

An inverted pentagram, which is facing the ground instead of the heavens, represents independence, personal power, sexuality, and accomplishment. It is a rejection of Christianity's dominance over society and a reminder that you are in control over your fate.

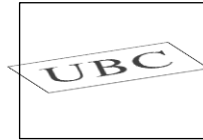
THE GAME

BY

Ehrle Howard, Susan Fourtané, Lucas Sewell

Universal Books Collaboration (UBC)

<http://www.universalbookscollaboration.com/>



tarka publishing

tarka publishing
Ehrle Howard (Director)
Dangar Island
NSW 2083
Australia
tarkapublishing@gmail.com

Copyright © 2025 tarka publishing

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means.

Copying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews and certain other non-commercial users permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Authors Note

Each chapter of this book was written by a different author from all around the globe. The authors did not know each other and were only instructed to have continuity of the story and to use the main characters. They could take the story in any direction. I got the idea from camping when we used to sit around a campfire, and each person would tell part of a story with no preparation. A game that I thought was so brilliant, it should be taken to the 'next level'. This book represents the creative work of a group of very talented people who may or may not have written anything before.

Chapter 1 — Rules of engagement

‘Mastering others is the strength, mastering yourself is the true power.’ — Lao Tzu.

The bar Lucy entered was her favourite, casual yet elegant. Soft jazz music played in the background. They had a fine selection of her favourite wines, one of her passions. She was surprised to find that there weren't any customers. As an FBI agent, Lucy had little time for socialising but tonight was a rare treat. She was meeting Xin, a friend who was a lawyer and made a living out of representing organised crime bosses and their members. Lucy often joked that she spent months catching bad guys and Xin spent just days letting them go.

'Hi ya Xin,' Lucy said and went to give her a peck on the cheek. Xin moved at the last minute and kissed Lucy fully on her mouth. Lucy didn't flinch.

'Xin!' Lucy protested and laughed and pushed her back playfully.

'What? I can't give the woman I love, a little love? That short gorgeous aqua blue dress perfectly matches your aqua blue eyes, I can see your alabaster athletic legs and can imagine the rest. I want to eat you alive,' Xin said with a mischievous smile, as she flicked her long black hair suggestively over her left ear.

'I love you too, but not in that way. Which, by the way, I've been telling you for the last 10 years since we met at college,' Lucy said flashing a rueful smile with those perfect white teeth. 'But don't think I haven't thought about it. And as I've said before, if I start batting for the other team, you'd be the first on my list!'

'Well, there's talking and doing, and I'm for the latter when it comes to you,' Xin said, and they both laughed.

Xin, a Chinese American was so LA but had settled nicely into Seattle. Lucy often wondered if she had only moved here just because Lucy did. Lucy was jealous of her long black hair and her slender, tanned athletic body. Xin was mad about Zuma and went at every opportunity. She was flat-out sexy and was the kind of friend that you could tell anything to, and she would always have your back. Never judgmental and loved you, warts, and all. There was sometimes a slight waft of incense from Xin. Lucy was never sure if it was her imagination or for real.

The night progressed and they laughed and reminisced about cases they'd both worked on (albeit on opposing sides). They started on their second bottle of a Napa Valley red when Lucy began to feel weird, not drunk, but confused, and her vision became blurry. The room spun, and she felt like she was floating out of her body. It was a pleasant sensation, yet her body felt heavy. She tried to tell Xin that they had been drugged but couldn't form the words. It was like after a visit to the dentist but her whole face was numb.

'Come on, home time for you. You're getting old, you never used to be such a lightweight,' Xin said as she hauled her friend out of her seat. She also felt weird and felt like she was walking through thick soup. They stumbled out of the door onto the freezing, rainy street. They looked like two drunk girls, making their way home.

Outside the bar, a middle-aged man watched the scene unfold from his black van, a huge wolfish grin on his face as if this was exactly as he had planned. He took off his horn-rimmed glasses to polish them and looked at himself in the van's side mirror. His light brown hair was thinning. Just above the right-hand side of his top lip was a large mole, which he often touched. His brown eyes looked resigned as if to tell the world, oh well, can't have it all.

