

Contrary to popular belief, not all prisons are made public by the United States. There are a select few which are kept both off the maps and off the books. Downside Penitentiary is one such prison.

The taser wielding guards herd the prisoners onto the massive, one hundred by thirty meter elevator that constitutes two-thirds of the room. The prisoners are lined up in the center between semi-trailers of goods, all bound for the bowels of Downside.

Once the prisoners are all aboard, the elevator lurches into action. Screeching gears and dim, flickering fluorescent light set the tone for the slow and gloomy descent. Growls, whimpers, and the occasional thump come from the nearby shipping containers. The thoroughly scared convicts stay completely silent for the entire descent.

A mile of concrete passes by on their trip, and after a seeming eternity compressed into only a half-hour, the prisoners finally arrive at Downside Penitentiary. More guards usher them through metal corridors for processing.

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“Next prisoner,” I hear the guard’s bored monotone call as the prisoner in front of me is ushered forward.

“Name?” the processor asks.

“Daniel Agravan,” the prisoner answers. The processor checks the name on his tablet and then makes sure the prisoner is who he actually is. He taps the tablet several times and then turns to one of the guards.

“Black Rank.”

A guard leaves and returns with a black bracelet. The bracelet is locked around the prisoner's right ankle and he is ushered inside.

“Next Prisoner.”

I hear the call and walk towards the processor.

“Name?”

“Quasi Eludo.” I state.

The processor checks my name on his tablet, and then slows down. He looks at the tablet, and then me, and then the tablet several times.

“Looks like the powers that be don't want you dead.” He taps the tablet and then turns to one of the armed guards. “Gold Rank,” he states.

The guard leaves and returns with a vibrant gold bracelet that he latches to my right ankle.

The processor then looks to the other guard. “Please escort Mister Eludo to the gold-wing of the prison and introduce him to the Gold-Blockleiter.”

The guard nods and, quite nicely, asks me to follow.

I follow the guard through long reaching, paned upper passageways that reveal the enormous scope of the prison—though more of a city than anything else below. Similar to a city, the prison complex has apartment buildings, gyms, workshops, medical areas, libraries, churches, and a massive central exercise yard.

From my casual glance, I also notice that the city is separated into four quadrants, with the smaller quadrants looking better.

Our trip takes us to the smallest and most well cared for quadrant. Me and the guard enter an elevator that drops us down to the city ground level. I exit to the curious whispers of many other nearby prisoners—all of which have the same golden band on their ankle as myself.

“This way. We are almost there.”

The guard leads me through clean streets and several buildings until we arrive at the largest building yet. Above the entrance, arrayed in bright gold, is the word Gasthaus.

When we enter, the muted, chilly temperature of the prison outside is replaced with an inviting warmth. I am guided inside towards yet another elevator, wherein the guard presses the topmost button with his thumb for several seconds. After a moment the elevator begins to hum with classical music until we reach the penthouse. We exit the elevator and arrive in a gaudy, golden-embroided office room with a glass view of most of the entire city. From the view, three similar buildings can be seen, including a large central building in the city's center.

“Gold-Blockleiter,” the guard steps forward, “there is a new arrival.”

The chair behind the desk swivels away from the glass windows with the professionalism of an experienced CEO. When the man swivels to his desk, he places down the glass of wine he had been holding and then our eyes meet.

The man smiles warmly.

“Ahh, yes. Quasi Eludo, the richest man in the world... for a week. I've been expecting you.”

He extends his hand to the seat across his desk.

“Please, take a seat.”

I walk to the leather chair and sit my butt down on the cushion.

He clasps his hands together.

“First, let me introduce myself. I am Herman Toftoy, and I am the leader of the Gold ranked prisoners. My job is to make sure that my prisoners are taken care of and comport themselves in an orderly and proper manner.”

He unclasps his hands, reaches into a drawer and retrieves a gold-trimmed book. He pushes that book to me.

“This book contains all the regulations that you as a prisoner are subject to and are expected to follow. When you have time, I highly suggest you read and memorize them all so that you do not find yourself in trouble.”

I open the first page of the book... and chuckle.

The Gold-Blockleiter smiles at my reaction.

“It seems you understand.”

He reaches into his drawer again and this time retrieves a pencil and notebook. He flips open the book and stops on a page.

“Ahh, perfect. Prisoner 31244 recently passed.” He quickly writes something down on the notebook and glances up at the guard behind me.

“Please take Quasi to cell 821 on the eighth floor.” He looks up at me. “Mister Eludo, please enjoy your stay at Downside.”

With the rather short introduction completed. I follow the guard back to the elevator which then takes me to the eighth floor. I exit onto the eighth floor and into a common area with clean and colorful carpeted flooring, a small library, massage chair, video-game consoles, and a stocked kitchen.

“This way.” The guard leads me past several open and closed cells until we reach cell 21. In the cell is a single bunk bed, with a prisoner already laying on the bottom.

“Cillian,” the guard knocks on the open cell, “You’ve got a bunkmate now.”

A round, short man with a magnificent beard groans as he leans up to the side of the bed. He then blinks rapidly and shakes his head.

“Feeck meee,” he curses, “I must still be jaked. Is that a brat with narry a hair on his chin?”

I grin, “What are you talking about?” I deepen my voice, “I’ve got an amazing goatee,” I stroke my clear chin, “Your eyes are just failing you.”

He blinks again. With a decent bit of effort, he wipes both eyes with a sleeve. Then he takes a proper look at me.

“You’re just a wee brat. Why the feck are children in this prison?”

The guard sighs, unamused. “This is your new bunkmate. Show him the ropes. I have to get back to work.”

Without even bothering to move me into my cell or close the cell door, the guard turns and walks back the way he came.

As he leaves, Cillian burps with the professionalism of an expert alcoholic.

He stands up and lifts his mattress a little to grab one of several bottles of indeterminate liquid. He opens said bottle and downs half the contents.

“So,” he asks with a grin, “What the feck did you do to get into Downside?”

I grin back. “I bribed a lot of people.”