Two watchers reclined on the hill. Between the hill and the edge of the tall woods, a field of tall grass lay spread out below them, more than a kilometer across. The grass in the middle of the field was trampled, the ground torn up by the many hooves that had run across it. The middle was beaten to bare dirt, but the field had not long been used for the game. Tall grass still stood on the majority of the playing area, enough to hide a hunter.

“Gerran’s prey again,” one of the watchers of the game noted. Out on the playing field, a long-legged, pale caramel turr loped towards the bare circle in the middle of the field, while the other four broke up and headed for the tall grass at the edges.

The game, called aarkheldr, or “prey and hunter” was older than civilization. Surprisingly similar versions independently evolved on both continents of the turran homeworld. In the south, however, the ayss played it in rugged terrain, rather than the flat, and trees were an important part of the play. The turr played only in the open. The hunt team spread out around the perimeter of the field, over a kilometer across, but only four would come in during the round. The “prey” would not know which direction they came from, or who the hunt team selected. The rest of the hunt team formed a circle at the edge. They could only intercept the prey if he passed outside the inner circle.

Gerran began searching the ring for the stalkers. The rules stated that he could not run until he saw them—it would be foolish anyway, without knowing which direction to run. When—or if—they caught him, only one could close with him, while the others blocked his escape. His job was to get Gerran’s legs out from under him. If Gerran overcame the hunter instead, the hunter would retire and another of the four come in. Four throws for Gerran and he would be prey again—and much more tired, while the next hunters that came in from the outer circle would be fresh. Thus only the strongest and most durable remained “prey” for any time at all.

“Figure he’ll last another round?” one of the watchers asked the ayss raal next to him. She grunted indifferently. The hunters had dropped out of sight at the perimeter, now, and the four hunters would be stalking. Gerran turned about warily, his ears never resting, but the four hunters gave nothing away, not even to the two on the slope who had a better vantage.

“One round more only,” she stated with finality, surging to her hooves. Because of her young age, she was lean, as ayss went, which made her only a little chunkier than a heavy turr. Her fur was a dark cinnamon, marked with umber stripes on her shoulders, black feet and hands and the characteristic tear lines leading from the black around her eyes to the dark of her muzzle. Like most of her kind, her fur grew long and fine, making trailers and feathers on the backs of her legs, burying her hooves in black silk. As she loped down towards the playing field, the feather transformed her motion, making her six hundred kilos seem to drift along over broad feet that only lightly touched the ground, but for the crushed grass and depressed earth that marked her passing.

The four hunters, confused by the sound of her approach, rose to pursue too soon, reaching Gerran hot and out of breath. The first to arrive charged straight into him while the other three formed a circle, but Gerran simply sidestepped him, forcing him to waste energy stopping and
turning. That was a missed kill, counted as a fall for the hunter. The second hunter watched more carefully, so that he could intercept, but Gerran did not dodge. He dove and hooked the hunter’s front legs with his foreleg, and doubled his fists hard against the hunter’s upper back, giving him the second fall. The third closed before the second had even recovered his wits, and he too fell to a simple maneuver. The fourth approached more carefully, biding his time. Two were down, one was stalking. The fourth, though standing, was out of it. So Gerran ran.

It took a couple of beats before the fourth hunter could believe what was happening and pursue, but he was the faster runner, and Gerran was showing the strain of the day. As Gerran neared the edge of the circle, the fourth hunter caught up with him. Suddenly two perimeter hunters jumped up, eager to prevent Gerran’s escape. Gerran jolted to a halt on his front feet, his body pivoting around as the hunter snatched at his tail. His hooves lashed out at the passing hunter, hurling him into the other two, and all three went down in a shouting tangle.

“You getting tired, Gerran?” one of them asked as he lay panting on the ground, staring at clouds. Gerran clasped his hand, pulling him to his hooves, and leaned close.

“Beat me,” he grinned.

As Gerran waited in the center, he tried to still his hard breathing so that he could hear better. Count to a hundred before worrying about it, he thought. A hundred breaths. Half a thousand heart cycles, rumbling hard in his chest like the wings of a fleeing bird. He had the directions of three of them pinned down by the noise they made in the dry grass. Three of the points of a compass. No imaginations. Was number four at the last point? Three was legal, albeit stupid, especially as an open square. Could it be three? He strained his ears in the fourth direction and heard only wind sighing in the grass. These were not dim kids. They had something planned. But prey would not know it, and he was prey. When the time came—

—Here they came. Three charged through the tallgrass, directly at him, obviously driving him to the suspiciously open fourth side. He considered standing his ground, but that would spoil the game, besides which, he was itching to find out what they were up to. He wheeled and galloped towards the perimeter, keeping his ears on his pursuers. Their hoofbeats slowed. He looked back in time to see them split off and fan out to cover his sides. When he looked forward again, a rusty auburn wall of fur blocked his path. He caught a brief glimpse of black markings and broad feet, then a hard yank nearly dislocated his arms and those broad feet slammed into his gut, lifting him off the ground. Air rushed past. He fell a suprisingly long time as the earth and sky wheeled about him, then he rejoined the earth, face-first, eating dirt. Every moving part of his body twisted painfully with the impact.

