



# DIADEM

A Story Game of A Roman Succession Crisis  
By Max Hervieux  
Requires 5 Players, Index Cards

The year is 270 AD. The Roman emperor Gothicus is dead of the Plague. The great general Aurelian had been chosen and been made ready to succeed the emperor, which would have been great if he hadn't died hours before Gothicus, vanquishing barbarians in the Haemus Mountains. Those fool senators in Rome elevated the former emperor's brother Quintillus to the office, but he has not the skill, influence, or will to do the job well. It is up to you, the high command of the imperial army, to pluck your next leader from your camp in the city of Sirmium.

If this were any other decade, maybe things would not be so urgent. The West seceded and formed the Gallic Kingdom, and the East is under the sway of the merchant empire of Palmyra, forming a wall between you and the warmongering Persians. In the South, the fields of Africa that keep you fed are defenseless, and it is all you can do to hold the North against the barbarian Germans. The cries of usurpers break out on a yearly basis.

If you choose wrong, you might lose even more - even Rome is not safe these days. But if you choose right, then maybe, just maybe...

You might be able to take it all back.

## ROMAN CULTURE IN 270

Roman culture is quite unlike ours. To get into that distinct Roman mindset, consider these elements.

- 🕒 To lose territory is not just shameful. It angers the gods themselves.
- 🕒 Wealth brings comfort, but only ambition can bring honor and glory.
- 🕒 Cries of local defense and glory ring louder than cries for unity.
- 🕒 Christians are officially tolerated, though not approved. Rome remains the center of pagan culture.

## THE HIGH COUNCILORS

The high council has five members, none of which are eligible or fit for the position themselves. The five councilors are:

### 🕒 CASSANDER

The prefect of Sirmium is both ethnically Syrian and a devout Christian. He has none of the military skill the next emperor will need, but knows all of the city's local talent and was a friend of several past emperors.

### 🕒 GOTHICA

The former emperor's wife, Gothica was in many respects an equal partner in her husband's exploits. Alas, Romans will never accept a woman emperor, but she is as influential as ever.

### 🕒 JANUS

The eunuch in charge of the emperor's personal protection, he has long been refused the emperor's ear. Gothicus may have distrusted the Egyptian courtier's council, but his loyalty was never in doubt.

### 🕒 LIBIUS

An elderly and wealthy senator from Rome in an honorary advisory position, his priorities lie with the home province and its old-fashioned, pagan ways.

### 🕒 MAKRIAN

A German general in the Roman army, Makrian turned from his tribe during the Alamanni invasion of Italy. His heritage disqualifies him from the job, but the troops hang on his every word.

## CHOOSING AN EMPEROR

The process of choosing an emperor consists of each player taking turns advocating for or railing against a candidate using one of the six possible actions. On your turn, you may **Introduce**, **Foretell**, **Glorify**, **Interview**, **Observe**, or **Deliberate**. After your turn, play passes to the right. When all players have taken a turn, the **Day Ends**.

On the first day, all players will **Introduce**.

## INTRODUCE (ACTION)

When you **Introduce**, you add a Candidate for consideration. Name them, and come up with their Job, 1 Trait that distinguishes them from the other Candidates on the table, and 1 great Exploit or Policy they are respected for.

Sample Names: Galba, Otho, Domitian, Maximinus, Gordion, Balbinus, Philip, Desius, Gallus, Aetius

## FORETELL (ACTION)

When you **Foretell**, you set a scene in a potential future where a Candidate of your choice was chosen. You frame the scene, and play the Candidate. You may cast other players as you desire. The goal of a Foretelling is to answer the question, "What might happen if this Candidate becomes emperor?"

## GLORIFY (ACTION)

When you **Glorify** a Candidate, choose another player. They will tell a story of an exploit of your choice performed by the Candidate, be it an act of great courage or cowardice or cunning. This is how you explore a Candidate's history. Players telling the story should honor the prompt in its positivity or negativity, regardless of their opinion of the Candidate.

## INTERVIEW (ACTION)

When you **Interview** a Candidate, they are called into the Council's tent. The player making the Interview action plays the Candidate. Every player, starting with the Interviewer, gets to ask the Candidate a single question that they will answer truthfully.

Once interviewed, the Candidate knows they are being considered, and may change their behavior accordingly.

## OBSERVE (ACTION)

When you **Observe** a Candidate, choose another player to play the Candidate. Say where you want to watch the Candidate within Sirmium or the army camp, and cast at least one other player. They are not aware that you are watching, and you may not interfere. Watch the scene play out. You may leave, ending the scene, at any point.

## DELIBERATE (ACTION)

When you **Deliberate**, you stall the conversation and the **Day Ends**. You, rather than the next player, will read the News during the day ending procedure.

## DAY'S END

When all players have gone or someone Deliberates, the Day Ends. Day's End has two parts, voting and the reading of the News.

