

Chariot and Quadriga



There are many slaves across the Roman empire, but as you tug at the reins, feeling your chariot roll towards the arena gates, you listen to the growing roar of the crowds and contemplate how few who labour under the shadow of the Aquila command the attention you do now. A wheeled shrine will be doing the rounds about now, consecrating this race and its racers in the name of the gods. Thinking on the images of the twins Castor and Pollux dancing beneath the regal figure Jupiter puts you in a faithful state of mind as you make to offer up your own last-minute prayers.

Castor and Pollux

Many charioteers pray to the half-divine twins and many not native to the empire besides. Their ascension through willingness to self-sacrifice bespeaks a sort of humility that draws the lowly together in a shared will to greatness. Spying other staff at prayer breeds a kind of kinship, it may not be you in particular who seizes the wreath but neither will you be abandoned to face your greatest challenges alone.

Jupiter

You pay obeisance to no less than the sovereign of the skies himself. Some might say it's not proper for slaves to presume audience with the all-father but you have seen that lightning and will not flinch from its brilliance. It's hard to credit others of your station when your soul rises to such lofty goals and they in turn disdain a racer who is the very definition of uppity. You'll only have yourself to rely on, but then, you wouldn't have it any other way.

Heathen

A shiver grips you as you consider this alien display and recite half-remembered hymns in a foreign tongue. These may be relics of a past stolen from you or gifts from an unusually eloquent barbarian, whatever they are they grant you solace in a strange land. The same strangeness that sets you apart from most sees you find familiarity in the strangest places. If you bridge class divides remember to keep the foundation of your bond hidden.

Your meditation has calmed your soul, now reviewing your strategy must calm your mind. You've seen some of the other racers and heard rumours of any newcomers' habits but beyond some small changes to your quadriga and cart you tend to race the same basic way. Racing is more an art than a science and sure enough your speed gives insight into your soul.

Bold

You win a race by being fast. Philosophers may dress this fact up however prettily they like, the fact is you take away their wittering and put them behind a horse and they'll whip it until it outruns Apollo himself. You thunder ahead from the first and contest the tightest corners aggressively, off the sands you conduct yourself similarly, including in the exhaustion that follows your initial rush.

Patient

Any fool can flay a beast's flanks red, it takes a civilised man to rally your lesser and bring them to heel. You've no affinity for style over substance and your supporters are often drowned out at the beginning of a race. They make up for it near the end where their restraint gives way to elation that deafens the other teams' hoarse throats. You are cerebral in person, any argument long enough you win by careful logic. Epigrams, however, entirely escape you.

Lucky

You really can't say what's got you this far and with that thought say another prayer for good measure. Some think you a genius, others a fool, all agree you're blessed. You had your suspicions the third time an opponent's axle snapped and the fifth one of their horses bolted. That's not to say it's all luck, taking advantage when an opportunity presents itself requires a certain flexibility and speed. You're not really an active person, but what retorts you let loose!

The doors crack open and the noise hits you like a slap. The single ray of sunshine is blinding after the lamps but from behind your shielding hand you just about see a figure. Here on the threshold between the private hippodrome workers and the eager public your friends have gathered to wish you well. You turn your warding gesture into a little wave meant for them before you go out to hail the crowd.

Vendors

Is he selling... otters' noses? Whatever it is he tosses you a treat to be enjoyed later, provided it doesn't slip from your tunic during the race. The vendors are surprisingly well connected, between hawking food, charms and statuettes of the racers they hear a great deal of conversation. They know what trimming will win the crowd's favour and which agitators have secreted away stones to throw. Besides this they feed you and tell tales like nobody else.

Grooms

A likely lad gives you rightmost horse a pat on his rump for luck. The stable lads might have a permanent stench of horseshit about them but they're such an obvious influence on a charioteer's success that all curry at least some favour with them. You go above and beyond, perhaps by sharing their pastoral history or simply concealing your disdain for the slightest social distance. Some of the smell clings to you but it's a cheap price for that little extra speed.

Bookies

The fellow whose grin shows a mouth half emptied of teeth really shouldn't be down here. He's holding up a handful of paper while jabbering a combination of prayers and stock tips at you, sounds like a bookie alright. Others might frown at this intrusion and sure enough you motion for the guards to escort this man from the premises, but you're more lenient than most. You endure for the occasional nugget that is literally worth its weight in gold.



