

Cherry Blossom Karaoke House had a rather poor reputation. While it could be argued whether that reputation was deserved, it had not been earned by the owners or staff. Founded as a Japanese (and somewhat pan-Asiatic) cultural touchstone, it had been a sort of neutral territory for meetings and hangouts among the various oriental gangs. If members of the Golden Leopards met some Azn Bad Boyz at the Cherry Blossom, it was a gentlemen's agreement that they'd at least pretend not to see one another.

After Lung brutalized the gangs into a melange of Asian culture all too frightened to oppose the Dragon, the Cherry Blossom turned from neutral ground into a simple gang hangout. The owners were too afraid to say no, and Lung's lieutenants at least paid well, but it became less and less popular with ordinary citizens much less those who couldn't trace their heritage to southeast Asia.

Greg Veder, of course, was blissfully unaware of any such gangland machinations. He just saw karaoke and decided it would be something fun to do. Due to the ABB's having been gutted in Lung's absence during Wolf Day, there was no longer a strong gang presence to deter visitors. And so, much to the manager's shock, three non-oriental kids walked unprovoked into the storefront. Yamato, the manager, watched from the sidelines as the hostess Kendra prepared to greet the approaching teens.

The trio was led by the only boy, the young man regarding everything with the kind of awe and enthusiasm that only came from genuineness. Yamato instantly disliked him – not for his response to the Cherry Blossom, but Yamato couldn't help resenting that someone could still hold shining-eyed wonder in this dreary world. The boy treated the entire establishment as some manner of exotic and amazing curiosity, yet it was clear there was no malice or othering in his behavior. He was simply enthused to encounter something new and foreign to him.

Behind him was a black girl whose behavior was intimately familiar to Yamato. The way she looked around, regarding the establishment with an affected cold detachment, yet her eyes scanned for every niche where someone could hide and any additional exits... Yamato pegged her as part of a gang. But he'd been dealing with gangs at the Cherry Blossom for the majority of his life: as long as she didn't cause trouble, he had no reason to turn away a paying customer.

The third was the tallest of the three, long black hair flowing freely behind her. She was elegant, pretty albeit in a slightly awkward way. Her expression was...the best way Yamato could think to express it was 'empty'. There was nothing there, a poker face superior to anything he'd ever seen. The young woman didn't look around, barely even looked at Kendra. She stared into the distance, as if seeing something no-one else could. It made him uncomfortable.

"Good afternoon," Kendra chirped. She'd worked there for a year and Yamato still wasn't sure if she was simply unflappable or so utterly oblivious that she didn't notice any of these nuances. "Would you three like a room?"

"Uh, yeah," the boy replied, trying and failing not to roam his eyes over Kendra in her tight dress. "I, sorry, this is my first time at an actual karaoke place." His pronunciation wasn't perfect, but it was nice to hear the effort rather than 'carry-oaky'. "How does getting a room work?"

Yamato suppressed a chuckle when he saw the boy's brain catch up with his mouth: the kid had just implied he wanted to get a room with these two cute girls.

“Well, we sell use of karaoke rooms in half-hour increments. Once the time is up, the speakers shut off and I’ll come in to check if you want to buy more time.”

The boy paid for an hour and then tried again not to stare at Kendra as she led them to the room. While it likely wouldn’t be of any real use, Yamato made a mental note that the black girl looked briefly jealous when she saw the boy’s wandering eye. When the door finally shut and the tall white girl was out of view, Yamato let out a heavy breath. It felt like a heavy stone had been taken off his sternum.

Greg was in awe. A real karaoke bar! How had he never known about this place? They had the super-hot hostesses and everything! The walls were decorated with various neon signs and posters over the soundproofing, and the room in which they found themselves was cylindrical. Half the room was a U-shaped couch, some sort of faux-leather, and a sturdy metal table. On the walls in here were automated posters that rolled between several different albums each – like some sort of advertisement to help remind people of the different songs available. The remainder of the room was a stage with a big screen to show the lyrics, speakers at the sides.

“Alright, this was your idea,” Sophia said with a cruel smile on her lips. “So you get to embarrass yourself first.”

“Too afraid to go first?” he teased, then dodged away when she aimed a kick at his side. Thankfully it was halfhearted, because he knew she was fast and strong enough to do some real damage. Going up to the console, Greg was surprised at just how many songs were available. He wanted something somewhat easy to help warm up: they had an hour to build up to the big, bombastic stuff after all. Greg wanted to do some Red Hot Chili Peppers, but didn’t want to embarrass himself by getting tongue-tied over *Snow*. He found *Under the Bridge*, and punched it in.

The music started in, soft and gentle, strumming of guitar. Greg took a deep breath and hoped he wouldn’t make too much a fool of himself.

*“Sometimes I feel like I don’t have a partner
Sometimes I feel like my only friend
Is this city I live in, this City of Angels
Lonely as I am, together we cry...”*

By the song’s end, he didn’t feel he’d sucked that bad. Taylor’s expression was unreadable, but thankfully Sophia didn’t have a condescending smirk on her face. “Alright, Sophia, your turn.” He relished her momentary fish-out-of-water helplessness. Sophia looked over as if to foist the turn onto Taylor, but one glance at her granite-carved face put paid to that idea.