The dust cleared to reveal a familiar, if large figure standing over him, grinning.

“I see you finally decided to play, Feíhol,” he noted wryly.

“A’aya,” she confirmed as she offered him a hand up, “I thought you might be getting tired, what with being prey all the time.”

“If I’d known ayss were on the field, I would never have let you catch me.”
“What catch? You ran into me.”

“I’m going to rest, now. A few more rounds and I’ll have you down, and then see if you catch me.

“Maybe I’ll stop playing then.”

“Good players don’t need to win to enjoy the game,” he said, quoting something they had both heard often as cubs. She laughed softly and he joined her.

“Hunters have to fall too, you know. How far do I get to throw you?” she joked. Dread crossed his face for an instant, then he backed his ears in irritation at being surprised and raised his hand, claws out, as though to strike her.

“Get into the circle, Prey!” he laughed. She strode off, but not without a bemused glance at his claws. Ayss often consider turr to be effete because they seemed to be clawless, she thought, but they had claws all right. They just didn’t keep them in the open.

She reached the circle of bare, hoof-scraped earth and sat on her haunches, crossing her arms. Across the tall plains grass, she could see nothing but the woods that rose into low mountains behind the plain. She did not really want to be here, in the circle, out in the open. The woods were a better place to play.

She smiled—this game could go to the woods yet. She stood up and began walking towards the woods, gathering speed. A hunter sprang out of the grass in front of her—one of the four, startled by her headlong approach. He was not very old. She suspected that Gerran was planning strategy for the hunt team, and that all their biggest players were resting up to take her down once the lesser players had tired her out some. The youth tried to grapple with her, but he only came up to her sternum. She ran over him, ploughing him under, dancing to avoid stepping on him, then put on a burst of speed to leave him behind. A glance back showed that him climbing groggily to his feet. He would be all right. The perimeter was unguarded between her and the woods, though rim hunters were closing on both sides. She made the woods easily, a ragged pursuit not far behind.

On the flat, they could run circles around her, but here, in the hills, dodging trees and rocks, her strength made it no contest. One by one, her pursuit fell away until only a hard core of three or four remained, chasing her more out of spite than anything, because it was pretty obvious that she was out of the game.

With the shield of a low hill between her and her pursuers, she swiftly picked out a good tree and veered towards it, circling to the backside before scrambling up—claw gouges were a dead giveaway, though it never seemed to occur to laska’n to look up trees. Barely had she reached the first branch and crouched down against it before the entire hunt team galloped past below her, howling curses and anger. She allowed herself a private smile. When the sound of their hooves and cries grew dim with distance, she scrambled backwards down the thick trunk. She patted the trunk affectionately, then froze, looking closer, then sniffing the trunk. Hers were not the only fresh scars on that trunk.
There were three sets of clawmarks—her two, going up and coming down, and another set
going up—deeper, wider between the claws. She squinted up into the tangle of branches. The tree
was large, twice as large as she could reach around, and taller than the beacon tower at Port Beísar.
Even the branches far up the tree, out of sight from the ground, were thick enough to support an ayss.
There were no other trees of size close enough to jump to. Whoever had climbed it before her was
still up there—a male, by the scent, though none she knew. Strangers were uncommon this far from
Port Beísar.

“A greeting, khur Aaril,” she called out in her deep voice. She thought she saw a flash of fur,
high up in the branches, and faintly heard the scrabbling of claws on wood, then only the wind.
Delicate blue masirtas fluttered from the tree, screeching a cacophany of warning. He was not up
there to hunt them. They were too small to interest an ayss. All other animals held fearful silence
near the two predators. The only sounds were the masirtas and the papery rustling of wind in leaves.

“I know you are there,” she called impatiently. “Do you hear me?”

Silence.

“If you don’t say something, I am going to come up and drag you down!” On an impulse, she
repeated the statement in Saleía, supposedly the unifying language of the banaís, her own race, called
ayss by turr like the hunters back in the field. It was a beautiful, frustrating, ancient, lyrical and
convoluted language that she knew she spoke badly, and only as well as she did because Marr
Mauree drove all the ayss at the Den to learn it. Just because Saleía was his first language, just
because he never learned to speak Troáhn very well, was no good reason to force her to—

A deep yet faint voice drifted down, a soft sigh that seemed part of the wind tousled leaves,
speaking Saleía: “No.”

“You do have a voice. Will you come down, or do I come up?”

“NO,” the distant voice repeated more firmly.

“Then can we at least talk? I’d like to find out something about you. Who are you?”