'Hey, ladies! Your chariot awaits,' Mike grunted as he half guided them, and half carried them into the back of his van. He didn't need to push them in. They both passed out. Dragging them to lie

side by side, he handcuffed each of them and gagged them as a precaution. They would be out for hours after the amount of Rohypnol his cousin (the barman) had slipped into their drinks.

Mike drove directly to the deserted dock that he had scoped out days before. He pulled down his black baseball cap and being of medium height and build, he knew he would be unremarkable in a crowd. Not that there was anyone around. His plan was simply to dump Xin in the harbour and let her drown. One less lawyer in the world, who would care? But suddenly he thought, that's too good for this bitch, and punched her in the face. She murmured but hardly registered the pain.

Closing the van doors, he sat on the dock and lit a cigarette. Thinking. The revenge of my family, the ruination of his Practice that he spent his life building... stop! There's no point going over this. It's time for action. He threw his cigarette into the harbour. Fuck! He thought and saw red. As he calmed himself the thought of a long-suffering game that he had planned, was what these whores deserved. And they would play his game with no chance of survival unless they could outsmart him and this, he thought would be the rules of engagement of 'The Game'. Xin and her crime buddies had ruined his life. His family was dead. His bankruptcy. No, she would pay and her suffering would be long and painful. Equally guilty. The best thing of all was the whole world could watch it for free. It would be revenge for everyone who had lost it all.

He searched both women, found their mobile phones and tossed them into the harbour. Setting off to the isolated barn where his brother-in-law lived, who was an ex-marine, his main occupation now was drinking beer and watching the sports channel. He was never the same after Afghanistan. Mike began to laugh the maniacal laugh of one who had lost his mind and made a pact with the devil.

Xin woke up in a barn with an ankle chain, the chain connected to a metal post at the centre of the barn. She lay naked on an upside-down pentagram, dug into the barn floor which appeared to be filled with a red sticky liquid. She dipped her finger in it and realised it was blood. She screamed and

screamed and couldn't stop screaming. At her feet was a bottle of water. A bucket. A packet of biscuits. Cameras everywhere. A giant TV showing her kept changing camera angles. She realised it was a website but couldn't take in the details of her situation, she was in shock. This was too much for her mind to take in. She heard monks chanting but was unsure if it was real or imagined. Having studied Latin for fun she realised the chant was 'ardebit in ignem aeternum' ('burn in the eternal fire').

Suddenly, as if this nightmare couldn't get any worse, the candles of 12 hooded monks standing in the shadows around the barn magically lit up but not enough to illuminate their faces. The monks didn't move for minutes or perhaps it was an eternity. Their eyes set in their dark faces appeared to be glowing red. Xin smelled wood smoke but saw no fire or smoke. One of the monks stepped forward. He pulled out a golden blade from a sheath in his waist cord, she yanked fiercely at the chain in a vain effort to escape. He calmly knelt before her like a doctor and cut a deep line across her lower thigh. The pain was excruciating, it felt like he was using a blow torch and she saw smoke rising from the wound. The blade had been heated and he inspected his work dispassionately and then drew a long line up her thigh. She realised it was an upside-down cross. She passed out.

The website switched to a blonde woman lying in a fetal position on a narrow dirt path. As if on cue, she woke up in a misty forest at dawn. There was a narrow path leading in two directions and no sign of civilisation. She rubbed her eyes, stretched, and tried to assemble her thoughts. Lucy didn't recognise the forest but thought it was beautiful, still but eerily quiet. For a moment she wondered if she had lost her hearing and clicked her fingers. Now, that's stupid, she thought and scolded herself. Obviously, she wasn't deaf. Her training kicked in and she got to her feet deciding to run downhill to find water. She still felt foggy and was incredibly thirsty. As she was about to set off, a few things suddenly dawned on her. One, she saw a camera on a tree pointing at her which

tracked her as she moved. Two, she quickly concluded that she had been drugged and someone had changed her into an FBI tracksuit. But not just any tracksuit, it was hers. Three, there was a scroll on the path. She picked it up and quickly read it.

