



The Immortals

Ch. 2: Quest for Immortality

Based on the true stories of Tyla and Douglas Gabriel.

The Gabriels are writing an adult fairy tale of our former incarnations where we describe how each iteration of our existence on Earth was part of a Divine Plan to show us the process of ascension, or immortality. Follow us as we write this story, chapter by chapter, until you *also* discover the secrets of the majestic sequoia trees.

Chapter one begins here:

Our Quest for the Tree of Life



Once this chapter is complete with our opening animation, we will post it as part of the book. In the meantime, please see: <https://neoanthroposophy.com/2022/12/26/our-quest-for-the-tree-of-life/>

Chapter Two: The Quest for Immortality

Queen Mother's Call

Shenrab wandered in those imaginal realms where wind-horses flew down the valley like Ferghanan heavenly-horses riding the air-tides swiftly to the plains, plummeting from the snowy mountain tops to the glaciers melting into swollen rivers rushing to the valleys below. Some urgent message, like whispers of angels was sounding from the clouds above and could be heard coming from afar. News of unimaginable wonder and surprise filled the air with the quick pace of a galloping steed on a mission of life and death, auspicious and terrifying. Shenrab knew the message would change many lives permanently, his own most especially. The dream harbinger was a herald of his destiny, yet unknown and strange in every way. He knew he would never be the same after that fateful message was delivered. All of this came to him in a state of consciousness between the seen and unseen worlds, that nevertheless turns destiny into a mystery of the yet-to-be-seen future unknown.

Shenrab woke with this imaginal memory still fresh on his mind and his eyes caught the early morning sunrise coming through his window. But not all of it was a dream, he clearly could hear horse-hoofs speeding up the valley towards his house from the broad plain below. Once he gained his bearings, he quickly ran outside to the street to see what the rider was in such a hurry to accomplish. He could see beyond his horse corrals that down the road some sort of messenger on a Ferghanan heavenly-horse was racing up the valley towards the center of town. Shenrab's mind raced just as quickly trying to imagine what message could be so important. His own yakut mares whinnied and were agitated by the commotion and the prospects that their master was going to feed them early this morning.

Shenrab threw on his clothes and returned to the street with the intent to stop and question the rider, but the messenger barely noticed him. Curiosity got the best of him as he mounted his snowy white mare and rode off bareback following the other rider. He caught up with him just in time as he was walking into the community house to deliver a letter. Shenrab followed him inside and heard the rider ask for an

elder of the village. One such elder stepped forward to receive the letter and thank the messenger who turned immediately and dashed out of the room and resumed his speedy delivery of the letters in his pouch.

The elder's face grew twisted and distorted as he read the letter, as if he had never heard of a such a message before. Indeed, he had not ever seen or heard of a message before that came from the Queen Mother of Nagar. He sat down and dropped the letter on the table nearby. Shenrab quickly picked up the letter and read it. He, too, had to sit down in silence and wonder and simply try to understand the implications of what the Queen Mother was asking of the valley elders.

After a long pause of silence, the elder turned to Shenrab and asked him to gather the other elders for an emergency meeting of the clan and tribe leaders. "Do not tell them of the content of the letter. Simply tell them that Queen Mother has asked us to respond immediately," said the elder to Shenrab.

With that, Shenrab remounted his horse and road to each of the elder's homes and delivered the message. Soon, the women and men of the elder council gathered to hear what the excitement and surprise was all about.

"Today we received a letter that I would like to read aloud to all of you that is of great importance," the elder said and then read the letter.

"From the Queen Mother of the West, Hsi Wang Mu, and her throne in the West Flower of Xihua, - Queen of the Immortals who provides prosperity, longevity, and eternal bliss - Perfected Marvel of the Western Florescence and Ultimate Worthy of the Cavernous Darkness - Guardian of the Peaches of Immortality and the One Pillar of our Twelve Valleys:

Greetings to the Elders of the Twelve Valleys of Bonpo, the land of Buddha Miwoche in the Western Mountains of the Jade Emperor,

I extend the blessings of the One to all those who know the ways of Miwo, Skytheonos, Zarathustra, Shakti, Kali, and Vac.

Not since the time of the Yellow Emperor of Chin, Huangdi-the great sage king, has a great expedition to map the world been undertaken. The Book of the Mountains and Seas, the Shan Hai Jing, recorded and mapped the known world at that time with the help of Buddha Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche and Skytheonos. The fauna and flora specimens, maps, languages, customs, and writings gathered by the expedition filled many libraries on Manu's White Island in the Kingdom of the Yellow Emperor. These records comprise what is known about our world. This is the library of the wisdom of our known world. The explorer's who dedicated and sacrificed their lives to this task live on through their findings in the Libraries of Wisdom on the White Island.

The Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors of China and the City of Manu have added to the Libraries of Wisdom for thousands of years. Great secrets were preserved and mysteries revealed through cherishing wisdom and accumulating knowledge.

