

It was the middle of november—the air was crisp, and the sun was nowhere to be seen, hidden behind the all-too-familiar dull clouds. The leaves danced and shook on the trees in the gentle wind, fluttering to the ground in an array of muddy brown and orange hues. Under his thick boots, Sora could feel the crunch of the leftover snow from days prior. Snow, along with the frigid air, was something he never got to experience until recently. It was a nice change of pace from his hometown that never seemed to cool down. He walked with anticipation, wondering to himself if not being able to taste would have an effect on how his day would go. He brushed it off, clutching his bag tightly and adjusting his scarf as he ventured towards Moonfox Corner Cafe, where he would be starting his first day of work.

The bell chimed as he opened the door, feeling the warmth from inside. From behind the counter, Sora saw him, his tanned skin dusted with freckles, his dark curls that fell in front of his eyes, and his ever-charming smile as he attended to the customer with ease, helping them pick from the array of pumpkin and cinnamon flavored staples of the coffee shop. Okay. He was doing this, Sora was going to be working with Datu, the same Datu that would always sit in front of him in his university's Art History class. He was going to actually be working with Datu, and he was going to be okay. Sora already knew very well that Datu was as dense as a rock, so he felt slightly assured that maybe this wouldn't end awkwardly.

"Hey, welcome in! What can I get for you sir?" Datu grinned, waving at him. His smile lit up the entire room, in the sickently charming way it always would. Sora realized that he had been staring and standing awkwardly, failing to notice that the customer in front of him had already gone to sit down.

"Sir?" Sora paused, confused. Maybe he just calls everyone who comes in sir, or maybe he genuinely didn't recognize him. "Well, I'm not exactly here to order anything." he sighed, stepping up to the counter while loosening his grip on his satchel. He was relieved to know that Datu didn't seem to recognize him, and couldn't imagine how awkward that would have been if he had. What would Datu even think of him? "I'm the new hire...my name is Sora Akiyama. I think you're supposed to be training me?"

Datu's eyes widened, his face reddening slightly. "Oh!- I didn't realize they hired someone recently!" he exclaimed, then chuckled. "Well, I'm Datu Lim. It's good to officially meet you!" He walked out from behind the counter, coming up to stop in front of Sora, holding a hand out towards him.

Sora stared at him for a moment, before taking his hand and shaking it, noticing how Datu looked up at him, and squeezed his hand tightly. "Nice to meet you too." He muttered, giving Datu a slightly awkward smile back to his much more confident one. If Datu was embarrassed at all a moment ago, he wasn't anymore. Watching Datu's bright smile, Sora knew this was going to be a long year.

Datu brought him behind the counter, showing him around the cafe and describing what all of the equipment did. Sora tried to take it all in; the sleek metal espresso machine, the pastry case, the bags of coffee beans that sat on the white marble counters, and everything else around him that he needed to know about. Datu taught him how to pull his first shot, grinding the coffee beans into a fine powder, and adjusting how Sora held the tamper.

"Don't press down so hard," Datu chuckled, readjusting Sora's grip ever so slightly. "If you press down on the coffee beans too hard with the tamper, the shot will turn out bitter

because it'll extract too much." Sora nodded along, trying to keep mental notes on everything Datu told him, but as Datu leaned in closer, he caught the faint scent of cedar and coffee grounds clinging to him. He tried to focus on the espresso machine in front of him as he pulled another shot, but his attention kept drifting to how close Datu's hand was to his own.

"26 seconds. Not bad, that's around how long you want it to pull for." Datu's sudden compliment brought him out of his daydreaming. He poured the shot into the cup on the counter, then reached over to steam the milk. He turned over his shoulder to see Datu smiling proudly at him as he finished pouring the milk over the shot, laughing as Sora officially made his first latte.

Over the next few hours, Datu continued to teach Sora all of the basics of being a barista. The difference between a latte and a cappuccino, how to make foam, everything he needed to know. Sora, half paying attention, would glance back at him whenever he got the chance. The way he charmed customers without a second thought was infuriating to him, and he still didn't understand why.

"Sora?" Datu's voice broke his train of thought, bringing him back to reality.

"Yeah? What's up?" he called back.

Datu was looking over his shoulder, efficiently juggling between two drinks at once. "We need more lemon danishes, can you go make some? Whoever was working this morning probably forgot to make more. The recipe's in the back, near the bags of flour." He hurriedly called back, setting down the cups and going over to the register to take another order. Sora nodded, walking into the back quickly.

