guys. I don't have much money, but it's all yours. I just want to get home."

The leader pointed his two by four at Bo's chest as he said, "Yer one of them ragheads."

Bo did his best to look confused. He said, "A what? Listen, I don't know what that is, but whatever I did, I didn't mean to piss you off."

One of the smaller, angrier men in the back shouted, "Bullshit! I saw the warped cross."

Rashida's mental commentary wasn't helping matters, ***'It's called an ankh, shit for brains.'***

Ignoring his partner for the moment, Bo maintained the act. He pulled out his gold chain and let the ankh hang outside of his shirt. "What, this? I picked it up at a pawn shop. You can have it if you want, it's probably worth something."

The leader took a step forward, and the rest followed suit. Bo started to backpedal, slowly.

"Don't worry. We'll take whatever we like when we're done with ya, cultist fuck."

Rashida assessed the odds. His mental tone was grim. ***'Six on one. No music. Your Judo training isn't going to help us much here, my boy. We're gonna take a beating.'***

Bo's reply was uncertain. He thought, *'Do you think they'll stop at just a beating, pops?'*

There was no reply from Rashida as the mob closed in.

Inside, Ally began to get her things together. She felt that she had proved her point: Ally would not be bullied or shamed by Chad and his friends. She had weathered the worst that he had to dish out and-

"I feel real sorry for the next guy. It'll be like throwing a pencil down a train tunnel."

Something inside of Ally snapped. She wasn't easily moved to violence, but the temptation to walk across the room and brain Chad with a beer bottle was growing. She stood, gripping the edge of the bar tightly, knuckles white with the effort.

A chorus of 'oohhhs' and 'ahhhs' came from her ex's table, seeing that Chad's last insult had landed a palpable blow. They waited for the inevitable storm out.

Instead, Ally walked over to the old jukebox at the far end of the bar.

Maybe it was the last Pimm's that did it. Or perhaps all of the little digs that had accumulated throughout the night had finally struck a core of iron. Whatever the reason, the normally reserved Ally felt that a more demonstrable display was in order.

The first three chords of Elton John's *'I'm Still Standing'* echoed through *Auntie Cobra's* main room. There was a vague rumble of protest from some of the patrons. The jukebox was normally 'off limits' after midnight, an unwritten but sacred rule.

But rules meant nothing to Ally in the heat of the moment. When one of the sympathetic but puzzled bouncers walked over to Ally to see what was going on, the blonde bombshell

turned to face him and started to dance. The tall man watched in disbelief as the 'shy' woman looked him right in the eye and started to lewdly gyrate.

The bouncer looked to Bruce for guidance. The bartender just threw his arms in the air, helplessly. By the time the second verse was underway, the bouncer had surrendered to Ally's whims. He was dancing with her, possessing less talent but just as much enthusiasm. The woman wore a genuine smile, taking joy in the act of spreading some of her glitter over to him with every bump and grind.

This turn of events stunned Chad and his crew into silence. Their 'victim' was displaying a degree of defiance that they weren't used to.

Bo barely managed to raise his left arm to partially block the right hook that sailed at his temple. It meant that his ribs were exposed, and the next drunken brawler took full advantage. Even with Rashida's boon of natural toughness, the pain flashed through Bo's body like a bolt of lightning. He staggered back against the alley's brick wall, just barely having the presence of mind to duck when the two by four whistled in.

Rashida didn't have a lot of helpful input. They were in trouble, both of them knew it. Their attackers hadn't been satisfied with bruising and tripping up Bo. They were doubling down and going for serious injury. Or worse.

Bo tried to push away from the wall and pivot, but all he managed to do was catch a front kick straight to the gut. He rolled and ended up on his back, looking up at the slow, stalking approach of his attackers. At least the two smallest ones were guarding the entrance to the alley and the bar. A dubious blessing, as the four other thugs were clearly more than enough to beat Bo down.

Then, the upbeat tempo of '*I'm Still Standing*' flooded into the alley.

Even their attackers paused in confusion. *Auntie Cobra's* didn't normally have music this late into the night. Nevertheless, Ally's song selection poured through the vents and the windows that had been left ajar.

Bo thought, '*What in all the hells...*'

Rashida was just as mystified. He replied, '***I'm not sure son. But I think we just got an early Christmas present.***'

'*You can use this?*'

'***Hell yes, boy.***'

That was all Bo needed to hear. His adrenaline surged as Rashida latched on to the distant melody. By the time their attackers turned back towards Bo, he was empowered. The young man *kipped up* to his feet. This involved shifting his weight back to his shoulders, before rolling forward and uncoiling his body. It hurt. But he was able to **use** the pain of his bruised body, rather than succumb to it. He raised a palm and then twitched his fingers, silently urging the thugs to come at him.

