

DEVON

MONDAY

First-day-back assemblies are the most pointless practice ever.

And that's saying a lot, seeing as Niveus Academy is a school that runs on pointlessness.

We're seated in Lion Hall – named after one of those donors who give money to private schools that don't need it – waiting for the principal to arrive and deliver his speech in the usual order:

1. Welcome back for another year – glad you didn't die this summer
2. Here are your Senior Prefects and Head Prefect
3. School values
4. *Fin.*

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for structure. Ask any of my friends. Correction – *friend*. I'm pretty sure that, even though I've been here for almost four years, no one else knows I exist. Just Jack, who generally acts like there's something seriously wrong with me. Still, I call him a friend, because we've known each other for ever and the thought of being alone is much, much worse.

But back to the thing about structure. I'm a fan. Jack knows about the many rituals I go through before I sit down at the piano. Without them, I don't play as well. That's the difference between my rituals and these assemblies. Without these, life at Niveus would still be an endless drudge of gossip, money and lies.

The microphone screeches loudly, forcing my head up. Twenty minutes of my life about to be wasted on an assembly that could have been an email.

I lean back against my chair as a tall pale guy with dull black eyes, oily black hair slicked back with what I'm sure was an entire jar of hair gel, and a long dark coat that almost sweeps the floor, stands at the podium, staring down at us all like we're vermin and he's a cat.

"My name is Mr Ward, but you must all address me as Headmaster Ward," the cat says, voice liquid and slithery. I squint at him. What the hell happened to Headmaster Collins?

The room is filled with confused whispers and unimpressed faces.

"As I'm sure some of you are aware, Headmaster Collins resigned just before summer break, and I'm here to lead you all through your final year at Niveus Academy," the cat finishes, his lips pursed.

"So, the rumours *were* true," someone whispers nearby.

"Seems like it... I hear rehab is super classy these days though..."

I hadn't even heard anything was wrong with Headmaster

Collins; he seemed fine before summer. Sometimes I feel like I'm so lost in my own world, I don't notice the things that seem so obvious to everyone else.

"And so," Headmaster Ward's voice booms over everyone else's, "we keep within the Niveus tradition, starting today's assembly with the Senior Prefect and Head Prefect announcements."

He swivels expectantly as one stiffly-suited teacher rushes forward and hands him a cream-coloured envelope. Silently, Headmaster Ward opens it, the paper's crinkle amplified to a blaring shriek through the speakers. He removes a small card and places the envelope on the podium in front of him. I start to zone out.

"Our four Senior Prefects are..." He pauses, his pupils flicking back and forth like black flies trapped in a jar. "Miss Cecelia Wright, Mr Maxwell Jacobson, Miss Ruby Ainsworth and Mr Devon Richards."

At first, I think he's made a mistake. My name *never* gets called out at formal assemblies. Mostly because these assemblies are usually dedicated to the people the student body know and care about, and if Niveus was the setting for a movie, I'd probably be a nameless background character.

Jack elbows me, pulling me from my shocked state, and I push myself out of the chair. The creaking of wooden seats fills the hall as faces turn to glare at my attempt to shuffle through the rows. I mumble a "sorry" after stepping on some guy's designer shoes – probably worth more than my ma's rent – before making my way to the front where the

senior teachers are lined up, my sneakers squeaking against the almost-black wood beneath. My heart pounds and the light applause comes to an awkward stop.

I recognize the other three standing up there, though I've never spoken to them. Max, Ruby and Cecelia are these giant, pale, light-haired duplicates of each other, and next to them, my short frame and dark skin sticks out like a sore thumb. *They* are main characters.

I stand next to Headmaster Ward, who is even more terrifying up close. For one thing, he's unnaturally tall and his legs literally end at the top of my chest. His pupils move towards me, staring, despite his head facing the front.

I look away from him, pretending that the BFG hasn't got a scary emo brother called Ward.

"I've already heard great things about our Head Prefect this year." Ward's voice drags, making what I'm sure was meant to be a positive, somewhat lively sentence as lifeless as a eulogy. "And so, there should be no surprise that the Head Prefect is none other than Chiamaka Adebayo."

Loud cheers fill the dark oak-walled hall as Chiamaka walks forward. I notice her army of clones seated at the front clapping in scary unison, all as pretty and doll-like as their leader. There's a smug expression on her face as she joins us. I almost roll my eyes, but she's the most popular girl at school, and I don't have a death wish.

I shift awkwardly, feeling even more out of place now. If Max, Ruby and Cecelia are all main characters, Chiamaka is the protagonist. It makes sense seeing them up here.

But me? I feel like any moment now, guys with cameras are gonna run out and tell me I'm being pranked. That would make more sense than any of this.