'A forest can be a dangerous place full of dangerous things. Things are not always what they seem. Some things look innocent enough but are deadly. Choose carefully which way you go on the path. One way leads to certain destruction. The other leads to possible salvation but most likely destruction. If you are thinking of leaving the path at any time, think again. There are mines and animal traps and all sorts of nasty surprises that await you'.

The odd thing about the scroll it appeared to have been written on very old paper and in a very old style of writing in red ink or wait, was it blood? Ok, she thought, 'game on'. Something caught her eye, it was a dark brown owl, watching as if wondering what she would do. It was completely still like it was stuffed and put there as part of this sick set.

'Hey! Which way should I go?' she yelled at the owl feeling stupid. Nothing happened for a moment and then suddenly it took flight, silently toward the dark forest. *'Well, not my first choice but then again owls are supposed to be wise,'* she thought to herself and headed off at a slow jog. The black camera ominously swivelled to follow her along the path.

As Mike watched both Xin and Lucy on his live-streaming website simply titled, 'The Game' he thought, *'Let the game begin'*, and laughed like a hyena. The chat room went crazy with people asking dumb questions like; 'Is this for real?'. He looked at the number of site hits and couldn't believe it had gone over a million in less than a few minutes.

Chapter 2: Recollections

‘The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.’ - H.P. Lovecraft.

The sunlight began to dim behind the tall, shadowed trees. Pine trees, spruces, and birches seemed to be stretching up like arrows into the sky. The now barely visible black trails snaked through the underground. It was quiet. Suddenly, a chilly wind slipped through leaves, cracking undergrowth with each of Lucy's steps. *'Was that a wolf howling?'* She stopped for a moment.

The crepuscular animals of the forest begin to make their appearance. For them, it's time to hunt for some succulent prey. Surely, Lucy knows well the type of relationship a predator has with its prey. As an FBI agent, she has played the part of a predator countless times. Right now, however, she feels more like prey herself.

'Rats! I wish I knew where I am, and where I am going,' she thinks, while rubbing her arms trying to warm herself up.

At night, the woods are an entirely different world. While during the day there is a breeze of magic and a fairytale feeling at times, the dark hours awaken mystery and sometimes fear. Fear. This is something that Lucy has learned to fight; a battle she conquered a long time ago. Why is it then that she feels her old enemy is back? She feels as if fear is coming back to haunt her like a ghost that

never quite leaves. Or that was at least what the guide on the tour at that haunted castle Lucy visited once in Scotland said.

'I wish I had one of those emergency blankets Dad forced me to pack once,' Lucy thinks, as the night turns colder and colder.

She remembers her father, who served in the military when he was young, giving her a plethora of 'essential items' to add to her already heavy, overpacked backpack. Yet, that didn't stop him from making sure his girl packed four jackets, including a thick, winter one. Just in case.

It was never clear to Lucy in case of what, since she wasn't going to the North Pole or anything. Other bizarre items that she recalled as 'essential' included a rather heavy and bulky metal camping cutlery kit in the style of a Swiss Army knife, a hand torch and a head torch, and two emergency blankets. Wouldn't just one be enough? He was a military man. Preparedness was everything. As he said, 'just in case.'

Lucy was eighteen at the time. It was late summer. She was embarking on her first-ever solo trip, far from home. She was going to taste freedom and independence for the first time. Despite her father's apparent idea that Lucy's trip was set to the high mountains away from any civilization, she was going to Finland, to a guesthouse, where she wouldn't need any torch or emergency blanket or camping cutlery kit. Much less a winter jacket in the land of the midnight sun!

Now, a few decades later, that first packing list comes back to her mind. 'What wouldn't I give now for one of those emergency blankets?!' she cries while shivering. 'Or that head torch to illuminate

my way in this darkness, or the knife in that metal cutlery set Dad insisted I pack back then! I could defend myself if something or someone attacked me! Just in case, if here and now, I was the prey rather than the predator!’ she laments. ‘That camping lighter thing that Dad made me pack would be rather useful now to start a fire!’ Lucy laments as she tries to gather some tree leaves to improvise a softer surface on which to lie for a while.

