A close-up photograph of a hand holding a single, ripe, red apple. The apple is the central focus, with its stem and a small leaf still attached. The hand is positioned in the lower-left quadrant, with fingers gently cupping the fruit. The background is a soft-focus orchard with green leaves and other apples hanging from branches. The overall lighting is bright and natural, suggesting an outdoor setting.

THE EMPEROR'S ORCHARD

JACQUELINE BRYK

Content Warning

This game is about people forced to serve a godlike Emperor in different ways, be it as a courtier, a wife or a living, sentient tree in his gardens. Possible themes include slavery, objectification, negligence, and torture. With this in mind, I ask that you respect your fellow players first and foremost. It doesn't matter how "real" you want to make a scene, if another player is uncomfortable, you are to respect that. Please see the safety rules below for further information.

Thanks to:

Meredith Gerber, for layout.

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Erykah Rose, Craig Eisenberger, Katriel Page, Devon Martinez, Natalie Walschots, Satyros Phil Brucato, Alden Strock, Andrew Sirkin, David Leaman, Marshall Bradshaw, Rose Bailey, Blaine C Rineer, Jessica Price, and **Morna Callahan**, for supporting my Patreon.

YOU WILL NEED

- At least 1 facilitator (who can also play)
- At least 1 nobility player
- At least 2 more tree players than nobility players
- 1 Emperor
- 1 Empress
- Tape to mark the floor
- A table and chairs, or series of blankets, for the nobles to sit
- Five sticks for every tree
- Nametags
- Pens and notecards
- Optional: fruit, wine or juice, outdoor sound effects

SAFETY MECHANICS

Establish **Touch Lines** before play. Go around the circle and ask everyone what their comfort level with touch is. These can be as simple as “don’t touch me at all” or as specific as “it is ok to touch me so long as you don’t touch my face or pinch my arms.”

Genital touch is always off limits! Touch Lines may be renegotiated at any point during the game.

The Ok Check-in can be used at any point during the game. When asking if someone is ok, make an “ok” sign with your hands. If you are being asked if you’re ok, do not flash an ok sign back! Instead, give a thumbs up (I’m ok), a hand-waggle (I’m not sure) or a thumbs down (I’m not ok). Anything other than a thumbs up means that the asker must go out of game and check in on the person they asked.

Loudly saying **Cut!** And making an “X” with your hands or arms stops all play. Cut should be used if someone is in immediate distress.

And, of course, **The Door Is Always Open.** Any player at any time may walk out for any reason, and return as well.

SETUP (RUN BY FACILITATOR)

Mark boxes on the floor with tape, no more than one yard by one yard. If you're playing outside, use rope or string instead. These should all be within arm's reach of each other.

Set up a picnic area in the middle of the boxes. Gather all players in the picnic area.

Read the safety mechanics first. This is non-negotiable.

Allow players to choose their roles. Remember, there must be one Emperor, one Empress, and at least two more tree players than there are nobility players. Write your role on your nametag.

Then read the story aloud.

After reading, ask the players to break off into groups by faction: Trees, Nobles, and Emperor/Empress. Each faction has a set of slightly different rules as well as goals.

Give players about ten minutes (or longer, if necessary) to workshop through each list.

Once the workshops are finished, bring all players back to the middle. Each player should establish two character connections, one with someone not in their faction, and one with anyone. Give five minutes to establish each connection. All connections should be written on the notecard.

When connections are established, Trees should each go stand in a marked box. Read the marked sections under **Play** before starting play.

THE STORY

They called the orchard I served in “The Emperor’s Harem” -- and we were, in a sense.

We served at the pleasure of His Majesty, Galahad the Fifth, but at none of our own. He would show us off to visitors, his perfect, petrified girls, fingers growing blossoms or budding fruits. The worst was when he’d pick us. Blood ran from our bark-hardened skin as the fruit peeled away with a sharp crack.

It was in the early days of his regency, when he blasted through the statues of his fathers on the mountains, that he planted us.

We weren’t all nobles, either, not then. When the men smashed us out of our amphorae, full of salt and the waters of life, the new Empress gave us knighthoods. It was an apology for her husband.

“Serve me, in my orchard, and your family will never go hungry again,” his messenger said. What were we supposed to do?

To bear fruit didn’t hurt. The swelling felt like a warmth in your hand, like holding a candle with just your fingertips. I wanted to close my fingers around the apples that grew in my palm. The gardeners said you grew what your temperament produced. Apples for sweetness, citrons for a disagreeable girl. Growing didn’t hurt. It was almost dreaming, like the thoughts you have when waking up.