I know things like Senior Prefects are popularity contests. Teachers vote for their favourites each year and it's always the same kind of person. Someone popular, and I am *not* popular. Maybe my music teacher put in a good word for me? I don't know.

"As all of you know, the roles of Senior Prefect and Head Prefect should not be taken lightly. With a lot of power comes great responsibility. It is not just about attending council meetings with me, or organizing the big events, or impressing a choice college. It is also being a model student all year round, which I am sure the five of these students here have been during their time at Niveus and will, hopefully, continue to be long after they leave Niveus behind." Headmaster Ward forces a tight smile.

"Please give another round of applause to our prefect council this year," Ward continues, triggering louder claps from the sea of pale in front of us.

I feel a few eyes on me, and I avoid them, trying to find an interest in the floor beneath my feet, rather than the fact that there are rows and rows of people watching me.

I hate the feeling of being watched.

"Now for the school values."

We all turn to face the giant screen behind us, like we always do, ready to watch the school values scroll down like credits at the end of a movie, while the national anthem

plays in the background. In normal assemblies, we usually just pledge allegiance to the flag, but seeing as this is the first assembly of the year, Niveus does what it does best: amps up the drama.

The screen is enormous and black and covers most of the large, double-glazed window behind the stage. Niveus is a school made up of fancy, dark wooden walls, marble floors and huge glass windows. The exterior is old and haunted-looking and the interior is new and modern, reeking of excessive wealth. It's like it's tempting the outside world to peer in.

There's a loud click and a large picture fills the screen: a rectangular playing card with As in each corner and a huge spade symbol at the centre.

That's new.

I turn to find Jack in the audience, wanting to give him our *What the hell?* look, but he's staring at the screen as if the whole thing doesn't faze him. Everyone else in the audience looks just as unbothered by this as Jack. It's weird.

"Ah, there seems to be some kind of technical malfunction..." Mrs Blackburn, my old French teacher, announces from the back. A few more clicks, and all goes back to normal. The national anthem blares from the speakers and we sing along, with our palms placed on our chests as we watch the school values fly past: *Generosity, Grace, Determination, Integrity, Idealism, Nobility, Excellence, Respectfulness and Eloquence.*

Nine values most people at this school lack. Myself included.

“Now for a speech from our Head Prefect, Chiamaka.” The student body goes wild at the mention of her name, clapping even louder than before and cheering like she’s a god – which by Niveus standards, she basically is.

“Thank you, Headmaster Ward,” Chiamaka says as she steps up to the podium. “Firstly, I would like to thank the teachers for selecting me as Senior Head Prefect – it’s something I never imagined would happen.”

Chiamaka’s been Head Prefect three years in a row now: she was the Junior Head Prefect as well as the Sophomore Head Prefect – there’s nothing remotely shocking about her selection. Mine, on the other hand...

She looks back at the teachers with her hand still placed over her heart from when we sang the national anthem, feigning surprise like she does every year.

My eyes really, *really* want to roll at her.

“As your Senior Head Prefect, I will work hard to ensure that our final year at Niveus is the best one yet. Starting with the Senior Snowflake Charity Ball at the end of the month. This year’s prefect council and I will make sure it is a night everyone will talk about for many years to come.”

People start to clap but Chiamaka doesn’t back down, instead she drags the microphone forward, not yet done with her soliloquy.

“Above all else, I promise to make sure that the majority of the funding we get goes to the right departments. I’d hate to see all the generosity shown by our donors go to waste. As Senior Head Prefect, I will make sure the right people –

the students winning the Mathalons, competing at the science fairs, the ones *actually* contributing something to the school – are prioritized. Thank you.”

Chiamaka finishes, flashing a wicked grin as the hall erupts in applause once again.

This time, I roll my eyes without a care, and I’m pretty sure the girl in the front row with the red bows in her hair looks at me with disdain for doing so.

The prefects all stay behind to get our badges, while everyone else marches out of assembly to their first period classes. I watch them all with their shiny new fitted uniforms, their purses made from alligator skin and faces made from plastic. Looking down at my battered sneakers and blazer with loose threads, I feel a sting inside.

There are many things I hate about Niveus, like how no one (besides Jack) is from my side of town and how everyone lives in huge houses with white-picket fences, cooks who make them breakfast, drivers who take them to school, and credit cards with no limit tucked away in their designer backpacks. Sometimes, being around all of that makes me feel like my insides are collapsing, cracking and breaking. I know no good comes from comparing what I have to what they have, but seeing all that money and privilege, and having none, hurts. I try to convince myself that being a scholarship kid doesn’t matter, that I shouldn’t care.

Sometimes it works.

