

PLAYLIST

Yellow – Coldplay
Do I Wanna Know – Arctic Monkeys
I Wanna Be Yours – Arctic Monkeys
Your Blood – Nothing But Thieves
Impossible – Nothing But Thieves
Demons – MISSIO
Maniacs – Conan Gray
Run Into Trouble – Bastille & Alok
Somebody Else – The 1975
Someone Else – Loveless
Losing Control – Villain of the Story
Yours – Conan Gray
Sorry I'm Yours – Circa Wales
Half-Life - Essenger
Dear Reader – Taylor Swift
Half of My Heart – Josh Makazo
Silence – Marshmello & Khalid

You can find the complete playlist on [Spotify](#).

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BRANDON

What am I doing here?

Deep in the hollow corner of my heart, I know the answer. I know it so well that I can taste the nausea that slithered down my throat and hooked onto my bones the moment I got that godforsaken text.

A text I should've very well ignored, deleted, and then blocked the number.

A text I shouldn't have dignified with a look, let alone given it enough weight to intervene with my decision-making.

I did.

And that's the reason I'm here.

I did.

And now, I've put myself in an irreversible position.

I did.

And I'm not sure I can shove this lapse of judgment on to the possibility of having no choice.

In reality, I do.

I've just never been good with choices. Don't appreciate them. Don't care for them. Would rather not be presented with one.

The text was an obligation or, more accurately, a pertinent piece of information.

It was *not* a choice and certainly *not* a situation I could've escaped.

The reason I'm here is sorely due to my sense of responsibility that I've carried like excess baggage since I started learning what life is all about.

I'm at what looks like an indoctrination center. Other students stand on either side of me, forming parallel lines and wearing white rabbit masks that cover their features.

We're facing a huge three-story mansion with old-looking stone walls and an ancient tower on the far right.

The longer I remain unmoving, the more unsteady my breathing becomes.

My inhales and exhales flow in a fast, fractured rhythm, forming condensation on the plastic and forcing me to breathe my own air.

Tick.

The sound is low, but it slams into my brain like a fatal crash. My mouth starts to fill with saliva and I gulp it down, forcing my stomach to settle.

Tick.

I lift my hand, about to pull at my skull. Sometimes, I wish I could smash it against the nearest wall and watch as everything spills and shatters. Once and for fucking all.

Tick.

My fingers curl in midair, but I lower my hand and force it to hang limp at my side.

It's fine. I can do this.

Breathe.

You're in control.

My soothing words of affirmation splinter and crack as the scene around me comes back into focus.

No matter how much I attempt to delude myself, the reality is that I'm in the last place I should be.

And I'm not one to challenge fate or go places I'm not supposed to.

In my twenty-three years of life, I've always been the type of man who follows the rules. I've never deviated from what's expected of me and I'm creeped out at the notion of being different.

In any sense.

For whatever reason.

And yet here I am at the Heathens' mansion because I received a text and made the conscious decision *not* to ignore it.

I made the decision to attend the initiation of the most notorious club on Brighton Island—a secluded place near the UK's southwest coast.

For a university I'm not even enrolled in.

The Heathens are the leading club of The King's U college. A uni that reeks of mafia money and *la nouveau bourgeoisie*, where all American students flock like birds of a feather.

We have our own malicious club at Royal Elite University—or REU—where I'm working on my master's degree in art. It's called the Elites and is led by none other than my headache of a twin brother, Landon.

However, The King's U's clubs—the Heathens and the Serpents—are much more nefarious since they come from real mafia families and are using the uni experience to sharpen their fangs for the leading roles awaiting them back in the States.

If a week ago someone had told me I'd be standing here wearing a creepy rabbit mask and waiting for the entitled, violence-thirsty Americans to make their appearance, I would've laughed.

I'm certainly not laughing now. A lot of variables have changed in the span of a week and I find myself under the obligation to be here.

As part of the herd.

And it has everything to do with that headache of a brother I mentioned earlier.

Though they took my phone at the entrance, I can still recall the text I received yesterday word for word.

HEATHENS

Congratulations! You are invited to the Heathens' initiation ceremony. Please show the attached QR code upon arrival at the club's compound at four p.m. sharp.

While I'd heard of their nefarious initiations, I had absolutely no interest in them or the clubs. If I did, I would've joined the Elites since Lan has been asking for years.

So I ignored that text and was about to block the number, but then I got another one.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

If you want to see your twin brother breathing instead of being shoved in a casket and showcased to all participants, be at the initiation.

That's the reason I came here, even though every fiber of my being revolted against the idea of taking part in this madness. I called and texted

Lan, but he didn't reply, so I had to save him from himself as usual.

My brother has always been the reason I've deviated from the core of my existence, though he'd argue this is my true character, and what I consider normal is a product of repressing.

Hiding.

Shackling my real self.

A sudden movement comes from my side and I tighten my muscles, ready to run away, move from the center of danger and pretend none of this has taken place.

The girl beside me—judging by her breasts and frame—laughs as she hits her companion's shoulder.

A general murmur of excitement bubbles in the air.

I don't understand people's obsession with these types of events. Is it the feeling of grandiosity? The opportunity to walk amongst gods?

But then again, it's impossible for me to understand some people due to how drastically different my personality is compared to the rest of my peers.

Don't get me wrong. I get along with almost everyone and I'm often described as extremely polite and a good sport, but my close friends are only a few. The only reason we're tight is because we grew up together and I spent several years familiarizing myself with their personalities.

Maybe my inability to form close connections after my childhood is due to being completely detached from most people's source of happiness. A glaring example is my complete bafflement at these people's sense of a thrill. They talk about the Heathens as if they're the personification of everything they aspire to be.

Wealth, influence, and, most importantly, morbid power.

