

THE SLOW KNIFE

Arcadia Prime



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THE PITCH

Arcadia Prime is all our fears for the near future made real. The ultrarich, having made their billions as the Earth burns around them, have fled to safety in an orbital paradise. It's *Elysium*, *Rapture*, *Teixcalaan*, and all the other cities from stories of inequity across the stars.

We'll play members of this satellite elite, living in luxury among the new high society as we wine, dine, and countersign—managing our fortunes and our rivals as we gaze at the cosmos with a cultivated disinterest.

Use this playset to twist your anxieties about the world into diabolical avatars, and to claim an ounce of solace as you tell the patient story of their inevitable comeuppance.

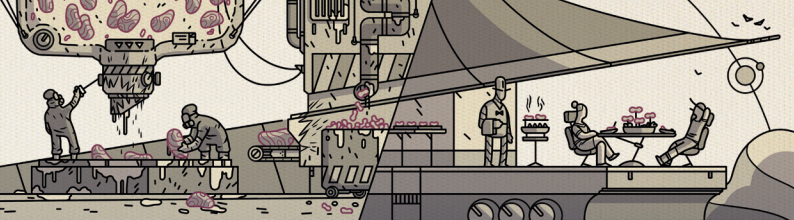
THE PLAYSET

We'll complete these steps to work through the playset and set up our game. This replaces the usual *Prelude*.

We'll take turns reading text aloud, and add characters, threads and notes to our board as we make new choices.

1. Read *A Paradise for Parasites* (3).
2. Read *Our Place in the Stars* (5) and make the four choices presented to customise your setting.
3. Create the *Knife* (8) together as a group.
4. Each choose one of the four *Conspirators* (9) to play as your character, then name & introduce them.
5. Outline the Knife's arrest in the *Incident* (13).
6. Define your Conspirator's role in the arrest by choosing options in *Each One Bloody Handed* (15).
7. Ensure that all relevant characters, threads and notes have been added to the board. There are lists at the back of the book to help name characters (17).
8. You are now ready to begin your story with *Act 1*.

This process typically takes around an hour to complete.



A Paradise for Parasites

WE CAN'T LOOK UP

A thick, ochre miasma lingers just below the rooftops.

But steal a car and drive out west – through the trash-choked gutters, the hab-city checkpoints, the satellite slums, the bleached forests and up into the wind-scarred sierra – and you might just catch a glimpse of the sky.

And if you stared long enough, you would notice that one of the stars burns a little brighter than the rest as it glides across the ink-dark heavens. This is Arcadia Prime.

THEY DON'T LOOK DOWN

A starflung haven for the ultrarich, Arcadia Prime arcs gracefully in geostationary orbit around a dying Earth.

Leafy streets wend gently through stylish residences of white and glass, where beautiful gaunts gather to share canapés and polite laughter. A paradise for parasites.

FOR THE BENEFIT OF EARTH

Like an orbital tapeworm, Arcadia leeches resources from Earth to maintain its inhabitant's lavish lifestyles.

Those below process waxen, dog-sized grubs into tender replica meats. They delve through toxic scrap to salvage batteries. They trade blood to revitalise Arcadia's aging bodies. Some even work in the depths of Arcadia itself.

In exchange Arcadia provides irresistible entertainments, retail narcotics and a pale dream: to fix our broken Earth.

REGULATION-HEIGHT HEDGES

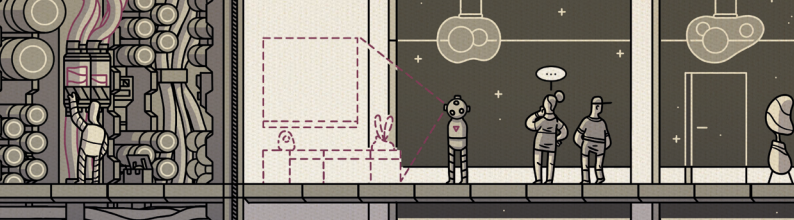
For our story we should imagine Arcadia as the worst kind of exclusive, picket-fenced suburban community.

It's verdant fairways, protein-rich salads and sage-scented wellness retreats. But it's also messy divorces, civic committee squabbles and the occasional quiet murder.

Play your part in genteel society, make your billions as your robot assistant fetches drinks, get your rivals exiled earthbound, and don't forget to watch your back.

"He who is not contented with what he has,
would not be contented with what he would like to have."