The crack is now a torrent of sunshine, the time has come to bid farewell to those who toil in the dark and greet your waiting public. You compose and fix your features into the charming smile, stoic grimace or knowing leer that your fans know and love you for and sure enough as you ride to the starting line the cheering redoubles. The hippodrome is one of the few venues where all the peoples of the empire come together, a particular tone to the celebration marks your chief admirers.

Plebs

Animal exultation washes over you, despite the poorest being unable to pay for entry the plebs in attendance still vastly outnumber any other demographic. In a way you are both above and below them, though free men it's doubtful they will ever bask in the glory that could be yours. Instead they live vicariously through you, raging like a wounded beast at the slightest setback and howling with glee at your triumph. Your influence, should you choose to wield it, is a blunt instrument. But of what terrible power!

Patricians

The celebration is no louder than any other, what makes it booming is the silencing of all others to allow the nobility to voice their favour. Genteel applause masks admirers who are if anything more savage than any others, charioteers have risen and fallen at a few influential citizens' whims. Be sure not to do anything that could be perceived as a slight or they will turn on you as rabid wolves. Their aid is powerful indeed, so long as one does not fall into debt.

Wives

They allow women in here of all people. The shrill scream is ignored by respectable slaves but you court the city's wives with aplomb. The plebs girls are eager to sight a man prettier than their exhausted husbands and the patrician ladies relish temporary escape from courtyard prisons. There's power of a subtle sort that's known to maids listening at the door or matrons arranging finances and sport besides in being a sex icon.

You wave to one wing of seats, then the other and finally turn to the patrician stands where your patron is seated with his entourage. You hail the imperial representative and then offer thanks to him. Your eyes lock across the distance, seeming to bring you face to face. The salute is a formality, only you can say whether true feeling lies behind the words. This man is after all your owner and you know slaves can suffer far worse fates.

Enthusiast

For his part he smiles just slightly wider than what is strictly proper, you can't quite tell if it reaches his eyes. That's your patron alright, mostly mercurial, always inscrutable. Other slaves say that before he bought you and the horses he'd dabbled in swan breeding and architecture. By all accounts this obsession's lasted longer than most but at the end of every race you look to him dreading the day you spy the boredom that will dash your dreams appear on his face.

Banker

Your patron is in animated conversation with his neighbour, it seems as though a small pouch is changing hands. Characteristically he breaks from his jolly fat façade to send a curt nod your way. The small gesture speaks volumes, as does every decisive movement hidden by his obfuscating babble. You're an investment, one among many. If you fail one too many times he'll find a way to recoup his losses one way or another.

Gentleman

His face is as impassive as the grey eyes staring down his aquiline nose are striking. Almost indistinguishable from a marble bust, your master is truly a patrician's patrician. He hasn't much interest in racing, seems to think expressing interest in anything at all rather vulgar actually. No, you are a method of practicing stoic detachment from one's possessions and engaging in traditional gentleman's bets with one's peers.

Your patron outfits you at least in part as a display wealth, having draw attention to his person it now falls to you to show off his purchases in their best light. The surrogate pride you puff out your chest with isn't entirely artificial, some of the items you've entered the arena with are of acme quality. Your heart quickens as the sun illuminates that which you are most privileged to bear.

Suit

All charioteer panoplies are polished to a shine and decked in fine fabric of the team colours but yours go beyond into luxury. Your master has procured exotic alloys and textiles, orichalcum from Colchis and silk from Kos. The crowds see this too as you are inevitably the most notable driver both in victory and in defeat. With a getup so memorable a legend will build about you all the quicker, usually for the better.

Horse

It's said that your horses' lineage can be traced back to mares left facing the Adriatic rump-first and impregnated by Neptune's foam stallions. Whatever the truth of the horse dealer's tales there can be no doubt that your quadriga are exemplary specimens of their species. They seem to have some dim awareness of their excellence and require a stubborn driver to overcome their haughty reluctance to be steered.

Chariot

Riding on your well greased wheels you could almost believe you were afloat. The cunning crossbeams and sturdy timbers bely this impression of airy fragility, your chariot can in fact sustain severe damage and keep on rolling. The increased weight forces you to pace your horses more than you might and the resistance to wrecks might encourage you to take foolhardy risks but overall racing is safer for you than your opponents.

