

THE INSCRUTABLE MR. MING

Roman Province of Galatia

40 A.D.

The Akroana *agora* in the Roman Empire's Asia Minor province was noisier and more crowded than usual because the westbound Silk Road caravan had stopped there during the night. It opened for business at dawn and would leave soon on its scheduled route carrying eclectic merchandise from the Far East: spices, fine cloth, blown glass, exotic pets, jewelry, and, of course, slaves.

The wealthy Roman Galatian citizens came to spend their money on luxuries while local residents strolled along the quarter-mile line of tired camels and display wagons with their families to gawk at the combination bazaar and traveling zoo. Squeals of fear mixed with joyful amazement made the exhibition of apes, peacocks, parrots, snakes, giraffes, and elephants all the more exciting.

Cornelius Fabbius, *Primus Pilus* or commanding centurion of the first cohort of the Parthian XVI Legion, walked through the caravan looking for a specific slave trader. He had given the *procurator*, Marcus Appius, specific requirements for a slave purchase more than a year earlier when his caravan passed through Akroana eastbound on its way to Indus and countries beyond. According to the slave trader, a shrewd Florentine who only took orders on consignment, slaves with special characteristics and abilities were in very high demand. Most customers wanted intelligent young house servants or skilled artisans, but Centurion Cornelius demanded a well-educated male slave.

When Marcus Appius brought the candidate to him, the soldier's first impression was that this diminutive, rail-thin foreigner with slanted eyes and of indeterminate age was entirely unsuitable. His wrists were shackled to a chain about his waist and his ankles were similarly bound so he was forced to take short, tentative steps. He stopped in front of Cornelius with his eyes lowered to the ground in submission. The *procurator* poked him with a sharp camel prod.

"Look at the centurion!" the slave merchant demanded.

Cornelius walked around the peculiar little man as if examining a rare animal. He sported a braided pigtail, or *queue*, from an otherwise shaved head that extended down his back almost to

his knees. Atop his head was a small black cap. A one-piece black gown covered his body from neck to ankles. The hint of a thin mustache shadowed his upper lip and drooped down the sides of his mouth. He was the most bizarre creature the Roman centurion had ever seen.

“Does he speak Latin?”

“Sometimes, Centurion. He understands my Florentine Latin, anyway.”

“And he is well-educated?”

“Supposedly. The seller I bought him from in Indus said that he was once a teacher.”

“Open your mouth,” Cornelius said to the slave.

He complied and showed a half-dozen brown teeth. He exhibited no signs of illness or disease.

“Show me your hands.”

The slave lifted them as far as the chain allowed.

Cornelius took them in his hands. He turned them over and examined his long, thin fingers.

“What work has he been doing? These are not the hands of a teacher.” Cornelius suspected that he was being misled by the *procurator*. The skin on the slave’s knuckles was thick and hard. He had the heavy calluses of a bricklayer or stone carver.

The slave trader shrugged.

“Why are his hands so calloused? Are you trying to cheat me, Marcus Appius?”

“No, Centurion. I purchased him a year ago and he’s done no more work for me than food preparation and cleaning. Ask him.” He punctuated his suggestion with a smack with the stick across the slave’s back.

The centurion grabbed the slave’s hand again.

“What is this?” Cornelius asked in Latin.

“It is a hand.” The slave obviously spoke Latin too.

“I know it’s a hand. What makes these lumps on your knuckles and hands?”

“*Wu shu*.”

“That’s his foreign gibberish.” The trader prodded the slave again. “Answer the centurion properly.”

The little man replied: “The deformity, as you call it, is caused by training to fight without weapons which is called *wu shu* in my language. Does that answer your question, Honorable Sir?”

“He speaks perfect Phrygian too!” Cornelius exclaimed. “That is amazing!”

“Well, I don’t speak the local dialect, Centurion, but if you say it’s Phrygian then I believe you.” Marcus Appius poked the little man again.

“Honorable Sir, could you please tell this man to stop using that instrument on me? It is entirely unnecessary. I do not wish to inflict injury on him.”

Cornelius burst out laughing. The *procurator* was puzzled by what the slave had said that was so funny.

“Marcus Appius, leave us. I wish to examine the slave myself to see if he is suitable for my special needs. Oh, and give me your camel prod in case he requires further discipline.”

The *procurator* left after handing over the source of affliction which the centurion promptly snapped in half and threw aside. Cornelius sat on a crate and looked at the interesting specimen shackled before him.

