

Chapter 1 – Lofty Thought

A hazy gray blanket hovered above the Valley of Shadow. Residents below paid little heed to the gloomy day, but scurried to and fro, conducting everyday business. The Twin Peaks rose high in the sky, piercing the nebulous shroud, and joined together in the Village of Lofty Thought. People above bustled about and prepared for the rite of passage—another generation would join ranks with the revered Illuminati.

Hallowed passageways meandered deep within the mountainside and dead-ended at the closed-door meeting, where high-level pundits chosen from among the Illuminati screened the hopeful brood who had come of age.

The High Pundit slammed the point of his staff to the floor. "You are not the interrogator!" A fine spray of spittle scattered from his lips, highlighted by the torchlight until it dropped into the shifting shadows.

The young Seeker, Jeune, squirmed on the bench before the three-man council. Pundit 'Tenacious' reprimand echoed within the limestone chamber. Dark smoky tendrils painted sooty trails that skittered and climbed uneven walls while Jeune searched for what to say.

Black hollows marked Pundit 'Tenacious' deep-set eyes in the dim torchlight. Shadows oscillated across the other two council figures, embroiled in muted discussion.

Jeune swiped the sandy brown curls matted to his forehead. "But, sir, the philosophies of Lofty Thought breed more questions than answers." He fidgeted. The stuffy chamber closed in around him. Perspiration trickled from his hairline.

Tenacious slammed the tip of his elaborate walking stick into the hard-packed earthen floor one more time. "Enough! No more discussion." The older man leaned forward on his walking stick, stopping inches from Jeune's face, and lowered his voice. "The highest ethical good is the same for everyone." The council members nodded.

Wigglewot, Jeune's tiny winged companion, let out a soft whistle, fluttered to Jeune's shoulder, and leaned to his ear. "What is he talking about?"

Timing bells chimed, indicating the conclusion of the session.

"Finally!" Wigglewot flew toward the exit. "Hurry, Jeune. Let's get out of here."

Jeune stood, bowed his head before the council, turned on his heel, and rushed to the door.

"Highest ethical good." He mimicked the pundit's nasal tone.

Wigglewot chuckled. The two hurried along the torch-lined tunnel toward the exit. "Uh-oh. Trouble ahead."

Three silhouettes eclipsed daylight at the passageway's end. Jeune skidded to a stop. Even in the dim light, billowing robe sleeves warned that pundit trouble blocked his way.

Wigglewot shimmied next to Jeune's ear and whispered. "Politely say 'hello,' but keep walking. Let's get out of here."

Sunlight leaked into the corridor behind the shifting figures. Jeune drew in a deep breath and sauntered to the exit with a carefree strut. He fiddled with the medallion hanging from his neck and forced a smile.

The polished surface of Pundit 'Tenacious' walking stick gleamed among the three bodies blocking the corridor. Jeune's smile faded. He cast a fleeting look over his shoulder toward the Reckoning Chamber. *How did they get from there to here?* Feeling trapped, he back pedaled a few steps. *What should I do?* His back pressed against the cool limestone. In his heart he longed to become one

with the stone wall and disappear. Tenacious marched toward him followed by Punctilious. Why did Jeune feel such dread? They weren't much taller than him. Pundit Arcane pushed between Tenacious and Punctilious and grabbed Jeune's upper arm. Thick bands of silver and gold shimmered on the belled cuff of the pundit's sleeve.

"If you persist in your ways, you may be forced to leave the village." A vein bulged between Arcane's brows.

Jeune clenched his jaw. *If I say anything, I'd only make matters worse.*

The older man's grip tightened. "Your disruptive ways squelch the flow of debates." He shoved Jeune toward the wall as he released his hold.

Jeune licked his dry lips and glanced from one stern face to another, still wondering how they left the Reckoning Chamber after him, yet now stood, blocking his way. "I don't understand, sirs. I mean no trouble."

They surrounded him like a pack of wild dogs circling a brush rabbit. Spine pressed to the wall, Jeune waited. Pundit Punctilious' hard-soled sandals clicked against the stone floor. He paced; his hands folded at the small of his back.