## VOTING

When the day ends, everyone casts a single vote for the Candidate they would most like to see become Emperor. If any Candidate receives no votes, remove their card from the table - they are out of the running. If a player later wishes, they can use the **Introduce** action to bring them back.

If any Candidate received four of the five votes, they are no longer just a Candidate - they are the Emperor. Everyone goes around and says one policy or initiative that the Emperor immediately begins during their ascension ceremony.

If no Candidate received more than three votes, remove unvoted Candidates and move on to the News.

## READING THE NEWS

At the end of every day that the empire goes on without a real emperor (as Quintillus is woefully unfit for the position), a messenger arrives at the Sirmium camp with the News of what disaster has struck the empire during the day. One of the players will read this News to the rest of the council.

The next player in order (meaning the first player to act in a given day) will read the News, unless the day ended by a player Deliberating, in which case they read the News. Play then passes to the right and the next day starts.

The News is always problematic, but the empire is so vast that few problems will affect it all at once. Use the reading of the News to introduce problems your Candidate could solve best, or that would affect the standing of other Candidates.

Be creative! There are so many ways for things to go wrong. Usurpation and invasions are easy go-to answers, but plagues, important deaths, natural disasters, and other problems can be just as interesting. The crisis might even strike Sirmium! However, the News never results in the removal of a Candidate.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The actual history of Roman Crisis of the Third Century is, of course, irrelevant to the course of a game of Diadem. Players are not bound to the historical record, and the very premise of the game pushes the game into alternate history, but some context to the era can provide context and interest to some players.

## THE CRISIS OF THE THIRD CENTURY

Stretching from the end of Alexander Severus' reign in 235 to the ascension of Diocletian in 284, the Crisis of the Third Century was a period of constant turmoil and breakdown for the Roman Empire. Under the reign of Gallienus, the empire really did fracture into the Gallic Kingdom, the Palmyrene Empire, and the central Roman Empire. In his fifteen year reign, Gallienus dealt with no less than six major revolts and an even greater number of invasions in addition to the appearance of the Cyprian Plague (now presumed to be smallpox). Religious divisions between pagans and the growing Christian faction also tore at the empire's unity, though Gallienus decreed that Christians be tolerated and not persecuted.

Claudius II, also known as Claudius Gothicus (or just Gothicus for the purposes of Diadem) succeeded Gallienus in 268. His reign was mostly spent warring with the Goths, hence his surname. He really did die in 270 of the Cyprian Plague, and Aurelian really was his successor of choice. In the real world, Aurelian's charge in the Haemus Mountains had been months earlier and had not resulted in the general's death, but it is a suitably dramatic event to remove him from the running. Considering that in real life he went on to reunite the entire empire and stabilize every single frontier in just five years, he was pretty much the Roman Superman. There's not much drama in deciding the next emperor if the choice is that obvious. One item of note is that Gothicus died unmarried; the Councilor Gothica is a fiction I added to provide a female voice to the game. She exists in a long tradition of powerful empresses like Livia, Julia Domna, and Agrippina.

## INSPIRATION AND CREDITS

This game was built upon Ben Lehman's *Amidst Endless Quiet*.  
Fonts: *Alegrey* by Juan Pablode Peral, *Roman SD* by Steve Deffeyes.  
Inspired by *The History of Rome* podcast by Mike Duncan.

## SIRMIUM

Of all the frontiers of the Roman Empire in the Third Century, none was more volatile than the Danube River. And of all the cities on that Northern frontier, Sirmium was the greatest. The capitol of the province of Lower Pannonia in the Illyricum region, the city was the centerpiece of Third Century, with no less than ten emperors either hailing from or living in the city in just those hundred years. The Illyrians were hardy folk, and some of the best soldiers in the empire. They were right in the action, and were deeply patriotic. Both Gothicus himself and legendary Aurelian were born there! Essentially, if you had to pick a city to pull your next emperor from, you could do a lot worse than Sirmium.

## BARBARIANS

To the Romans, any tribal group outside of the borders of the empire were barbarians. Thus, the term means very little on its own. They tended to fit into one of two groups though: Rhine barbarians and Danube barbarian, both also called Germans. On the Rhine you had tribes like the Franks, the Suebi, and the Alamanni (from which the fictional Councilor Makrian hails). On the Danube were tribes like the Quadi, the Vandals, and the Goths. The Huns had yet to arrive, the Gallic, British and African peoples were pacified, and the eastern border was connected to the Persians, the only major enemy of the Romans that were looked upon as peers.

## RELIGION

Roman Paganism was still the main religion, especially in Rome itself. The further east one looked, the more Christians there were, but by the year 300 they would still only account for about a tenth of the population. Jews were tolerated for their antiquity, but Christians were considered upsetting to the balance of everyday life. They were not officially persecuted again until 303 however - this period of toleration is known as the Little Peace of the Church.