“Speak to me in Latin. Tell me your name, where you are from, how you became a slave, and the source of your education. I’ll tell you my requirements if you give me honest answers.”

Now that the dreaded camel prod was broken and thrown aside, the bantam slave appeared more at ease. “My name, Honorable Sir, is *Ming Mei*. I was born in the land you call Serica after the fine silk of my country. I was educated from a child to be a *guan* or bureaucratic overseer in my provincial government. After rising to prominence in my city, and much to the shame of my father, I joined a band of warriors to defend our valley from northern invaders. After fighting off the barbarians I returned to find our city controlled by corrupt officials. No sooner had I exposed their thievery, than I was kidnapped and sold to slave merchants from Indus and then Rome. I was a slave for many years during which time I taught myself the languages of people between here and the Indus mountains. Not only do I speak Latin and Phrygian, but my Greek is flawless and my Gallic more than passable. I also write those languages. Does that answer your questions, Honorable Sir?”

“Your Latin is certainly excellent. It even has a Roman accent which fits with my plans. Your other qualifications appear to be adequate,” he admitted. “I need a tutor for my boys who is

versed in classic literature, logic, the arts, mathematics, physical sciences, and history. Can you instruct them in those subjects?

Without hesitation, Ming Mei answered: “Of course, Honorable Sir. I am a uniquely educated slave. What I do not know I learn quickly.”

Impressed with his self-confidence, Cornelius continued: “How can I barter with the *procurator* for your price? He will sense my interest and double or triple the asking price. Tell me your shortcomings that can help me bargain for you.”

Ming thought for a long minute before answering. “You could suggest that I am too small, that I have bad breath, or that my eyesight is poor.”

Cornelius smiled at his answers emphasizing his physical limitations. “Apparently you do not consider arrogance or conceit a shortcoming.”

“You could tell him that I have a fatal disease and will live only a few more years. That could reduce the price somewhat.”

“Do you have a fatal disease?”

“Not that I am aware of, but he doesn’t know that.”

“I cannot tell the *procurator* a lie. First of all, he knows that I am a Christian. Besides that, my God would be offended and dishonored if I told a lie.”

Ming gave him a puzzled look. “I do not understand, but it is as you wish, Honorable Sir.”

“Stay here and I’ll negotiate a price for you.” Cornelius left the man standing in shackles. He looked back with another question.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Ming. Your boys may address me as Mr. Ming.”

“Very well. Stay here.”

As soon as Cornelius left his sight, Ming stepped through the loop formed by his shackled hands, twisted the chain around his waist so his hands were behind him, and arched his back. He felt for his *queue* and extracted a metal pin from the thick, coarse braid. He deftly maneuvered the pin in his hand to spring the primitive lock at his waist that was now behind him and released himself. After unlocking his ankles, he returned the pin to its hiding place and set the chains and locks on the ground. He flexed his wrists and waited for his new owner.

When Cornelius and the *procurator* returned it was evident that they had arrived at a suitable price.

“I will take him to a blacksmith to remove the chains, *Primus Pilus*.” The slave trader was overly apologetic. “The key has apparently been misplaced. For that I apologize.”

“Well hurry along. I don’t want to wait any more than I have to. The drive home will take us at least two days, weather permitting.”

The slave handed his former owner the chains and locks in a neat pile. Turning to his new owner, he gave a deep bow. “I am ready to serve you, Honorable Sir.”

“Look, I’m getting tired of this ‘Honorable Sir’ business, Ming. Address me as *Centurion* or *Master* unless I tell you otherwise. Understood?”

“Yes, Centurion.” He bowed again.

While Marcus Appius looked at the metal shackles in disbelief, the soldier and his new slave walked through the caravan crowds to where Cornelius had parked his chariot; Ming followed at a discrete distance. When they reached the stables, Cornelius found his horses fed and rested. While he paid the attendant Ming grabbed the reins and expertly pivoted the chariot around in the courtyard. His master stepped onto the platform and they swung onto the main road at a trot.

After several miles without speaking, Cornelius spoke over the rumble of iron wheels on the stone pavement, “You’re an enigma, Ming.”

“Thank you, Centurion.” The diminutive slave gripped the reins in his strong hands and relished the feel of the swift chariot. His long braid swung behind him in the wind.

“I am also *inscrutable*.”