In our time, the Chinese Emperor, the Great Yu, has sent out notice that he intends to gather new explorers to conduct another great expedition. The clans and tribes of the Twelve Valleys shall send our best explorers, botanists, animal breeders, linguists, cartographers, and warriors to join this expedition.

Thus, I ask the Counsel of Elders in each of the Twelve Valleys to choose their best representative for this expedition and send them directly to my throne in Hunza Nagar, beyond the valley of Gulmit to meet with the others chosen by their Valley Elders. The explorers should be young, unmarried, experts in their vocations, familiar with other languages and cultures, and prepared to give their lives for this important mission. The expedition is dangerous, and the explorers may not return, or they may return with new knowledge from far away peoples in lands that are heretofore known only to the wise."

A long silence filled the room with inward questions, doubts, fears, joys, and a looming cloud of unknowing. No one was prepared to speak, offer suggestions or names, or even fully realize what this letter meant. Many good questions arose that needed good answers and yet silence, deep and profound, was all that the room of elders offered to those who had gathered for the news of the message.

“I, for one, volunteer for this expedition most willingly and I believe I have many qualifications that meet the requirements. I am not married, I have trained with the master horse breeder for years and accompanied him to lands far from here to trade and sell our yukat horses. I am familiar with the Pamir Mountains and the Ferghana Plains north of Bactria. I am also of the clan of Miwo and a descendent of Buddha Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche, who was a horse breeder himself and was the best cartographer in our histories. I have used his maps and the wisdom of his travels, found in our sacred books, to traverse all Twelve Valleys and beyond. I have even added my own commentary to some of the maps to expand the knowledge. I also know the way through Kashgar to Kouton and the Tarim Basin, which will surely be the most direct route to the City of Manu to join with the Great Yu’s expedition. Truly, I am a good candidate, and I would like to put my name forward as a possible choice from our valley. I would be honored to represent our ancient traditions to these unknown lands of exploration,” said young Shenrab.

Others stepped forward that day and presented their qualifications and desire to be chosen, but, in the end, the elders chose Shenrab and he quickly prepared to go to Gulmit, to the throne of the Queen Mother, who was until that day only a dream, myth or story of old that would never touch his life personally. This was the greatest moment of honor and pride that Shenrab could have ever conceived. It was obvious to Shenrab’s family and the elders that he was born to this destiny.

Passage to the Throne

Shenrab believed that his brain could not hold another wild thought about what the future might hold for him. Already, his long trip from his home in the Gilgit Valley, and then across the other mountains and valleys of the Pamir, was a new awakening for him because he traveled for the first time alone, without the master horseman. The bitter cold nights around the fire were lonely if not for his two favorite horses

he had brought with him. These wild Mongolian horses were bred with yakuts from the far north and had long thick hair, thick manes, and broad tails that kept them warm at night and cool in the hot sun of day. Shenrab had bred these small horses to have broad hoofs for better footing in snow and more surface for walking on sand. They ate little and only needed to graze each day from the grass of the valleys or the greens found below the snow in the mountains. Mares expressed milk that could be made into many types of food and they could carry a great load with ease. To Shenrab, his horses were the best in the world, especially for the long trip across the Takla Makan dessert and the Tien Shen mountains to reach Lop Nor Lake, the ancient City of Manu and the current home of the Great Yu.

Shenrab recognized the Hunza River by sight as it wound its way up the Hunza Valley to the glaciers at the back of the valley, but he didn't know where the throne was situated in Gulmit, nor what was meant by Hunza Nagar. Thus, he had to ask of the elders in Hunza to find out where he was to go next. Perhaps he would need a guide to find the One Pillar, which as far as he knew was only a myth from begone days of Buddha Miwoche. As he turned onto the road along the river, he could see the familiar site of the valley filled with fruit trees of peaches, apricots, apples, and vast gardens growing everything imaginable. Hunza was the best valley for growing food and the late Spring air was filled with the fragrances of blossoming fruit trees and flowers. Gilgit Valley was the home to horses, oxen, yak, and other cattle, whereas Hunza was the valley of flowers and fruit. That is why they say the Queen Mother reigns over the Land of the West Flower.

Midway between the trailhead and the middle of the town, he noticed a beautiful orchard of peaches in full bloom. He could not help himself from stopping to smell the fragrance and let his horses drink from the river. He pulled out his map and again searched for any clues where Gulmit might be located on the map. Just then, a beautiful young lady stepped out of the orchard and began walking towards him. He was stunned and shocked at her graceful motions as she approached with a smile on her face. Obviously, she could see that Shenrab was not of her clan and was probably lost. Her gliding pace and swaying body conveyed to him the most unusual sensations that he had ever experienced. Somehow, he believed he already knew this young lady and yet was certain they had never met, for surely he would have remembered the most beautiful young lady he had ever laid eyes upon. Joy and

terror arose in his heart as it leapt into his throat making him feel like he could never muster the courage to speak to her.