The badges are all different colours. Mine is red and shiny, with *Devon* engraved under *Senior Prefect*. The

prefects they choose in senior year are always immediately drafted as the top candidates for the valedictorian selection and while Chiamaka will probably get it, I'm still happy to even be considered. Who knows, if I can get Senior Prefect, what's stopping the universe from granting one more wish and making me valedictorian?

I don't usually allow myself to dream that much – disappointment is painful, and I like to control the things that seem more possible than not. But I've never been on the teachers' radars before, or anyone else's for that matter. I excel at being unknown, never being invited to parties and whatnot. Now that I'm here, and something like this is actually happening to me, I can't help but feel it is a sign that this year is gonna go well...or at least better than the last three. A sign that maybe I'm gonna get into college – make my ma proud.

Ward finally dismisses us and I rush out of the hall, weaving through a small crowd of students still hanging about, and into one of the emptier marble hallways with rows of dusky grey lockers. I only slow when a teacher turns the corner. She gives me a pointed look, her sleek bob giving her face the same scary judgemental appearance of Edna Mode from *The Incredibles*, then she passes and I can breathe normally again.

The sound of a locker door slamming hard grabs my attention, and my head whips around to find the source. A dark-haired guy with sharp, heavy make-up around his eyes and an expression that says *Fuck off* stares back at me. Josh?

Jared? ...I can't remember his name, but I know his face.

He's the guy who came out last year at Junior Prom, walking in holding his date's hand. *His guy-date's hand*. And it wasn't that big of a deal. People were happy for him. But all I remember was looking at him and his date, hand-in-hand, and feeling this overwhelming sense of jealousy.

Prom is one of Niveus's many compulsory and meaningless events, and so, like a masochist, I watched them all night, from the benches at the side of the hall. I watched them slow-dance, arms wrapped around each other like they were naturally safe there. Like nothing bad would happen to them. Like none of their friends outside of school would hurt or mock them. Like their parents wouldn't stop loving them – or leave them. Like they'd be okay.

My chest had squeezed as I'd held onto that thought. My vision blurred, the lights in the room becoming vibrant circles. I had blinked back the tears, quickly wiping them off my cheeks with the sleeve of the black tuxedo I'd rented, still watching them dance, like a class-A creep, looking away only when it got too painful.

"What?" A deep voice cuts into the memory like a blade. I blink to find the guy at the locker is staring at me, looking even more pissed off than before.

I turn quickly, walking the opposite way now, not daring to look back. Because, one, Jared? Jim? – *that guy* – scares the shit out of me, and two... My mind flashes back to prom, *their intertwined fingers, their smiles*. I screw my eyes shut, forcing myself to think of something else. Like music class.

I climb the steps to the first floor where my music classroom is, burning the depressing memory and tossing its ashes out of my skull.

My body tingles when I see the dark-oak door with a plate engraved *Music Room*, and the sadness melts away. This is my favourite classroom, the only place in school that's ever felt like home. There are other music rooms, mostly for recording or solo practice, but I like this one the most. It's more open, less lonely.

"Devon, welcome back and congrats on becoming a prefect!" Mr Taylor says as I step in. Mr Taylor is my favourite teacher; he's taught me music since freshman year and is the only teacher I ever really speak to outside of class. His face is always lit up, a smile permanently fixed to it. "You can get started on your senior project, along with the rest of the class."

My classmates are lost in the world of their own music, some on keyboards and others with pencils firmly gripped in their hands as they write down melodies on crisp white music sheets. We were meant to start planning our senior projects over the summer, ready to showcase when we got back. But I spent most of my summer occupied with my audition piece for college, as well as other not-so-academic things.

I spot my station at the back by one of the windows, with a keyboard on top of the desk and my initials, *DR*, engraved in gold into the wood. Not many people take music, so we all have our own stations. I've always loved this classroom

because it reminds me of those music halls from the classical concerts online: oval-shaped, with brown-panelled walls. Being in this room makes me feel like I'm more than a scholarship kid. Like I belong here, in this life, around these people.

Even though I know that isn't true.

"Thanks," I say, before stepping towards the keyboard I've dreamed of all summer. I don't have a keyboard at home, because there's no space and they are a lot more expensive than they look. I'm sure my ma would get me one if I asked, but she already does so much for me and I feel like I burden her more than I should. Instead, when I'm not in school, I improvise; humming tunes, writing down notes and listening to and watching whatever I can. I'm more into the composition and songwriting aspect of music anyway, but it still feels good to have an actual instrument in front of me again.

I plug the keyboard into the wall and it comes alive, the small square monitor in the corner flashing. I put my headphones on, running my fingers over the black and white plastic keys, pressing a few, letting a messy melody slip out, before I sit back, close my eyes, and picture the ocean. Bluish green with fish swimming and bright sea plants. I jump in, and I'm immersed by the water.

The familiar sense of peace rises inside and my hands stretch towards the piano.

And then I play.