Thus denied her escape, Sophia stomped up to the stage and began cycling through the songs. She couldn’t just half-ass this: Taylor wouldn’t let her, and she didn’t want Greg to say he was better than her. As she cycled through the album images, something caught her eye. The art twiggged something in her mind, a memory nearly lost. Running around as a superhero had made her forget, losing memories of her past wholesale: she had to run from it all if she was to escape the pain. But maybe, as Taylor had said in a roundabout way, that wasn’t the solution.

With her back to the others, Sophia keyed in *Sunny Came Home* by Shawn Colvin and tried not to bite her lip. She steeled her nerves as the instrumental introduction played, then took a deep breath.

*“Sunny came home to her favorite room
Sunny sat down in the kitchen
She opened a book and a box of tools
Sunny came home with a mission...”*

The song was both soothing and melancholic, and it had been a chance discovery in the days from when he first visited her. Perhaps Greg didn't realize just what Sophia was baring as her voice cracked during the bridge, but Taylor's gaze was unwavering, her expression oddly soft.

By the time she was done, Sophia almost staggered off the stage to plop beside a red-faced Greg Veder. “Uh, wow, Sophia,” he said. “You sing great!”

One glance at Taylor showed the girl wasn't going to move. So, tiredly, Sophia snapped back at him. “Your turn again.”

Greg looked about to protest, but something seemed to finally get through to him. He nodded and went back to the stage. This time he let instinct guide him, leading to an album his father often enjoyed. The weighty man on the cover had intrigued him as a child. Greg selected Matchbox 20's *Long Day* and began to sing, even opening with the toothy inhalation.

*“It's sittin' by the overcoat
The second shelf, the note she wrote
That I can't bring myself to throw away...”*

As Sophia listened, she noticed a difference in Taylor's behavior. The lyrics seemed to be resonating with the girl.

“Hey, it's me, yeah well I can't get myself to go away.”

Taylor shivered.

Sophia didn't realize that she was doing it at the moment, but she found herself drawing nearer to the taller girl, watching tears bead at the lashes of her closed eyes. Sophia could feel the pain rolling off Taylor, deeper than she could truly fathom, pain that the girl had worn for so long that it had become like armor. But now that armor was being chipped apart, falling away, letting that pain escape.

Sophia had bared something of herself, almost without realizing it. And now, perhaps this too was calculated, but it felt too vulnerable. It felt like Taylor was taking a risk, trying for genuine happiness instead of the morass of pain. The pain that Sophia had wallowed in, the pain that had drowned Emma and Sophia had never even known. And seeing Taylor, the terrifying Bloodmoon, take that risk to shed her pain, did something to Sophia's heart.

As Greg hit the second chorus, Sophia softly joined in. Not for his sake, but to coax Taylor. The black-haired girl slowly joined the chorus, and in moments she was genuinely singing, her pretty but unused voice cracking. Taylor's eyes were still screwed shut, tears spilling down her cheeks. Sophia realized that she was offering comfort to the taller girl, trying to help. Genuinely trying to help. And as Taylor

cried, as the corners of her lips turned up in a melancholic smile, it felt good. Was this what Sophia had been missing all this time? Deriding as childish weakness?

God, she thought, as her own tears began to fall, *I was such a stupid little kid...*

As Greg finally turned back, he saw both girls teary-eyed. Something in him stopped the initial stupid remark he'd been about to make, joking about if his singing really was that bad. This was important: he couldn't mar it with frivolity. Whatever was happening, he could feel it in the air, and see it on their faces. The girls both looked melancholic. Sweet, sad, and hopeful smiles adorned their lips.

He quietly stepped off the stage and approached the taller girl. "Would you like to try now, Taylor?" he asked gently.

The tall girl didn't respond verbally, but she rose from the couch and practically glided onto the stage. Greg sat down beside Sophia, who rested against him. For the sake of self-preservation, he opted not to mention it.

Taylor walked up to the console and deliberately moved through the albums. Eventually she found what she was looking for, and a tender guitar plucking began. Taylor's voice was soft, lilting, haunting.

*"Look straight in the window, try not to look below
Pretend I'm not up here, try counting sheep
The sheep seem to shower off this office tower
It's 9.8 straight down; I can't stop my knees..."*

Taylor's choice of song was *When I Fall* by the Barenaked Ladies, and it was impossible not to draw deeper meaning from her selecting a song about contemplation of death and suicide. Greg and Sophia both softly applauded for Taylor, smiling genuinely.

"Alright," Sophia coughed slightly to cover her cracking voice. "It's getting too weepy. Let's do something more upbeat." She stormed up to the stage and quickly selected something she doubted either of them would have expected from her. Honestly, she'd been surprised to even find the song on the list. *The Creationist* by Kerli began playing, and Sophia couldn't help smiling even as she sang.

"This is an old and funny poem I accidentally overheard..."