The most inebriated of their attackers was clearly offended by Bo's gesture of defiance. He leaped at Bo, arm uncoiling in a feral right hook as he closed the distance.

Bo drew upon not only his own modern Judo training, but upon Rashida's warrior pedigree. The ancient god-son had spent dozens of lives as a wrestler, a boxer, and a soldier. Rashida had seen this kind of clumsy, reckless attack a thousand times. Bo's *O Goshi* was perfectly timed. He pivoted and ducked the flying punch, grabbing his attacker's outstretched arm to add even more momentum. The assailant tumbled over Bo's hip, flying and skidding some fifteen feet down the alley before coming to a stop.

The thugs gawked at the Host's display of supernatural strength and agility. Bo's tongue flicked out to taste the trickle of blood falling from his split lip.

Then the three rushed in to test Bo's much-improved combat prowess. His blocks were crisp now, and he was mostly able to keep pace with his attackers. Once again, a front kick managed to slip through the young man's defenses, causing him to stagger back.

But this time he remained standing.

By the start of the next verse, Ally was lost in the music. 'Shameless' was a good word for her state of mind. The buzz of alcohol and the sweet taste of revenge fueled her dirty dancing. Chad and his boys had started objecting to her display. Quite vocally. The second bouncer had to abandon his post next to the front door. He walked over to Chad's table and told the group to settle down. They didn't take that well.

At some point, the broad strap of Ally's black midi dress had slipped from her left shoulder. It was no surprise really; she was covered in a fine sheen of sweat. Given her activities, modesty wasn't her top priority anyway.

Ally pouted when 'her' bouncer excused himself. The man had noticed that his buddy was being screamed at by Chad's friends, way over on the other side of the bar. As the now-beglitteered bouncer headed over to provide backup, Ally heard a happy little shout from off to her right. The brunette who had been sitting at the bar ran over to join Ally, immediately getting into it. The eager young woman seemed to have boundless energy. It was Ally's assessment that she was there to party.

There was a smattering of laughter and cheering from the far corners of *Auntie Cobra's*. Behind the bar, Bruce was just shaking his head. He took a couple of orders from bemused patrons, and then started to mix up the appropriate cocktails. He managed to keep one eye on the action, as Ally and her new friend lost all inhibition and performed their impromptu revenge dance with gusto.

The two by four shattered against Bo's raised wrist. He snarled at the sensation of splinters entering his arm. But it was better than getting his skull caved in.

By the second refrain, Host and god-son had made their mark. Once the pair absorbed the gist of the lyrics, they incorporated the song's natural rhythm into their combat plan. Bo focused on turning his attackers' own power against them, remaining nimble until one of them lunged or overextended. Then the bigots went flying.

An artful *Tomoe Nage* allowed Bo to briefly sacrifice his footing to roll onto his back and send one of the drunks over his prone body. Using his foot as a lever, the young man propelled his assailant into a rusty iron barrel. That one didn't get up for some time.

Rashida was doing his part as well. On the triple beat of each crooned refrain, Bo felt his muscles surge. Defense morphed into attack, and three crushing blows impacted with the unprepared body of a yokel. When one of the two fresh 'guards' left his post to join the fray, he received a brutal sidekick to the ribs for his troubles. His airborne body caved in the side of the alley's plastic dumpster.

Even though he was bruised and bleeding, Bo kind of felt like gloating at the three winded and wary assailants, as well as their cowering friend by the bar's backdoor.

Instead, he got a scolding from Rashida. ***'This isn't over yet, boy.'***

Still, even the god-son had to admit: The unexpected song was exactly what they had needed to turn the tide.

Ally spared a glance over at Chad's table just as the guitar solo started. His yelling and abuse had escalated to the point that other patrons were telling the bouncers to throw him out. When Chad's wingman put a hand on the glittery bouncer's chest, that was the last straw. He was manhandled out of his seat and shoved towards the door. When his buddies started to stand up and shout threats, the crackle of a live taser cut through the final straining guitar chords that were filling the bar. The threat of being shocked senseless and thrown out in the street was quite effective. Chad's entire group was ejected in short order.

As Elton John's voice cut through the jeers of the remaining patrons, Ally started to laugh aloud. The final full verse was a test of her endurance, but she was being egged on by the

brunette's antics. Ally rose to the challenge, finishing strong and receiving a kiss on the cheek from the other woman as a reward.