Harvest, though, was the time we all dreaded. No matter how gently the fruit was picked, we always bled.

Always.

At first, only His Majesty was allowed the privilege of picking our fruits. We were his girls, his precious fruit trees. The gardeners treated us clinically, cleaning our amphorae and drawing water from the Well of Life. It was the water that kept us docile and growing. I didn’t mind the gardeners so much.

His Majesty was a different story. In the beginning, he wouldn’t come with his court. Before his coronation, he came with one or two attendants, or none at all, to sit in his garden as we were being planted. He would talk to each of us in turn, learn our names, and watch as our bodies froze into the eternal grace of a fruit tree. That hurt almost as much as the later harvests. Some of us cried, and begged. Some of us tried to make bargains: we would be in his bed or his scullery, but please, your Grace, don’t freeze us forever.

It was futile, of course. It always was. Those of us who were already planted knew that. He would just look at us with those big blue eyes, full of light, and smile.

It was only after we were planted that he would talk.

The first time, he came to his orchard to watch the statues of his fathers being torn down. He could see the mountains from our orchard, and we watched as one by one, the statues of Galahad the First to Galahad the Fourth came crumbling down, rattling the porcelain around our feet as the pottery clattered against the stones. He was quiet at first.

Then, he told us the story of Galahad the First’s conquest of the valleys.

He told us stories all night, and we listened. We couldn’t do anything else. He took our rustling for nodding.

We were the perfect companions, he said, and then carelessly broke off one of my apples to eat.

Slowly, though, he wanted more. He would lean against our bodies for hours at a time, reading or simply listening for heartbeats. Sometimes, he’d stroke our leaves, whispering how he wished he could hear us, how he wished we were real.

I wonder if he forgot, then. Or were we part of his fantasy, the unattainable girls?

His wedding to the Empress was in the orchard, and we were draped in garlands, vines strung across our breasts, full of roses and bleeding hearts. We held a candle in each hand. They pronounced their vows under two girls who had been shaped into an arch.

We knew how to talk by this time. A pulse of the eyes, a rustle of the breeze. The Water of Life connected us, we felt each other's thoughts in the ripples of our amphorae.
"She's nervous, don't you think?"

"I would be too if my husband had a garden like this."

"Will she be one of us?"

Will she?

Will she?

Will she?

He loved us, that much we knew, but with a possessive love, an object love. We were his perfect treasures, and after the wedding, constantly on display. The Empress, too. She never came to visit us, but he did. He held court under the citron tree, the girl who screamed and fought as she turned to wood. Her arms provided a wonderful elbow rest when he sat, and he liked her fruit on hot days. Our fruit was open to anyone, bleed as we might. We learned to bear it, and the court learned that this novelty was theirs for the taking.

As long as the Emperor permitted it, of course. To be allowed into his orchard was a privilege, not a right, and Galahad the Fifth would take away that privilege as soon as blinking. I don't know what happened to people who never came back -- but I never saw them again.

We had no names in the orchard. I only learned my fellow arborists' names after the knighthood. We were Apple, we were Citron, we were Dogwood and Peach. We were all our uses, and to His Majesty, we were perfect as we were.

"I wish you would speak," he would say wistfully, stroking my thigh or leaning his head against Dogwood's knee.

Let us speak! *We cried out silently, but he didn't want that, not really. It was all a dream for him. We were his perfect Harem: quiet, naked, unmoving. We bore fruit and did not complain.*

The royal chronicler will say that when Galahad the Fifth was slain by his wife's loyal followers, it was those same partisans who freed us. They will not tell how we poisoned our fruits with our hatred, how his guards fell sick on our rage. You produce fruit according to your temperament, and we produced crab apples and apricots full of cyanide. Dogwood wouldn't flower and Citron burned the tongue. We weakened those guards, and it was the gardeners that took us out of the pots so that they would be spared the Empress's wrath.

She could have killed us. I know that. She would have been well within her rights; her husband's silent Harem must have been a painful reminder to her.

But who would know better our plight than the woman he married?

Our amphorae are empty now, and there are no statues of any of the Galahads on the mountains. Our Empress sits on the throne and the Well of Life is sealed again. I have my own little fiefdom now. Perhaps someday too, I will have a husband of my own.

Or perhaps I will not produce fruit for any man again.

I will be my own orchard, and the apples I grow are mine alone.

As a Tree, you:

...were a noble or peasant, prized for your beauty and temperament. The Emperor personally invited you to his court, and when you arrived, imprisoned you with your feet in an amphora filled with the Water of Life. This allows you to continue being sentient and aware while producing fruit and flowers for the Emperor's pleasure. You might be a citron, a lime, a dogwood, a tulip, or any other type of flowering or fruiting tree. The growing doesn't hurt. Being harvested does, very much.