"You are surely as your mother before you, talking of this--this one truth. We choose our way without the aid of such universal standards." He twisted, positioning his face inches from Jeune's. "You are not above our ways." He pawed Jeune's medallion and eyed it intently. His bushy gray eyebrows arched as if yanked by a string.

Jeune turned from the stench of the older man's breath.

Punctilious' complexion darkened from red to purple. "Saying one comes from a royal line does not make it so." He flung the medallion against Jeune's chest.

Unexpected anger boiled in the pit of his stomach. His hands balled into fists. *Punctilious talks in riddles and recalls details of my mother that I long to know. It's not fair.*

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Two hours later Jeune and Wigglewot pushed through the gathering crowd. Jeune struggled to think positive thoughts while threading around villagers lining the main street. Fine citizens of the mountain community navigated the walkways to find the best place to glimpse the revered procession and follow them to the Coming of Age ceremony. Jeune raced to stay ahead of the parade. *I don't want to be late. Pundits could use it against me.* Just behind him, the parade of pundits dressed in traditional robes snaked toward the Town Square where the crowd's flow stalled.

Jeune jerked to a stop at the bottleneck filtering into the narrow street. A blustery spring breeze tugged his curls. By the looks of the crowd, he'd be here awhile. He picked a stray thread from his bare sleeve and twisted it between his thumb and forefinger until the wind caught the fiber and pulled it into the sky toward the summit and out of sight.

His concentration wandered along the snow-capped pinnacles overhead. His eyes followed the mountain trails and returned to the procession of multicolored robes. Hues differed from robe to robe, but rings of gold and silver edged every sleeve.

Movement rippled through the throng and pushed Jeune past the standstill. His lanky frame slowed behind a young girl holding her mother's hand.

"I like that pretty one, Mommy." The child pointed toward the parade. Purple shades highlighted the shoulders of a shimmering garment, worn by one gray-haired woman who carried herself with a regal posture.

The mother patted her daughter's back. "With the right education, one day you'll wear a pundit's

robe."

"Look at her sleeves!" The girl clasped her hands beneath her chin, her eyes trained with delight on the woman as she filed by.

Jejune studied the metallic threads edging the pundit's cuffs; at least six rings decorated each sleeve. He eyed his undecorated sleeve, sighed, pushed into the crowd's renewed flow, and headed toward the Seeker's Circle.

Lofty Thinkers filtered into the Town Square. Vendors shouted for spectators' attention while onlookers discussed the prestigious rings and the theories they represented. Over time, theories melded with tradition and affected changes in the lives of the good citizens.

The single file cavalcade advanced in choreographed fashion while the first Illuminati settled into their pre-appointed center seats on the platform, nestled within the Seeker's Circle. Tenacious marched by. Jejune hid in the crowd, attempting to count the High Pundit's gold and silver merits. "Someday I'll have more rings than him," he said to Wigglewot.

Wigglewot let out a soft snort. "What does it matter, Jejune? You don't really want to be *like him*."

Tenacious shuffled along the limestone pavement and took his designated place of honor in the row closest to the stage. His chin held high and eyes forward, the pundit's robe overflowed his throne-like chair. The corners of his lips lifted in a hollow smile. His gaze focused on scudding clouds above the assembly's heads.

Wigglewot's transparent wings fluttered as he hovered and settled on Jejune's shoulder. "Let's sit over there." Wigglewot pointed toward the back row of stone benches that filled the Seeker's Circle. The large blocks offered reserved seating for the Lofty Thinkers on the verge of becoming Seekers.

"Just think, Wig. What I choose to believe today determines the color of my robe in the future." Jejune's shoulders slumped.

"Cheer up, Jejune." Wigglewot nudged Jejune's neck. "You're not alone."

Jejune glanced around at those approaching the Coming of Age who filed into the Seeker's Circle. They gathered in scattered patches. "This is the last time I'll have to take part in one of these ceremonies," he said to Wig as he ticked his head once toward the Illuminati. "Today fulfills my obligation to study under them." He shuffled toward the last row. Wigglewot balanced on his shoulder.

Paused between two slabs at the circle's edge, Jejune said, "How about here?" He studied the tall hedge fencing the grounds behind the last row of seating: to his right, the Fountain of Tradition splashed; left, an archway covered with honey blossoms. *The quickest way out.* "Our escape route when it's over."