She is utterly exhausted, thirsty, hungry, and cold. Lucy knows she needs to get some sleep, just a few hours to regain some of her strength. She needs a rested, focused mind to find a way out of the forest early in the morning. It is paramount to try to get some help to find Xin. At least, someone should know what happened in case they are killed. It is a dark thought, yet a possibility.

Her training in the FBI made this very clear, constantly. Lucy understands death is always a possibility. *‘I must stay focused,’* she thinks, knowing her very life depends on it. She lies on the bed of leaves she has gathered, curling herself into a foetal position and, unsuccessfully, tries to sleep.

Her thoughts are fixed on what she read on that scroll she found when she first woke up in the forest. In particular, she is thinking about the mines and animal traps, and the drone CCTV cameras following her, watching her every move. That is one reason why Lucy decided to sort of camp for the night. To stay safe. As safe as she can be when playing someone else’s game without knowing the rules.

Meanwhile, Michael keeps watching on his live-streaming website. He is somehow puzzled about Lucy’s actions. He was not expecting her to simply go to sleep as if she were in a Girl Scouts’ campsite. He is disappointed. ‘Are you trying to play mind games, Lucy?’ he yells at the screen. The

site hits over five million. The audience goes wild. 'The Game is a success!' he screams. 'And this is just the beginning.'

In the morning, Lucy wakes up from what felt like a few minutes of light sleep. 'Oh, it was just a dream, rather, a nightmare!' she laughs. As she opens her blue eyes, she sees the black drone right in front of her face. She jumps up like a spring and starts to run as fast as she can. She turns her head and sees the drone following her. She falls into a bear trap. Lucy uses all her strength to free herself. She escapes, but her left ankle is bleeding badly.

Chapter 3

‘The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship mediated by images.’ - Guy Debord.

Xin woke and slowly became aware of her surroundings. Her heart sank as she realised she was still chained in place, and the smell of stale blood burned her nostrils. She recognised that she was alone in the room and began to search around for anything that might help her survive.

Her eyes fell upon the TV on the wall. She saw a scene of Lucy, in the middle of a forest with the light darkening around her (or was it lightening? Xin wondered as she realised she had lost her sense of time). She watched as Lucy tore a strip of fabric from her tracksuit pants and then started to tie the torn piece as a makeshift bandage over her wound. The scene switched back to Xin, and she winced to see herself lying, still naked, with the burnt inverted cross looking raw and angry on her leg. But something else caught her eye - at the side of the screen, there was something new: two meters, the leftmost labelled 'Lucy' and the second labelled 'Xin'. Lucy's line appeared to be roughly two-thirds of the way towards the top of the screen, while Xin's sat at about half the height of Lucy's. At the top of the meter, Xin read the word 'Worthy', and at the bottom, 'Condemned'. Xin noticed in the scene that there was a metal tray sitting near her feet, and she remembered the water and biscuits. Realising her hunger, she quickly reached to grab the tray. As she bent her body, the pain from her wound shot up her leg, but she pushed through and pulled the tray towards her chest. She hungrily ate the biscuits, washing down the large dry pieces with gulps of water.

Glancing back around the room, in the candlelight Xin made out strange drawings on the walls, which looked like they belonged in some esoteric religious text. Some images appeared to depict huge demons, holding humans in various helpless positions, and often in the process of consuming them.

She was startled as the door suddenly opened. Michael walked in, still dressed in his monk robes. Their eyes met, and Xin recoiled at the look of disgust palpable on his face. He walked slowly over to her, and she tried to raise herself on her shoulder to regain some semblance of dignity.

'I see you have eaten; that is good,' Michael began. 'I want you to have your strength for the "Game" ahead.' Xin noticed a wry smile appearing on the corner of his lips as he spoke.

'Game? What do you mean? Why are you...' Xin stopped herself and realised she was letting her emotions get the better of her.