You look from your crowning glory to less eye-catching elements of your equipment. Though they won't come to define your image they are every bit as important as any other tool in the race. Among them you've mastered the use of one in particular

Whip

You give your twisted strip of leather a swing for good measure and are rewarded by a resounding crack as the tip hits the rim of the chariot. Your horse tense nervously but they know that if they bold they'll be showered with blows far more decisive than this. As they should. Some of your opponents also twitch at the sharp sound, you've been known to lash other men as eagerly as horses when the opportunity presents itself.

Reins

You gently tug at the reins as a fisherman does his line and almost before the force travels to the bridle your horse responds to your command. Even in the chaos of a canter you maintain full control, the horses' stamina or the chariot's integrity will break before your concentration does and of course no matter how fluid your control in the moment you'll still have to plan your path through the space ahead in advance.

Shoes

Your mastery remains unseen by most, it is in fact heard in the crisp clattering of hooves and the smooth creak of the wheels. You understand that the furious instants of the race are in fact the culmination of weeks of steady maintenance. You don't flourish your whip or twirl your reins, you sit with your horses day in day out evening out their shoes and applying fresh studs to chariot wheels. Your diligence pays off when you stampede over obstacles as though they were straw.



At last you line up at the starting line, your senses atingle in anticipation for the race to come. In this moment Saturn's attention seems to slip and the past and future seem to collapse into the present. Charioteers are a superstitious lot and at some point in your career you were cajoled into attending a session with an oracle. The gap-toothed old crone spouted the usual nonsense about whores everlasting and bottomless amphorae until a fit seemed to seize her. You remember her words still.

Shipwrecked

"You are a shipwreck on the shores of history", you'd hoped it was a figurative fortune but the number of crashes, naufragia, that you've suffered suggests she was warning against the dangers of the arena. You've walked away from all so far but without drastic measures or truly astounding luck you'll leave the hippodrome mangled if you do at all.

Dishonoured

"Those that speak your name as wine will spit it as vinegar", you dismissed a cheap shot surely based on her knowledge of your wide popularity but with rumours of rumours of rumours you worry there may be some truth to the curse. Whether or not you've done that which you are accused of is immaterial, the mob has a way of deciding such things itself. Clear your name or perform well enough to surpass it. A crowd will be waiting to lift you or tear you to pieces.

Nemesis

“Two brothers fight, one stands atop the capitol”, rivalry is hardly uncommon between charioteers but attempted murder is usually left to riotous fans. At least, that’s what you thought until a close shave convinced you one of the others has it out for you. You didn’t see who and word on the street is it’s someone from your past. A case of mistaken identity or something worse? One thing’s certain, this’ll be the death of you or him.

Dark premonitions are replaced with colour as the coloured rag falls from the governor’s hand and dances its way to earth. In the space of the heartbeats where your cries and tight reins call your horses to action you are met by another vision of the future, also ambiguous but considerably brighter.

Circus

The stable manger’s face flashes before you, games celebrating the ascension of a new senator, he said, an imperial representative in attendance. Despite the deadly nature of the races the bloody entertainment gladiators offer has never been the performance you wanted to give. But here playing caddy to some thug with a spear and skewering the other teams will gain the attention of one of the big players in Rome. You would go far with such patronage.

Politics

It’s common knowledge that the divide between teams is often demographic and therefore political as much as anything else. Manipulating the masses is mostly left to your patron but if you’re clever about it you can spread your message among the populace. Whether you do this as a demagogue for hire or out of genuine public spirit you wield power often overlooked by your betters. Do try to keep it that way.

Corruption

Betting’s big business and as with any torrent of talents a few crafty sorts endeavour to divert more their way through means fair or foul. You can be one of these cheats and if you’re particularly enterprising buy into and head your own cartel. Appropriate generosity can convince referees to look the other way and stable hands to mix poppy into the other horses’ oats. These people will sometimes ask you to lose, for compensation. You’d best obey.

Riches, power, glory... all those things denied to a lowly slave. The fabric finally touches the ground and you lurch ahead abreast with your opponents. Whatever the future holds and whatever past haunts you you’ll always have these timelessly ecstatic moments, going so fast you seem almost the stand still. Give the horses a good swat and trim the reins a touch, you’re riding right past the sunset!