Wigglewot snickered as Jejune claimed the out-of-the-way bench. He fidgeted on the cold stone while the last Illuminati settled into their designated seats.

Fragrant honey blossoms wafted on the spring breeze. Jejune inhaled the bouquet, which tickled long ago memories. He closed his eyes and tried to picture his mother's face.

"What are you doing?" Wigglewot interrupted his thoughts and fluttered to the bench.

"This sweet smell reminds me of Mother's hair." Jejune pulled in another deep breath, but the memory dissipated when two chatty girls claimed the seat in front of him.

Jejune stared at the ground and shook his head. "People look forward to this. Listen to them. I want to hear about quests to the Eternal City." He shifted in his seat. "My mother believed in the Eternal City."

Wigglewot shrugged. "Everyone knows the Eternal City exists." He feigned a yawn. "How long is this going to last?"

"Too long, Wig."

The benches filled. Wigglewot scurried up Jeune's arm to perch on his shoulder before a large-rumped fellow plunked beside them.

"Hello, Inveigle." Jeune glanced at the boy and slid an inch to the right to make space between them.

"Good day." Inveigle smiled. Excitement danced in his brown eyes. "Isn't this exciting, Jeune? Before we know it that will be us up there." He pointed his chubby finger toward the Illuminati.

Jeune scratched behind his ear and nodded. "Sure, Inveigle. Exciting."

In his heart, Jeune agreed with Wigglewot. He pondered the unpleasant episode with the pundits earlier that morning. Inveigle didn't experience such difficulties. He stole a sideward glimpse at the boy. *He'd never understand.*

Jeune slid his medallion back and forth along the leather strip around his neck. *Why is this so difficult for me? Each generation declares a New Age of Enlightenment, and my generation will be no different. Someday I will be like them.* He closed his eyes and shuddered.

The lad's musings drifted to the Eternal City. Historically, it had been the common thread for each Seeker's quest. Today, some said it existed while others argued it did not. Epic quests to locate the Eternal City gradually diminished, replaced by the popular concept that such a place existed only in the minds of great thinkers. This theory prompted Seekers within Lofty Thought to make the great city become whatever one imagined it to be. Travel outside the village limits grew obsolete. Jeune rejected such nonsense. *If it only exists in my mind, where are my parents?*

His thoughts drifted back to the unpleasant meeting before the Council that morning. The mandatory conclave fulfilled one of the last requirements for his Coming of Age, but Jeune had struggled with inconsistencies in the pundits' logic.

A fellow Seeker settled beside Jeune on his right, dissolving his retrospection. Family banners furled in a semicircle at the back of the platform behind the Illuminati. But Jeune's parents weren't here to display their family's crest. In the rich history of Lofty Thought, it was not uncommon among Lofty Thinkers to be orphaned by a quest. Some lost a father, others, a mother, even siblings; Jeune's parents never returned to earn rings and colorful robes. He clung to faint memories like grasping at the threads of an unraveling tapestry.

"They're ready to start." Wigglewot said.

Jeune shifted to see between the girls in front of him. He eyed his medallion and shined it on the front of his tunic.

"Did that fool leave his greasy finger marks?" Wigglewot asked.

Wigglewot knew how to make him smile. Jeune slipped the medallion into the neck of his garment and focused on the honored speakers. Pundit Arcane fussed about something to the woman seated beside him while Jeune's unasked question burned within him. He couldn't bury the yearning for truth. Seeing the pundit's face whisked his thoughts to that clandestine meeting in the tunnel.

"I admit, I seek the truth," Jeune had conceded. "How can people reach the Eternal City if they don't know how to get there?" He let the three irate men intimidate him and quash his remaining questions. Now he couldn't help but wonder what Pundit Punctilious meant when he spoke of a royal line? Jeune buried this question with the others.

The ever-present hunger for something more lingered. *I had hoped this would change today.*

Clouds engulfed the cliffs and moved in to hang like a wispy ceiling above the crowd of spectators. Speaker after speaker lectured. The sun worked to burn through the clouds casting elongated intermittent shadows from the onlookers toward the Illuminati.

Jejune's ears itched as he listened to the various theories, some new and some old. *How can pivotal points contradict each other and yet be embraced as truth?* The Illuminati despised this line of thinking. They taught truth was relative and that no objective, rational basis could be found for moral decisions.

