

*The Lacquered Talisman*  
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Excerpt from "Chapter Five: The Herd Boy Meets His Match But Loses His Meal"

(Author's Note: This scene takes place in 1341, in the hills south of the Huai River in modern Anhui Province. Fortune, the future Ming founder, is 13 years old, and working as a herder for Old Wolf.)

"We'll never get our hands on any meat," Darling said, shaking his head and tucking his hands into his sleeves for warmth.

At this, Fortune snorted and the rest all looked over to him. "What are you talking about?" he asked. "Look at where we are. Look at what we're up here doing. We're surrounded by meat! We're meat guardians! We spend our days going where the meat goes!"

The other three looked around at their cattle in surprise, having forgotten the animals could become the tasty meal Darling desired.

"But these are all draft animals," said Five. "And none are ours."

Fortune stood up, restless. He paced near the fire. In all directions, the landscape was rocky, brown and bleak. Even the cattle seemed scrawny. He mused silently on his fate. Fortune thought of his father and brother, toiling in the fields every day. Lately they hardly spoke because they were so worried about the drought. Every morning they walked outside and scanned the sky for signs of rain. And every morning they were disappointed. His mother had been spending more and more time praying to the Metal Mother. "If there is no harvest this year, will Squire Lin turn us out?" he wondered.

Fortune remembered the flight from their former home, when he was ten years old and the landlord rejected their tax payment and sent them away. How many years ago was that? He counted back. "It was five years ago," he murmured to himself. "And things have not gotten better." He pinched his chin, lost in angry thoughts.

"What is it, Fortune?" asked one of the herders, interrupting Fortune's ruminations.

Fortune turned and looked hard at one of the calves. "What's so wrong with us eating too?" he asked, his voice low and dangerous. Fortune swallowed hard and wheeled slowly back to his companions, furrowing his brow as he turned over his words carefully. "Have we ever lost a single animal?" he asked. "How many wolves have we chased away to protect this clan herd? And what have we ever sought in return?"

None of the boys offered an answer. They all began to breathe faster, and salivate. Fortune gazed again at the complacent calf, its tail swishing. The rest of the herders stared with him, lustfully, hearts beating. All consumed with the same desire: I want to eat it.

That simple thought overwhelmed all others. When Fortune grabbed the axe for cutting firewood, the others jumped up and urged him on. The calf munched blithely at a tuft of grass, unaware of its impending sacrifice. The first chop fell, propelled by Fortune's anger. He breathed deeply, the pressure finally vented through action. He was no longer a helpless bystander.

"I have done it," he realized. "There is no turning back now."

In short order the calf was hacked to pieces, its haunches roasting over the campfire. The rest of the cattle stamped fearfully and formed ranks, braying at the unconscionable feast before them. This chorus only served to raise the feverish pitch of the group. Their laughter could be heard far down

the hill as they gorged themselves, the meat half raw and roughly skinned, its juices smeared across their mouths.

At last, satiated, they lay back on the ground. Their greasy hands rested on their full bellies as they breathed in the beefy air. In the distance, the temple bell tolled, the sound that usually sent them on their way home.

Five sat up with a start. He swiped at his bulging eyes and rasped out, "What will happen to us?"

The youngest herder began to cry. The spell broke and fear descended on the gluttonous group. Fortune was as frightened as the rest. As the dusk deepened, he pinched again at his chin and tried to think of what to do next. At last he stopped and turned to face the others, his expression firm and grim. He told his companions to bury what remained of the calf, except for its tail, which he cut off himself and set aside. The other three worked in silence, their hands still shaking, but glad to have orders to follow. Fortune used a leaf to wipe the meat grease from his hands and face and then gestured for the three to follow him toward a pile of rocks. He surveyed the rocks at length, the calf tail in his hand. Then he selected a crevice between two boulders and jammed the tail deep into it. He turned to face his three friends.

"We'll say the calf wandered by these rocks, which tumbled down all at once and trapped him, even though we tried with all our might to rescue him," Fortune said. "I will explain this to Old Wolf, since this was all my idea."

The other boys dipped their heads in relief, mumbling that it was a good plan. It could work. They gathered their herd and headed back down the mountain in silence.

Fortune's mistake was in thinking that he could have a conversation with Old Wolf, who had no interest in hearing why his animal had not returned. His interest was only in the fact that it did not return. That left Fortune responsible for the loss, whatever the reason.

Fortune uttered a stream of explanations related to the tail in the rock crevice, but this amounted to nothing more than an irritating whine in Old Wolf's ears as he walked slowly and maliciously across his yard toward the young man who, in Old Wolf's opinion, lacked the appropriately groveling attitude of his station. Old Wolf sniffed the air, catching a whiff of charred meat. He noticed the bag around Fortune's waist and reached forward to yank it free. It fell open to expose the little wooden disks of chess pieces. Old Wolf regarded them in silence, poking at the pieces.

"You've been playing games with me," he said slowly. He turned and called forward a servant girl. "Take this mess and throw it into the fire."

Fortune watched mutely as the servant gathered up the treasured hand-carved gift from his grandfather, now worn with use. He began then to understand the scope of his transgression. If all the herders felt they could partake of the herds they guarded, then the world would be turned on end, and order would wobble in all directions like a spilled plate of boiled eggs.