'Sweetheart, I can't give away too much, lest I give you an unfair advantage,' he spoke with a grim sneer on his face. 'But I will tell you this much: you have been judged, and you have been found wanting. You can think of this situation you now find yourself in as a kind of 'purgatory'. This is your opportunity to seek redemption for your sins in life, so perhaps the Lord will have mercy on your soul.'

Xin shuddered at this last sentence, less so from the words but from the fervent darkness she saw gathering behind his eyes.

'You've no doubt noticed the cameras and the television,' Michael continued. 'See that gauge on the screen?' Xin nodded weakly. 'That gauge will determine your fate in our 'Game'. You might have also noticed that if her rating moves, your little girlfriend Lucy's rating moves in the opposite direction. Your fates are connected.' With a smirk, he added, 'So you can finally play that pivotal role in her life that you've always fantasised about.'

Michael went on, 'Your ratings are based on the sentiment towards you both, aggregated from the comments of your live audience.'

Xin stifled a gasp at this revelation. 'What kind of sick person would be watching this, let alone contributing to the rankings?' she thought.

'One last thing: if your rating goes to zero, the game ends, and you will receive a merciful death. And the same for Lucy. And therein lies a key to your redemption: will you make the ultimate sacrifice and end Lucy's suffering? Or will you cling to this fleeting life while she continues to risk hers?'

At that, Michael gave her a final victorious sneer and then walked from the room. Xin heard a key locking the door to her exit.

Michael's words swirled around in her head. She had always accepted that someday she would die, but not while being broadcasted to a live audience. And what did he mean that she could sacrifice herself to save Lucy? At last, she realised what must be his intention: to make her despair enough to want to end her own life. She finally wept and buried her face in her arms.

Lucy finished tying her torn pant fabric around her wound and gave it a few moments for the bleeding to slow. She gingerly tried to stand, bearing her weight on her other leg. Limping around the edges of the scrub, now much more careful not to tread off the path, she found a sturdy branch and, holding it like a staff steeled herself to keep moving.

The sun was barely above the line of the treetops when Lucy heard the sound she was longing for: the gentle burble of running water.

She continued along the narrow path and soon discovered the source of the sound - a shallow stream flowing along a rocky bed cutting across the pathway. Despite the increasing pain and

stiffness in her leg (she mentally noted that she would need a hospital if she got out of here alive), she rushed forward and bent to finally drink.

Despite the muddiness of the water, Lucy sighed in relief between swallowing from her cupped hands. She began to allow herself a tiny, creeping feeling of hope that perhaps she had chosen the better pathway out of the forest.

Lucy heard a whistling sound past her right shoulder, and she instinctively ducked to the side. She heard a thud nearby, and following the direction of the sound, she saw a crossbow bolt embedded in the trunk of a nearby tree. Adrenaline rising in her again, she scanned the forest behind her but couldn't see any trace of movement, let alone a shooter. She pulled herself back to her feet and started hobbling down the path again, as quickly as she could manage without crying out in pain. Moments later, she heard another bolt whistle past and then another. Seeing both bolts sticking out of another tree, she thought to herself, *'Is this guy fucking with me or what?'*

Then she finally saw the shooter appearing out of the trees. Another quadcopter drone. This one with a small crossbow mounted on it crossed the distance between them and hovered menacingly a few metres away. 'He is fucking with me, and he's a fucking coward,' Lucy spat out the words under her breath. A small engine mechanism attached to the drone drew one more bolt.

Michael turned from his computer and shrugged to himself. 'Well, the people have spoken; it's time to give them what they want.' Lucy's popularity on the live stream was ever-increasing and with so much 'Game' left to play, who was he to deny them? He entered new coordinates for his crossbow drone, and in its place, he deployed to Lucy's location another one nearby containing food rations. Lucy stood puzzled as the loaded crossbow drone abruptly turned and disappeared into the forest. She fell to her feet, and then finally lay on her back. *'Exhausted already, and it is only noon,'* she thought to herself, as she noted the sun high in the sky and the light sparkling among the leaves of the

overhead trees. She fought against sleep but felt it pulling her in, gradually softening the pain and vigilance of the day.

Chapter 4