

Shanali Islam, Age 16

Mina was out of paint. Again.

She slumped into her desk chair. 2:30 AM, *already?*

She had spent the past 6 hours on her painting, one she wished to enter in her local creatives contest, but she wasn't anywhere close to finished.

*With more paint, I can definitely complete this...an hour before the contest deadline.*

Lucky for her, the deadline was today at 5:00 PM.

Mina cursed her luck.

It seemed like she had no other choice. It was time for Plan B.

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“You’re going to steal paint from the art classroom?!”

Mina hid her face in embarrassment. “Lila, I will steal your right to speak if you don’t talk quieter.”

Lila simply chuckled as she took out her planner. Class hadn’t even started yet, but she didn’t seem like she had any time to waste.

Mina looked at her best friend. “All I’m doing is working on my painting instead of our assigned art project! Technically, we’re allowed to use any art supplies as students in the class.”

“*Technically*, today is our first project work day, so your half-completed painting will stick out like a sore thumb.” Lila countered.

Before Mina had the chance to respond, the school bell rang. Their first class was starting.

Dismissing her growing worries, she began to prepare for the period’s lectures.

Only five more classes until she would finish her painting. Only five more classes until she would be one step closer to winning the contest.

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Mina was not going to win the contest.

She knew that from the moment she stepped into her art class and saw that today would be a collaboration day: working on individual projects but with assigned partners.

Mina was paired with Tyler Faun, once again, and just seeing his name by hers was starting to give her a headache. Something always went wrong whenever they were partnered together; *of course* they were partners on the one day she needed no distractions.

She defeatedly sat next to him, then slowly began to lay her painting onto their shared workspace as nonchalantly as possible.

*Tyler doesn't even know what my real project will look like. She convinced herself. How would he know that I'm working on something other than our new realism assignment?*

"That doesn't look very realistic to me." A voice muttered behind Mina.

She almost screamed. "Do you need to whisper so creepily?!"

Tyler rolled his eyes. "The only creepy thing here is that you think zombies are an example of realism." He tore his eyes away from her zombie-apocalypse-like painting. "Anyways, how did you start the project so early?"

Mina scrambled to find an excuse. "I've been, uh, staying after school recently, so I began my project right after our teacher told us yesterday."

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Tyler looked unconvinced, and Mina couldn't blame him—her excuse was pretty shoddy—but she still grew frustrated.

*Why can't he just mind his own business and let me slack off in peace?*

She took a deep breath before continuing. "Art is subjective, Tyler. So stop trying to critique my artwork and focus on your own, please."

He scoffed in response. "What's up with you? Collaboration days are meant for critiques. Why's a tryhard like you all fired up over nothing?"

Maybe it was her lack of sleep, or the stress from the contest's deadline. All Mina knew was that something was making her annoyance quickly shift into an anger that was much, much worse.

Tyler suddenly backed away from her. "Woah. Are you crying?"

Mina glared at him, her eyes definitely dry. "What, now you're trying to embarrass me in front of everyone?"

"No, Mina. Your eyes are actually red."

"Yeah, and you have devil horns growing out your forehead."

Tyler ignored her comment, grudgingly taking out his phone and positioning its camera like they were taking a photo. "Look!"

*Hopefully, listening to him will make him shut up.*

Mina looked at her reflection in his phone.

Two scarlet red irises stared right back.

*Yeah, I'm definitely not finishing my painting in time.*

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Mina turned to look at Tyler, unamused. “Can you take the filter off now and stop bothering me?”

Tyler sighed in frustration before holding his phone up as if he were recording her. Mina watched him, perplexed.

Until he suddenly pinched her.

Pain flared in her arm, and she couldn't help but slightly tear up. Mina glared right at him. “What was that for?!”

“See, I'm not crazy!” Tyler exclaimed as he watched the video he just took.

He turned his phone towards her so she could see the video as well.

*He pinched me and then-*

Mina almost fell out of her seat.

*My eyes changed color? From red—definitely not their usual brown—to orange?!*

“But that's impossible...” she muttered.

“Think of something you love,” Tyler randomly insisted.

Mina knew better than to call him weird now. After a few seconds, Tyler gasped.

“Pink! They're pink now!” He whispered.

Mina's eyes widened. “You don't think...my irises change color based on my mood, do you?”

Tyler eagerly nodded his head.

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“It makes sense to me. You must’ve been pissed off earlier because of me, hence the red eyes. Orange must mean pain—that was the purpose of the pinch, by the way...sorry about that.”

Mina shook her head. “It’s fine; I definitely have bigger issues to deal with now.” She looked worriedly at Tyler. “How do I change them back?”

“Do you have to?”

She gaped at him. “I can’t just walk around like a mood-changing necklace, can I?!”

“Green.” Tyler noted, ignoring her concern. “Is that annoyance?”

She groaned. There was no use in asking him for help.

“Mina, I really don’t think this is a bad thing. Can you imagine how famous you could be?”

Mina perked at the thought. *Who doesn’t want to be famous?*

It was enticing, but she was sure that it wouldn’t end well.

“I think I’ll just stick to the idea of fame from my art, for now.” Mina reasoned. Speaking of art brought her focus back to the creatives art contest, and she felt sad that she probably wouldn’t be able to enter the competition after all.

“Uh, if you’re okay with it, I can help you finish your painting.”

Mina met Tyler’s sincere gaze, and a grateful smile found its way to her lips.

He quickly looked away. “They- they’re blue now, by the way.”

Mina laughed, and the look on Tyler’s face meant that her eyes probably changed color again.

“I think I should start investing in some sunglasses then, yeah?”

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Tyler immediately shook his head. “I think you should embrace this rather than hide it. It’ll be difficult to deal with at first, but your secret is safe with me until you choose that it shouldn’t be a secret anymore.”

For the first time, Mina appreciated that Tyler was her partner.

*He’s being surprisingly considerate.*

“Try being happy less often, though. Yellow irises look creepy on you.” Tyler remarked with a teasing tone.

*And he’s back.*

Mina jokingly rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t help but smile.

Perhaps she didn’t need to rely on an art contest so she could share her creativity with the world.

She now had an advantage in the creative realm, a quirk that made her uniqueness shine and would hopefully make her artwork shine even brighter.

One colorful iris at a time.