— **Socrates**



Our Place in the Stars

Arcadia Prime is a near-Earth colony built for the wealthy elite and those who serve them. It is a manicured palace of clean lines and lush greenery, maintained by teams of robotic and organic people who make themselves invisible to paying residents.

Here, we can shape this picturesque nightmare into something we're all excited to explore. As we go, we should make notes on the board, reference media touchstones and ask clarifying questions. We can always revise our answers if a better idea emerges.

GREY SANDS, GREY SKIES

Earth—dying home to the miserable masses. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *Nuclear brinkmanship led to nuclear war, erasing population centres across the world and creating an irradiated wasteland.*
- ♦ *A devastating environmental collapse, preventable if it weren't so unprofitable, took its steady, choking hold over our world.*

SET APART, BOUND TOGETHER

Yet, even up here, we cannot live without it. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *Shuttles bring supplies to us from hab-cities across the world—ugly domes of rusted steel housing billions of unfortunate souls.*
- ♦ *A space elevator tethers us to the surface, ferrying goods on bulky climbers. The last megacity sprawls out from its anchor.*

DEPENDABLE SYSTEMS, INCREDIBLE SCIENCE

Technology is our lifeline, we respect it as such. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *We rely on low-power computing: switches and dials, wired connections, compact screens—shielded with thick lead panels.*
- ♦ *Clouds of nanomachines swarm through our skies, holographic projections augment our reality, everything is instantaneous.*

RUBBER STAMPS, PERISHED SEALS

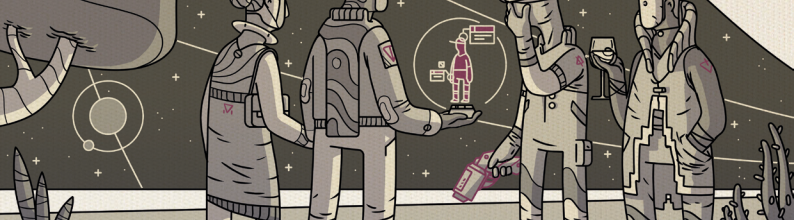
Black hearts stalk beneath a veneer of civility. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *Bureaucracy is a blade as sharp as any knife and easier still to control—problem residents are neatly cut from our society.*
- ♦ *Bodies are hard to hide on this sealed vessel. But space is dangerous, even here, so accidents are all-too easy to arrange.*

“Is this Paradise?”

‘I can guarantee you that it isn’t,’ Jubal assured him. ‘My taxes are due.’”

— Robert A. Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*



Characters

First, we'll introduce **Tesh Cassini**, the *Knife*, and answer their two questions.

We should decide as a group which pronouns Tesh uses.

Next, each of us will choose a *Conspirator* to play for the rest of the story. There are four to choose from:

- ♦ **Domenico:** *a friend-turned-rival, in serious money trouble.*
- ♦ **Naltrech:** *an eminent scientist, threatened by scandal.*
- ♦ **Alabaster:** *Tesh's future in-law who cannot abide the match.*
- ♦ **Brightline:** *a prominent figure, publicly spurned by Tesh.*

Read their description and make their choice, then introduce them and add them to the board.

Conspirators are referred to only by their surname, so we can choose their first name and pronouns freely. Consider their appearance, choosing a portrait card to represent them on the board if desired.

Tesh Cassini *The Knife*

Born on Earth, Tesh felt uneasy in the decorous circles of Arcadia society. They ascended as an adult, buoyed by their skill and the tireless sacrifice of others, to find a culture that despised everything but their performance.

So while they enjoyed the clean air and fine food, they never forgot about the higher purpose they served.

GLORIFIED GENIUS

Their gift—remarkable enough to save them. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *An astonishing athlete, champion of Earth's low-gravity football league, now a star player in the Arcadia Angels.*
- ♦ *A celebrity chef, famous for their imitation meat recipes, now the owner of a small restaurant in Arcadia's retail district.*

EARTHLY PURPOSE

They were free of Earth, but not of obligation. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *Tesh's family sacrificed everything to give them a chance. Now Tesh wants to return the favour and bring them here too.*
- ♦ *Tesh is a sleeper agent for the Loamborne, a radical anti-Arcadia faction. Their orders are to integrate and prepare.*

Domenico *Conspirator*

You and Tesh were born in the same crappy, crowded block in one of Earth's many slums. As children you were best friends and fierce rivals, whether racing along teetering stacks of scrap or studying at your local Layton Academy—the vanity project of Arcadia's richest man.