The smell of dish soap and pastries filled the air as he got to the back of the cafe. Glancing around the room, he spotted the recipe book sitting next to a couple bags of unopened flour. Picking it up and flipping through the book, he landed on a bookmarked page for the danishes. Taking in the recipe, he began to bake. First, he needed one and a half cups of flour. He already knew where it was, and quickly added it to his bowl. Then, he needed two cups of sugar and two sticks of butter. Sora searched the room, stopping on two similar looking unlabeled containers. He had previously seen two bags of flour beside each other, so he assumed these were the same. He scooped up a cup and a half, and added it to his mixture. He began to mix the jam, and was relieved when he was eventually able to place them in the oven to bake.

"Hey Datu? Can you try one of these?" Sora walked in holding a tray of still steaming hot lemon danishes with one hand, holding an individual one with a bite already taken out of it with his other. "I let them cool for a couple of minutes, but they may still be hot."

"Sure!" Smiling like he always did, Datu stepped over towards him, taking a bite out of the single one in Sora's hand. Sora watched as Datu paused, his brow furrowing before he plastered on a smile.

"These...Sora, are you sure you added sugar to these? They taste unusually...salty." he asked slowly, looking up at him.

Setting down the tray on the counter behind him, Sora tilted his head as he looked down at him.

"Well, I followed the instructions as they were written-" A plausible thought suddenly interrupted him. The sugar container wasn't labeled, was it? Had he added sugar? Sora looked down at the lemon danish in his hand, hearing Datu sigh.

"It's- you know what, it's fine. We can just remake them, and I'll help you this time." Sora stiffened as Datu placed a hand on his shoulder, then relaxed, nodding. "Right. Sorry about that."

Datu demonstrated how to properly make the pastries, pointing out all of the ingredients and where they were. Together they made a new batch of lemon danishes, along with a few other batches of a wide variety of pastries. They were having fun, it felt more like baking with a close friend than with a colleague. Sora kept sneaking glances at Datu when he wasn't looking, but he knew it didn't really matter if he noticed him or not. Datu never had a single thought in his head that could be remotely considered observant.

Together they walked out to the front, each holding a tray of the newly baked pastries, setting them behind the glass case to display to the customers. Sora placed down his empty tray after setting out a few pastries, and grabbed another from the counter behind him to set out more. Datu grabbed an extra lemon danish from the fresh batch, turning to Sora.

"Here, try this. I noticed that you had also tried one of the more questionable tasting ones that you made earlier, and wanted to show you how they're actually supposed to taste." He handed the danish to Sora, with a small smile.

Sora rolled his eyes at the description of his previous batch. Cautiously, he took the danish and ate a small bite of it. Then, he tried to mimic an overjoyed smile, as he looked down at Datu.

"Mmm." he muttered flatly, feigning enjoyment. He waited for Datu's reaction, hoping that he wasn't staring at him. He had never been too great at faking reactions for anyone else's sake. Then again, he knew that Datu would be none the wiser.

"Good, right? The lemon ones are my favorite!" Datu smiled widely, oblivious to his façade. Honestly, the pastry didn't taste like anything special or different from everything else he had tasted; or rather, hadn't tasted. He could only react to the flakiness of the crust, and the thickness of the jam. It wasn't that bad that he couldn't taste, at least he didn't know the supposedly terrible taste of the danishes he had previously made.

The sun was beginning to set, apparent by the golden light streaming through the large glass windows. As the day got quieter, so did the cafe. It was nice, he could hear the faint jazz music that Datu had put on earlier, as well as the quiet bits of conversations from customers. As to break the peaceful atmosphere Sora was coming to love, a customer stormed up to the register with an enraged expression. She wasn't even the first one today, why was everyone so unhappy in this city? She clenched her fists and glared at the first person she could find.

"You!" she snapped, pointing at Sora. "I need to speak with your manager! Who could've *possibly* made this danish!" She shouted, slamming a plate with a half-eaten lemon danish onto the counter in front of him. "It's awful!-"

Datu stepped in front of him, looking at the lady with a neutral expression. "Ma'am, please calm down. I'm sure it was an honest mista-"

"It couldn't have been!" She cut him off. "Someone has tried to poison me, I swear!" It seemed that the more Datu said, the more enraged she got.

Sora stood quietly, watching the scene unfold right before his eyes. Awful danish, hadn't they just made a completely new batch? On second thought, had he forgotten to throw out all of the

pastries that he had made earlier? Was he going to get fired just after he started working here? In his defense, it was an honest mistake.

"No one tried to *poison* you..." Datu groaned, running a hand through his messy hair.

"And please quiet down. We can give you a refund, or replace the danish with a new one?"

Narrowing her eyes, she scanned the room. She didn't seem pleased with her options, so she glared at Sora. "You, boy! Did you make these?"

He blinked, stuttering. "Me? Well- yes, I did." he muttered quietly, pushing up his glasses.

Datu placed a hand on his shoulder, pulling Sora next to him. He nearly tripped as he was pulled to stand beside Datu.