The other stayed silent for a few moments, then sighed: “Jaffó.”

“Is that your name? My name is Feíjholna’akhos M’daos’ier—Feíjhol to save breath. You are
not from around here. I know all of the ayss from the Den very well, and there aren’t any freedens or
holdings near here. Are you a wanderer?”

He gave no reply, but she could just make out the outline of his head and ears peering over the
edge of his branch, thirty meters above her head.

“That’s a unusual name for an ayss,” she prompted.

Still he said nothing.
“Are you from Port Beísar? Maybe from Center? I just wondered. We don’t get many strangers around here, and it’s quite insane that the first one I’ve greeted in a year is stuck up a tree and refuses to come down or talk to me or anything. I’ve never met anyone so unsociable in my life! You could at least just talk to me. I know you can talk, because I just heard you!”

“You also have a voice,” he commented neutrally.

She smiled wryly, bewildered by the situation. Logically, she should run for one of the Den’s masters, since a stranger could potentially pose a threat to the younger ones. The snag to that was that she was included in that group, and would probably be forbidden from the woods until he was found and questioned. Also, she did not doubt that the moment she left the base of the tree, he would be down and away. More than that, however, he intrigued her. She had only known those that she had grown up with, almost never meeting anyone new. The Den was far south of Port Beísar, and few came this far except on business or to escort very young students arriving. She wanted more than anything to see what he looked like.

Mostly, he was a challenge, and she could never resist a challenge. Gerran had challenged her by his wins, so she had beaten him, however unequally matched they were. She would win this challenge or be beaten fairly. She would not give up.

“I think you are hiding in the tree because you are scared,” she said, hoping to draw him down with a challenge of her own.

“Yes,” the voice admitted softly.

She stumbled mentally, her attempt to shame him run off in a ditch. “You’re scared? But why? I’ve never hurt anybody!” Not permanently anyway, she added to herself.

“Go,” he urged in a barely audible voice. His head disappeared behind the branch.

“I won’t go until I get some answers! What are you scared of? What is it that you don’t want me to find out? Who are you?!”

He said nothing. For the rest of the afternoon, she shouted questions, pleaded, challenged and taunted him, but he spoke not another word. She used curses that the Den masters did not suspect she knew, swore threats and offered pleas. At one point, she even started to climb the tree, but she backed off when he scrambled ten meters up the truck to a smaller branch. Damn him! She didn’t want him getting up into branches so thin he fell and killed himself.

Outside the woods, the sun was going down, turning the patches of sky she could see through the leaves scarlet and violet. At the base of the tree, she settled to the ground, finding a comfortable position to wait him out. It did not matter that she would be missed at the Den. He had offered her a challenge, and she would overcome it if she had to sit right here for the next tenday. But the night was warm and long, and the forest sounds lulling. With a start she realized that the sky was dimly glowing with the cool light of a new dawn, and that she had been sleeping.
She leapt to her feet in a sudden panic, trying to see up the tree. It was too dark to see anything but silhouettes against the indigo sky, but she could see the trunk well enough. A dread suspicion in her mind, she circled around it; A line of gouges started at the height of her head on up the trunk. The stranger was gone, and quietly, too. Damn her weakness! Oh, why had she ever allowed herself to sleep?

She searched the ground for tracks, and she found them, but so many? After a few minutes of standing and staring at all the tracks, she understood. He had left the tree and come back in every possible direction, giving her no direction to follow.

“I just wanted to meet you!” she cried to the woods. Think! she chided herself—deception meant territory. Nomadic animals used distance for protection. His efforts to confound immediate pursuit meant that he intended to stay close by. He was still in the woods, else he would not have bothered with that star-point trick—He would have used the time for running.

She peered around the woods. He was here still, she felt certain. Maybe not far. Maybe watching her. Maybe up another tree close by. Her ears twitched, straining for a sound that might betray him, though her rational mind knew he was too good for that.

“I want to be your friend,” she said in a gentler—though still loud—voice. “It doesn’t have to be now—” She scanned the brightening woods. That bush could hide him... “—I will come here every day. If you... If you want to let me see you, then I’ll be here. If you don’t, then... I’ll still be here!”

She felt giddy, talking to bushes and trees and scaring the small animals for hundreds of paces around. What if he didn’t hear her? What if she really was talking to herself? She would still come, she decided stubbornly. This was his territory—their paths would cross. And when they did, she would, well... find out who he was, tell him about herself, and eventually make friends with him. She hoped.
The Game is an American comedy-drama television series created by Mara Brock Akil. Premiering on October 1, 2006, the series debuted as the only new comedy series chosen for The CW's primetime schedule. Along with Runaway, it was one of only two series on the new network not to be inherited from either of its predecessor networks, The WB and UPN, during the network's first season. The series is a spin-off of the long-running UPN/CW sitcom Girlfriends.