Auntie Cobra's erupted in a combination of hoots, hollars, and applause. The other girl wandered back to her barstool, and a couple of guys immediately offered to buy her drinks.

Ally was happy enough to have pulled off her social coup without twisting an ankle. Her tears of vindication and relief were mixed in with the sweat dripping from her brow. Only Bruce really noticed Ally's emotional outpouring.

The bartender asked, "Feel better now that ya had your little fais-do-do, cher?"

Her response was immediate. "I feel **great.**"

And it was true. Upon reflection, in that particular moment, Ally felt better than she ever had when she was still with Chad.

When she took out her wallet to pay the tab, Ally did have the good grace to add, "Oh. Um, sorry for almost causing a riot."

Bruce snorted at the apology. He offered Ally a clean bar rag and then said, "Yeah, don't do that again. Else Papa Noel's gonna give you coal, love."

Ally wiped the sweat and tears from her face just as the bar phone started to ring. Bruce picked up and said, "Yeah, she'll be right out."

The bartender mouthed the word 'taxi' to his friend. Ally blew Bruce a kiss, and he pretended to catch it and put it in his pocket. Without another word, Ally gathered her things and headed out the front door of the bar, her head held high.

The guitar solo and the final verse of Ally's song were less about liberation and more about survival for Bo.

His three attackers had picked up brick fragments and rocks, forcing the Host to take on a purely defensive posture as he waited for an opening. There were several close calls, as a brick-holding fist came within an inch of his jaw or temple. Even with his enhanced speed, Bo had to give ground. His back was nearly to the dead end alley's wall.

Still Rashida counseled, '**Patience son. Not yet.**'

It was only during the song's final, repeated refrain that Bo felt it. A wave of power flowed through the Host, flooding through his gut and into every fiber of his being. Each time the song's title reached his ears, Bo felt like he could shatter the world.

He settled on shattering a few bones instead.

Bo kicked off of the wall just as the biggest man swung a dirty rock at his ribcage. He flipped over the top of the surprised assailant, getting two fistfuls of that oily brown hair and the collar of his jacket. Bo swore that he could feel the scalp give way just a little bit as he landed and ducked. He brought his arms forward to continue the momentum. The screaming man was hurled over Bo's head and into a row of unfortunate trash cans.

Now Rashida's mindset shifted. He had gone from defensive soldier to eager hunter in mere seconds. Bo's vision was shaded with Rashida's experience: The areas of his targets that were most vulnerable to the Host's attacks were tinted red. The areas that were high risk, high reward had been colored yellow. Bo had jokingly called this kind of assistance 'murder by numbers' in the past. It didn't seem so funny now.

Bo ducked a high swing from the next attacker, but his retaliation was on the third and final man. He stepped inside of the effective range of the swung brick, catching the man's arm at the elbow and locking it under his armpit. As the refrain of the song sent a warm shock of power through Bo, he reached across his chest to grab the man's isolated wrist. A standing *Ude Hishigi Waki Gatame* might sound like something pretty, but the dull 'snap' of the other man's hyperextended elbow was anything but elegant.

Bo took stock of the situation as the man in his arms seemed to melt, collapsing in a heap at his feet. The two men who had managed to remain standing were keeping their distance. The man guarding *Auntie Cobra's* back door wanted **no** part of this fight. Seeing his opening, Bo sprinted back up the alley, took the sharp left, and ran for the relative safety of the streets.

When Elton John's voice could no longer be heard, all of Bo's energy seemed to dissipate. The pain of bruised bones and deep scrapes all over his body left the Host weak, dizzy. As he was staggering towards the front of the bar, Bo thought that he might throw up, pass out, or both. It was only Rashida's mental encouragement that allowed his human counterpart to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Making it to the front of *Auntie Cobra's* was an accomplishment, but they were hardly out of the woods. With no phone and no music, the pair might need to rely on the kindness of strangers to find safety. That hadn't always worked out in the past.

When Bo spotted the cab parked out front of the bar, he thought that they had finally caught a break. The young man whistled and started to limp towards the yellow and black car. His heart sunk as the cab started to pull away.

But before it could get more than a few yards, the car screeched to a halt. The back door opened to reveal a friendly face.

Ally gave Bo the once over, taking in his battered state. After a moment of consideration, she said, "It's my birthday, you know."

Instinctively polite, Bo said, "Happy birthday."

The display of easy kindness was more than enough for Ally. She said, "Get in."

Not ones to look a gift horse in the mouth, Bo and Rashida joined the recently liberated young woman. The cab door slammed shut. Soon the three kindred spirits were ferried away, disappearing into the warm heart of New Orleans.