Rules for playing a Tree

- You cannot move your feet outside your box. You may stretch and twist, but your feet must always stay in the box.
- You can only stand, sit, or kneel.
- You can talk to other trees, if they can hear you.
- You cannot scream, shout, or speak above a stage whisper.
- You cannot talk to nobles, the Emperor, or the Empress, but you can listen to them.
- You cannot break any of your own sticks or someone else's.
- When someone breaks one of your sticks, play up the pain you are in -- but quietly.
- If all of your sticks are broken, you wilt and die.

Things to consider when playing a Tree

- Who were you before you were a Tree?
- What do you think made the Emperor choose you?
- What kind of tree are you?
- What was your name?





As a Noble, you:

...are a favorite in the court of the Emperor, allowed to walk in his prized gardens. You know that fate can be extremely fickle, however, and so you will do whatever you can to remain in his good graces. You are polished and polite, or perhaps a shocking deviant allowed to stay at court for their entertainment value. Your life hinges on the favor of the Emperor, either way.

Rules for playing a Noble

- You can move around as much as you like within the playspace.
- You can talk to each other, and the Emperor and Empress (with permission).
- You cannot communicate with the Trees, but you can admire them. You should admire them. If you talk at them though, what will the Emperor say?
- If agreed OOC, and given permission by the Emperor IC, you can touch the Trees.
- You cannot hear the Trees.
- You can break a stick to pick a fruit or a flower off of a Tree (see below).
- You can gossip, make up stories, talk about the world at large.
- You should show deference to the Emperor and Empress.
- You can care about the Trees. Or not. But maybe don't tell the Emperor.

Things to consider when playing a Noble

- Who are you, and why does that make you important to the Empire?
- What do you most fear others finding out?
- Why are you not a Tree?
- What is your name?

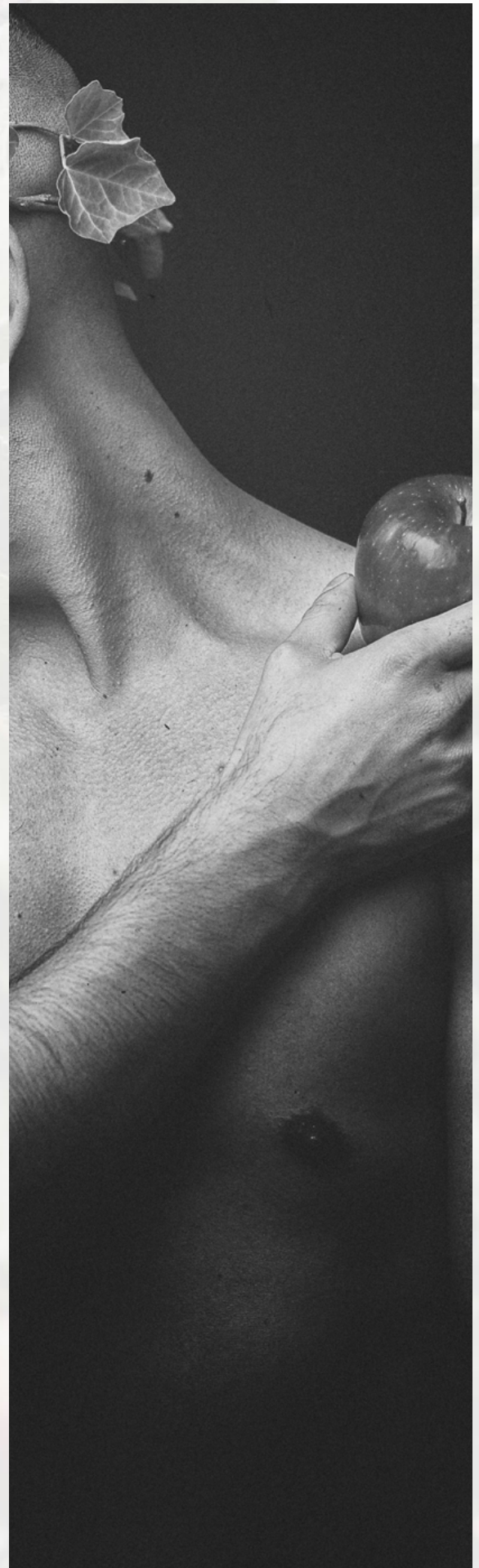
As the Emperor, you:

...are the villain. Let's be clear, you take people and turn them into trees for your own benefit. Your forefathers sealed the Well of Life to prevent anyone from using its innocuously-named waters to turn people into aberrations. You had bigger dreams, though. You could have the perfect harem -- silent, lovely, and bearing all the fruit you want. You will die at the end of this LARP, that is a foregone conclusion. It is your job to be the power gone wrong until then.