Water splashed in the nearby Fountain of Tradition where young children played without a care. Crystal liquid spilled from the upturned urn held by the faceless, hooded statue some called the Great Thinker, while a few said it represented the All Knowing One. Ancient scrolls taught that the founders built the fountain after escaping life in the Valley of Shadow. The flow of water represented new ideas that made Lofty Thought a village above the rest. Current theories bred controversy, whether or not an All Knowing One was a real entity or an imaginary concept put in place by the Great Thinker to help Lofty Thinkers find themselves.

A swarthy young boy dunked beneath the surface, popped up with a splash and startled his friend. Jejune gazed upon their folly and longed for simpler times. If he had his way, those up-and-coming would never have to sit through this drivel. He forced his attention back to the learned speaker.

Pundit 'Tenacious' stern glare targeted Jejune among the throng. The lanky adolescent slumped behind the heads of the two girls.

"I don't know if I want to find the Eternal City," the taller of the two girls said. "If one enters, they become trapped forever. That is how it came to be named the Eternal City. Once you enter you can never leave."

"No." The shorter, fair-skinned girl shook her head. "Living within the Eternal City overcomes one with happiness; people *choose* to stay." She emphasized her point with a nod.

Jejune stared at the two. *This is a perfect example of the point I tried to make.*

"Tenacious wants you to agree that you disagree." Wigglewot shrugged. "That's all."

Jejune couldn't shake the confrontation in the tunnel. Pundit 'Tenacious' words echoed in his mind. "Freedom of choice entails commitment and responsibility. You are neither committed nor responsible." The older man rested his hands behind his back, lifted his chin and looked down at Jejune. His heavy lids blinked once. "All ideas are welcomed and accepted here; you do neither."

"Committed?" Jejune combed his fingers through his flaxen curls and grabbed a fistful of hair. "Responsible?" He lifted his palms toward the ceiling. "What does that mean?"

Tenacious bent close. Jejune could almost count the enlarged pores on the man's bulbous nose. "It means we expect your behavior to be peaceful, not divisive." The pundit's eyes squinted into slits.

Jejune apologized. "I--I--I'm s-s-orry, S-sir. I am not attempting to be divisive. I--I only seek to understand--"

"I hope you do understand, young man. You're no longer due special treatment. Your parents are not here to claim your birthright." The man's gnarled finger poked Jejune's chest with each word. "You are under our authority as long as you live in Lofty Thought."

The crowd applauded and pulled Jejune from his preoccupation. *Perhaps Lofty Thought is not the place for me. What holds me here? Surrogate provides a comfortable life, but the void within my heart swallows the pleasures of life and leaves me empty. And this* He considered the young women in front of him. I can't

embrace conflicting theories.

Jejune looked beyond the girls and focused on the granite podium in the middle of the platform. Family banners fluttered in the stiff breeze while the gold and black train of the speaker's robe trailed along stone stairs approaching the lectern. Jejune stared wide-eyed at the impressive colors. For a brief moment he wanted it, the robes, the rings and the prestige. The pundit stepped to the podium to a round of hearty applause.

Wigglewot stifled another yawn. Jejune surveyed his peers' happy faces. They eagerly absorbed new ideas for their developing theories. *Why do I feel so empty?*

The last speaker concluded, and the crowd dispersed, gathering into private clusters. Seeker to Seeker, young people boasted of future plans and budding theories. Jejune avoided the interaction, slipped under the archway of honey blossoms, and followed the walkway until he emerged into the exiting crowd.

"What do you think?" Wigglewot asked. They wound through the mass and out of the square. "Any new ideas we can use?"

Jejune ignored his little friend and shuffled through the throng. The Illuminati clearly showed impatience when he questioned their ideas. Today their power and control stifled his participation. Adhering to their way of thinking robbed him of his freedom.

Dust stirred around the departing mobs' sandals. "Next thing you know they'll conjure up ideas by watching dust settle," Wigglewot said with a snicker. But Jejune did not smile. Instead, he walked away from the session with the birth of a plan.

"Tomorrow morning, Wig. We'll embark on a quest to seek the truth about the existence of the Eternal City.