I, Brandon King, belong to one of the most influential families in the UK, if not *the* most influential, but I still don't get people's obsession with selected elites.

Is it the illusion? The unknown? Something entirely different?

The girl's chatter comes to a halt and she looks up as everyone else grows silent. I follow her field of vision and pause when the balcony doors on the second floor open and five men stroll outside, all of them wearing neon-stitch Halloween-esque masks.

The one in the middle has an orange mask and carries a metal club. He's tall and broad, but the guy by his side who's wearing a yellow mask is taller

and buffer, and he reeks of hostility, even from this distance.

He stands out because he's the only one without a weapon, but he still emanates a nefarious energy. The rest of them, however, seem to have their thoughts and tempers under control.

Red Mask's fingers wrap around a bat, letting it rest nonchalantly on his shoulder.

A recurve bow is nestled in Green Mask's hand and there's a quiver attached to his back, and White Mask strokes a heavy-looking chain that's hanging around his neck.

They're all dressed in black T-shirts and trousers like a conformist unit of destruction.

Fortunately, I've never crossed the Heathens' paths or interacted with them, which can't be said about my prick of a brother. Is he with them? Perhaps he's playing a sick game to be part of their inner circle?

Or is he maybe somewhere in front of me or behind me? Maybe next to me?

The problem is, I can never imagine Lan being a participant in another group's glory or a mere follower in someone else's mayhem. He's too narcissistic for that. Besides, how could he possibly get an invitation?

The same way I got invited?

Probably.

Maybe.

I watch the five Heathens closely. The one in orange, standing tall in the middle, is most likely Jeremy Volkov, the leader of the Heathens and a Russian mafia prince. If my friends' gossip can be trusted, he's ruthless to a fault and is rumored to kill everyone in his wake.

Green and Red Masks are possibly Gareth and Killian Carson. The siblings are affiliated with the mafia but are more American royalty instead of mafia princes. However, I'm not sure which is which. White Mask seems like the leanest of the bunch, so he can't be any of the three previously mentioned.

Yellow Mask can only be Nikolai Sokolov. Another Russian mafia prince, Killian and Gareth's cousin, and the craziest twat who ever walked the earth.

If rumors are anything to go by—and in Nikolai's case, they probably are—he's capable of punching someone to death just because they had the audacity to piss him off. I've only stood close to him once, a week ago

when—*again*—my twin brother was fighting him in an underground fight club.

I honest to God thought he'd pummel Lan to death.

He didn't, because my brother is a cat with nine lives.

My concern about Lan shifted to disturbing unease when Nikolai looked at me with a manic expression while wearing my brother's blood on his bandaged hands.

I had this inherent need to get the hell out of there. And I did—after dragging my brother along, of course.

I've never gotten that feeling from someone younger than me, and Nikolai is *way* younger. Nineteen, I think. A kid right out of secondary school—high school for Americans.

Only, he looks *nothing* like a kid.

Even now, while wearing black clothes, his build stands out as if he's sculpted from pure muscle and malicious intent.

Good thing I don't run in these people's circle and never will.

Today is an exception. The sooner I locate Lan, the faster I can leave this immoral place.

Static rings in the air before a distorted voice speaks from all around us.

"Congratulations on making it to the Heathens' highly competitive initiation. You are the selected elite the leaders of the club think are worthy of joining their world of power and connections. The price to pay for such privileges is higher than money, status, or name. The reason everyone wears a mask is because you are all the same in the eyes of the club's founders. The price of becoming a Heathen is handing over your life. In the literal sense of the word. If you aren't willing to pay that, please exit through the small door to your left. Once you leave, you'll lose any chance to join us again."

A door beside the big gate opens, and about a dozen or less people exit. I contemplate joining them and putting an end to this madness, but I'd never, in good conscience, abandon my brother.

Never.

The distorted voice returns. "Congratulations again, ladies and gentlemen. We shall now begin our initiation."

I lift my head to the five Heathens, who remain unmoving. Completely grounded, absolutely apathetic about the promise of violence they're unleashing on the world.

All except for one.

The anomaly.

Violence on steroids.

Yellow Mask clenches and unclenches his fists at a rhythmic pace as if he's performing a ritual. That guy needs to be locked up instead of being allowed to be part of this nonsensical initiation.

"Tonight's game is predator and prey," the voice continues. "You'll be hunted down by the club's founding members. That will be five to ninety, so you have the upper hand. If you manage to reach the edge of the property before they hunt you down, you'll be a Heathen. If not, you'll be eliminated and escorted out. The founding members have the right to use any methods available to hunt you down—including violence. If their weapon of choice touches you, you'll be automatically eliminated. Bodily harm can and will happen. You are also allowed to inflict violence on the founding members—if you can. The only rule is not taking a life. Not intentionally, at least. No questions are allowed and no mercy shall be granted. We don't want any weaklings in our ranks."

Barbarians. The lot of them. Hopeless, outrageous savages with no grace whatsoever.

But then again, what to expect from mafia people?

"You have a ten-minute head start. I suggest you run. The initiation has officially begun."

The girl beside me and her companions sprint so fast, the pebbles crunch beneath their trainers. Everyone else rushes in the direction of the forest and I'm left with the option of following or remaining here like easy prey.

Cursing under my breath, I run as fast as possible. My heart rate remains the same—unperturbed, calm, and completely unaffected by the lick of danger and the lust for the thrill that hangs in the air like splashes of magenta on turquoise blue.

I guess that's the upside of having an abnormal brain. This type of nonsense doesn't affect it.

Despite going late, I manage to run faster and farther than the other participants. I might not be into these types of events, but I'm an athlete, pretty much a professional runner and also the captain of the lacrosse team at REU.