Your talents were matched, but Tesh always stalled when things got too risky or someone might get hurt. That's why you got out first, growing a simple idea into an empire through tenacity and ruthless efficiency. You bought your ticket to Arcadia on the backs of others.

And yet Tesh eventually followed, rising up by merit alone just as your business began to falter. Now you face eviction as their star soars, and that simply won't stand.

THE PRICE OF FRIENDSHIP

Your fortunes look up if Tesh goes down. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *You have gambled everything you have on a last-ditch wager that will pay off nicely—if Tesh is taken out of the picture.*
- ♦ *You're so close to swindling Tesh out of their newly-acquired fortune, but they're getting wary. It's time to pull the trigger.*

Naltrech *Conspirator*

You had never heard of Tesh until the day you destroyed their life. You are regarded as a visionary of science by your peers on Arcadia, a brilliant mind unfettered by Earth's tyrannical rules and regulations.

Rumours about your methods attract criticism from left-wing poseurs as they muckrake over vintage wines, but they eagerly consume your results. The fact is, they don't really want to know the true story. And so it shall remain.

Every now and again some conscientious postgrad or nosy journalist uncovers more than they should, and they are swiftly dealt with. This time it was Tesh who, unwittingly or otherwise, looked a little too closely. Oh well, just another casualty in the name of progress.

AN UNPALATABLE TRUTH

Your life's work is essential, if a little distasteful. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *You perfected the art of recycling human bodies into a protein-rich slurry, the main ingredient of Arcadia's nutri-shakes.*
- ♦ *You can reverse aging among Arcadia's elite by transfusing blood from adolescent donors, usually earthborn and desperate.*

Alabaster *Conspirator*

You and your family were among the first to move to Arcadia. Your name is one of enduring prestige, a dynasty stretching back to antiquity, so naturally you had the means and influence to secure one of the finest residences on the station. From your palatial home, you monitor your investments and, reluctantly, your household affairs.

Your child and sole heir, now a young adult, has always had a rebellious streak. Until recently, their outbursts had been contained to a dreadful haircut or designer drugs: all easy enough to smooth over. But now they say they've *fallen in love* with some upstart called 'Tesh'—an unrefined immigrant, born into squalor in an Earth slum.

As a matter of urgency, you must spoil this improper affair.

A SPIRITED SCION

Your brat has always given you plenty of trouble. **Choose one:**

- ◆ *You named them after your favourite flower. They seem bookish and compliant, but they wreak havoc in the shadows.*
- ◆ *You named them after your favourite hero. They are a wrecking ball of fiery energy, raucous and utterly fearless.*

Brightline *Conspirator*

You are an business magnate, investor and philanthropist, founder of some of the biggest companies on Arcadia. Nobody gets to say no to you. Sometimes they might try, but with enough money, promises or pressure they always bend to your aspirations.

Tesh Cassini is your current obsession. Whatever the nature of your interest, you need them under your control and they have spurned you at every opportunity. You've tried showering them with gifts. You've tried to pressure their friends and allies to turn against them. You've even tried menacing them directly with thinly-veiled threats.

Their refusal not only frustrates your desires but publicly embarrasses you. So: if you can't have them, nobody can.

NOBODY SAYS NO

You only wanted the best for them. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *You wanted to control the future of their labour and business, adding another rising star to your considerable portfolio.*
- ♦ *You wanted them to be your paramour, the latest in a long history of romantic affairs. They would've lacked for nothing.*



The Incident

So, now we have our central cast of characters and know a little about Tesh's life. They were on the ascent, working their way towards a better life on Arcadia for themselves while charting a course for those they care about to follow.

But then, of course, our villains played their part. They plotted together in the shadows to frame Tesh for a crime they never committed, each of them playing a pivotal, active role in the conspiracy.

Tesh's hopeful days were cut short, and they were arrested and imprisoned in the squalid depths of obscurity.

To establish the truth of this incident, we'll first sketch the basic facts of their arrest by making three choices: the crime they were framed for, the site of their arrest, and their place of imprisonment. Once we have this sketch, we'll work out how our Conspirators were involved.

Add notes to the board as you make these choices.