"It's his first day, we're really sorry about the danish." Sora focused back in after being nudged, and nodded. "I'm sorry. I must have made it wrong, but it won't happen again." The lady finally gave up, sighing. Maybe seeing the tired college student changed something in her?

She scoffed. "Whatever. Just give me a new one."

When she left, Datu grabbed Sora's hand and dragged him to the back with more force than he would have ever expected from him. The door slammed shut behind them, as Datu gripped his shoulders. Sora's eyes widened, and when he glanced down, Datu was already staring straight up at him.

"Sora, be honest with me."

He had never heard Datu speak with such seriousness in all the time he had known him. Had he finally put the pieces together about his condition? Or maybe Datu thought that he was weird, noticing all of the glances that he stole? The fluorescent lights overhead were too bright, making it harder for him to think straight. He couldn't bear to look at Datu as his chest tightened.

Datu took a deep breath, seemingly gathering his thoughts. "How do you keep messing up these pastries so... badly? We've had at least 3 unhappy customers today, and they were all related to the pastries that *you* made."

Sora glanced down to finally face Datu, seeing his confused expression. His shoulders relaxed. So that's what this was about. It could have been much worse, but it still felt weird to hear Datu act so serious around him. Datu's tone compelled him to explain what he dreaded talking about the most: his condition. In the back of his mind, he always had this nagging fear that he would get made fun of for it.

"Well...the truth is that I can't actually taste anything." he fiddled with his scarf.

Datu blinked. Loosening his grip and taking a step back, he continued to stare in silence. "...What? Like, seriously not anything? Nothing at all?"

Nodding, Sora walked over to clean the dishes that were in the sink. "Well, if it's spicy enough I can technically feel the spice due to the pain sensation, but that doesn't really count."

"So you keep messing up because..." Datu scanned the room, his gaze landing on the two unlabeled containers of sugar... and salt. "Oh." Datu burst out laughing.

"What? What's so funny?"

Datu bent down holding onto his knees for support as he tried to catch his breath from laughing. Taking a steadying breath, he regained his composure and looked up at Sora. It was a look of

perplexity, but also some form of what he assumed to be a gentle admiration in his eyes. Sora furrowed his brow, trying to understand what Datu was thinking.

"We need to get those containers labeled."

Datu's voice broke his concentration. He set down the plate he was cleaning, glancing over his shoulder, befuddled.

"You don't care?" Sora turned fully around to face him, tilting his head.

Shaking his head, Datu pushed himself off of the counter he was leaning against and looked up at Sora with the same charming smile he had gotten so accustomed to.

"Of course I don't. Sora, you can make a damn good latte. Just because you can't make a pastry to save your life, doesn't mean I'm going to *fire* you or anything. I admire you, I really do. I don't think anyone would be brave enough to take this job without being able to taste." He chuckled, pausing. "But...with that being said, I do have to ask. Why did you take this job to begin with?"

It was quiet for a long moment. They just stared at each other, mostly Datu waiting and Sora feeling his face get warmer as he tried to formulate a response. He looked back over at the sink, noticing how the water was still running.

"It's-" He sighed as he loosened his scarf. "You're in a couple of my classes and- I sort of saw that you were working here, and wanted to work with you...and of course I needed a job to pay for my classes!" He added that last part suddenly, squeezing his eyes shut like it would save him from some sort of impending doom that was yet to come. "And of course, someone to study with-"

He was abruptly cut off, being suddenly lifted off of the ground and squeezed tightly. Datu laughed obnoxiously, holding him up in a tight hug like he weighed nothing. He held him so tight that he was surprised none of his ribs had broken.

"You? Wanted to spend more time with me? I've been trying to talk to you for weeks in our art history class!" he exclaimed.

He could practically hear the stupid grin in his voice. Datu wanting to spend time with him and get to know him was the absolute last thing he thought he would be told today.

"Wait, what?" Sora asked, shocked.

Datu set him down, keeping his hands on Sora's shoulders as he looked up at him, trying to suppress his grin.

"I mean, yeah I did want to try and get to know you." Sora said sheepishly, looking back at the one thing that started this whole situation and confrontation: the unlabeled ingredient containers that sat on the counter.

"Guess we'd better get labeling then." Sora looked back at Datu, finally giving him a true smile.

"Guess so. Unless, of course, you would rather try and make a not-so-educated guess again?" Datu chuckled and smiled back at him, grabbing a black permanent marker from the counter, and walking over to where the ingredients sat. "Maybe in the meantime you can tell me more about this strange condition of yours."

"If you insist." Sora chuckled, feeling like he had a weight lifted off of his shoulders. Maybe this year won't be so bad after all. He picked up one of the containers, and handed it to Datu. He took it from Sora, labeling it 'sugar'.