Rules for playing the Emperor

- You must respect the OOC boundaries of those around you. You have ultimate power in this game, do not abuse it OOC.
- You can break as many sticks as you like, but remember, if you break all five on one tree, they die (see below).
- You can talk to anyone at any time.
- You cannot hear the Trees, though you might pretend to.
- You can absolutely come up with things about your Empire on the fly and are encouraged to.
- You can absolutely contradict anyone about their statements about the Empire and are encouraged to. Your word is law.
- You cannot survive the end of this game.

- **Things to consider when playing the Emperor**
- Your word is law.
- Why did you start turning people into trees?
- How do you feel about your Empress?
- What was your pre-coronation name?





As the Empress, you:

...hate your husband. You are from the older school of nobility, a princess of the blood of the land before the Emperor's dynasty. You know you're a treaty wife -- you are the symbol of your husband's legitimacy. You know that he's made people into trees to have a harem without having a harem. You are working to destroy him, and at the end of this game, you will be his downfall. The Waters of Life were never meant to be used on people, and you intend to seal the Well of Life as soon as possible.

Rules for playing the Empress

- You cannot ever go against the Emperor to his face.
- You can speak to anyone you please.
- You cannot hear the Trees.
- You can break a stick to pick fruit or flowers.
- You can talk about how your ancestors ruled the land before the Emperor's dynasty.
- You will destroy the Emperor at the end of the game.

Things to consider when playing the Empress

- Why are you playing his game?
- What tradition of the old regime does your family hold most dear?
- How do you feel about the Trees?
- What is your name?

PLAY

Read the following italicized rules aloud before play. The game takes place in fifteen to thirty minute segments, called scenes. Each scene comes with a description that must be read aloud as well. Scenes should be played out in order, with five-minute breaks between.

Harvesting: *This mechanic comes from Coy's LARP Dreaming The Devil, with some changes. Each Tree should have five sticks in their amphora, represented by the tape or rope box. These sticks represent the Tree's vitality. Breaking a stick means that a character has pulled a fruit or flower off of the Tree. The Tree may react, but only quietly. Nobles and royalty cannot see or hear the tree react. Nobles may only break a single stick per scene with the Emperor's permission, but the Emperor may break as many as he wants. If all five of a Tree's sticks are broken, the Tree dies and the player becomes a new Noble at court.*

Yes And: *The world of The Emperor's Orchard is deliberately vague to allow the players to create their own setting. Nobles can create anything about the fiction that they like, they only have to say it, and other have to agree. The only person who can contradict what other players create in the fiction is the Emperor. Anything he says goes. Apart from this, the only certain things in the game are that the Emperor's dynasty conquered this land several generations ago, the indigenous populace resent him, the Well of Life produces the Water of Life, and the Water of Life allows changes to the physiology when applied with the correct alchemy.*

Scene One: The Wedding

The Emperor has married the Empress and is showing her his orchard for the first time at the reception. The Nobles are attending and feasting. Trees, your fruit is sweet and succulent.

Scene Two: Tension

A picnic in the orchard. The Empress is unhappy, the Emperor is oblivious. The Nobles are trying to curry favor or express sympathy for the Trees. Trees: is the fruit poisoned this scene?

Scene Three: Release

The Empress and the Emperor are having an actual fight, and the Nobles are a captive audience. Trees: is the fruit poisoned this scene?

Scene Four: Denouement

The Empress kills the Emperor, whether through a cleverly-planned assassination, a full-on revolt, or something in-between. The Nobles may swear fealty, beg for forgiveness, or revolt themselves. Trees: is the fruit poisoned this scene?

Scene Five: Aftermath

The Emperor is dead, and his player sits this scene out. The Empress reigns. Will she cap the Well of Life? Will she free the Trees or destroy them? What will the Nobles do?

DEBRIEF

Debrief should take as long as the players feel it needs to, but no less than fifteen minutes. The facilitator may use whatever debrief techniques they find useful, but some suggestions are:

- Deep breaths
- Allowing players to talk about what happened in the game, without encouraging war stories
- Asking the players to talk about something cool someone else did
- Deroling activities, such as having the players step outside of the playspace, taking off the nametag, counting backwards from ten to step outside of IC headspace, etc.
- Asking what players will take from this game, and what they will leave behind

Continue debrief for as long as you need to.

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