ALMOST CRIMES

Tesh was framed for a heinous offence. **Choose one:**

- ♦ **The murder of Rake Gillard**—*the brash, inflammatory host of The Daily Rake, Arcadia's most popular talk show.*
- ♦ **Identity fraud.** *Tesh Cassini was killed back on Earth, they say—this charlatan is an imposter who stole their ticket here.*

IMMEDIATE JUSTICE

Swift, unbending—no bail, no trial, no chance. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *During a big public event, long prepared for, Tesh was roughly cuffed and dragged away in front of a sea of news cameras.*
- ♦ *After a busy day at work, on their roof garden with a warm drink, an ominous knock at the door. Come quietly, they said.*

DESPARING DESCENT

Now they are banished to a grim, forlorn exile. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *Down to one of Earth's containment cities—dismal, violent squalor; miserable and murderous; mud, rain, rust and blood.*
- ♦ *Deep within Arcadia amid white-collar criminals and radicals, sustaining the station through hazardous forced labour.*

“In the depths of winter, I finally learned that there lay within me an invincible summer.”

— Albert Camus, *Nuptials*



Each One Bloody Handed

Now it's time to figure out how our Conspirators were involved and the sequence that led to the Knife's arrest.

We'll take turns choosing a prompt for our Conspirator. It will establish a truth about their role and also provide a question that we should ask the player to our left. They answer as their Conspirator, weaving our plot together.

Continue discussing the conspiracy until we've each made our choice and we're clear on the order of events.

Then, update the board before beginning with Act 1.

THE ROLE OF *DOMENICO*

In this life, you do what you have to do. **Choose one, ask left:**

- ♦ *You needed my 'lowlife experience' to execute this plot. What did you ask of me, and what price did I know you would pay?*
- ♦ *You asked me to divulge something that Tesh had told me in confidence back on Earth. What secret of theirs did I betray?*

THE ROLE OF **NALTRECH**

It was a simple equation to balance. **Choose one, ask left:**

- ♦ *It was trivial for me to fabricate vital evidence. All I needed was a DNA sample—how did you get it for me?*
- ♦ *You needed me to alter official records. What secure document did I access, and how did you almost get me caught?*

THE ROLE OF **ALABASTER**

Goodbye and good riddance, dog. **Choose one, ask left:**

- ♦ *You asked me to invite Tesh to dinner. What vulnerability did I tease out of them, and what slight did I have to endure?*
- ♦ *Tesh's love was their greatest weakness. How did we arrange for you to endanger my scion? What did we demand Tesh do?*

THE ROLE OF **BRIGHTLINE**

Things just fall into place sometimes. **Choose one, ask left:**

- ♦ *I have dirty favours owed in every corner of this gilded station. What decorous official did you ask that I bend to my will?*
- ♦ *I have staff on my books, and contractors who aren't, ready to enact violence. Who did you ask me to point them at?*

Conquerors live in dread of the day when they are shown to be, not superior, but simply lucky."

— N.K. Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*

People of Arcadia

BLUE-BLOODS AND BARONS

Akbash, Bellrose, Ceylon, Djinn, Edgar, Fenix, Hera, Indigo, Jacques, Kind, Lychee, Meridian, Nobu, Orla, Palermo, Quam, Radgar, Sayla, Tombo, Uriel, Violet, Wilhelm, Xander, Zola

Canton, Deacon, Erstwhile, Fenchurch, Goodson, Highwater, Ito, Jazmere, Kirrahe, Lamkin, Maddox, Orchard, Plume, Quixada, Renaud, Sano, Tanaka, Theris, Usheel, Vale, Yuan, Zimmers

SCOUNDRELS AND SERVANTS

Arvo, Bucklighter, Cardoon, Danglar, Eshin, Finch, Gad, Huck, Jerro, Kilo, Locke, Murrano, Nitro, Ocelot, Pusher, Pickadine, Quasar, Rusco, Stylo, Toucan, Unche, Vincet, Wu, Xanadu, Yerro

PLACES AND PARTNERSHIPS

Angmering, Asea, Bishopstoke, Chatsbury, Feneos, Lycosura, Kapsas, Merstham, Palehouse, Ryehaven, Southwick, Thyraion

Red Sun Galactic, Magbank Alliance, POPCORP!, Brightline Consolidated, Valdivian Intergalactic, The Blackwater Group

The Orchard Syndicate, The Brotherhood of Ra, Broken Crescent, The Sable Targe, The Feast of Saint-Lazare, The Lavender Union