“You look lost and certainly I have never seen you in the valley before. May I help,” said Qui Ye.

Shenrab was dumbstruck and was sure he couldn’t muster more than a word or two to say to this visage of beauty standing before him. He simply pointed at the map and said, “Gulmit.”

“Oh my, you must be one of the twelve explorers coming to speak with the Queen Mother, I imagine,” she said.

“Yes, I am,” said Shenrab, shocked by the hearing of his fate spoken out loud.

“Well, you certainly won’t find Gulmit on your map. It is a hidden place that few ever enter. But since I can see that you have been called by the letter, I can show you where to go. You can’t find it on a map, you must be led to the hidden valley. It is a great honor to meet another explorer chosen for the expedition,” Qui Ye said with respect.

“Another?”, queried Shenrab.

“Yes, I was chosen by the elders to represent Hunza Valley. I am a botanist who works with the Master of Plants in this valley. I hope to join the Chosen Twelve on this expedition. It is a pleasure to meet you and have the chance to lead you to Gulmit, since I need to go there myself. Let’s go to my house down the street and I will get my horse and some provisions and let my mother know where I am going,” she said in a matter-of-fact manner, as if she goes off to the throne of the Queen Mother regularly. “Plus, we will have to speak with the elders in the community house and introduce you to them. I need their permission to proceed to Gulmit to answer the Call of the Mother,” she said contemplating the magnitude of the her statement.

Qui Ye led Shenrab up the street to her home where he tied up his horses in her corral and fed them hay near the water trough. Qui Ye disappeared inside her house and quickly returned and led Shenrab further up the street to a large house with double doors and a grand entrance. Once inside, Shenrab's eyes adjusted to the dark wherein he saw a half dozen elder women and men sitting around a large table looking at maps and papers strewn out like a puzzle yet to be assembled. They all looked up abruptly from their work and three elders jumped to their feet and immediately came over to Qui Ye to greet her, and to meet her new friend.

The elders promptly understood exactly who Shenrab was and welcomed him, but not before a stream of questions, seemingly never ending, washed over him. He drank and ate some fruit and joyously answered every question to their satisfaction and managed to ask a few of his own during the quick, yet pointed, friendly interrogation. He was surprised to find he was the last to arrive of the Twelve Chosen from the valleys as a respond to the Call. Qui Ye was staying until the chosen ones arrived from the most distant valley so that she could lead them to Gulmit. Qui Ye herself had not been beyond the hidden valley to the home of the Queen Mother. Shenrab was shocked to hear that Qui Ye was a descendent of the Queen Mother herself but had never met her. In fact, none of the elders had ever trekked to the home of the Queen Mother of the West, the guardian of the One Pillar. All of this was almost more than Shenrab could comprehend.

When the elders, and the two chosen explorers, had settled into a quiet contemplation of the powerful conversation that had just ensued, it all became clear to each of them their own part in this historic expedition, even though they couldn't comprehend the whole scope of what was happening. Qui Ye was reeling from the reality that she was now going to meet her great, great grandmother, the most powerful person she had ever heard of who ruled the Twelve Valleys. She was slated to transcend Hunza and move to Nagar when she was 35 and had mastered the plants and trees of the most abundant fruit and vegetable producing valley of the Pamir. But she was only 28 now, still a child in the normal lifespan of a Hunza Valley native --150 years. At 35 girls decide whether to follow a trade or raise a family and home. Qui Ye was supposed to be still young and carefree but now was meeting a greater challenge than either path she thought she might go down. Meeting the Queen Mother, seeing the Great Learning Tree, the priestesses, the Books of Wisdom

all quickly overwhelmed her in that moment. She had been told these stories all her life but never knew if they were a dream, a distant heaven, or a very real, sacred land of the immortals.

Shenrab was somewhat breathless after the barrage of questions were answered. It would take days to understand in his heart all that he had just learned in a short time. Thinking about Qui Ye and her destiny shattered his ability to comprehend. He wondered who would the other ten chosen ones be? He felt humbled and insignificant in the grand scheme of this historic moment. He couldn't believe he was participating in such a fairytale fantasy. But the looks of scrutiny on the faces of the elders clearly communicated this was much more than a nursery tale or some fantastic and elaborate game. By the look in the elder's eyes, this must be a matter of life and death, not just honor and glory. But it was quite clear that the council of elders had approved of Qui Ye and Shenrab proceeding directly to Gulmit to receive instructions in the next stage of the selection process for the expedition.

The trek from Hunza to Gulmit was smooth and easy for the two young explorers. They followed alongside the Hunza River to the Gulmit River and then up the valley towards the high canyon above the lush valleys of fruit trees and grazing cattle, all fed by the many rivulets that rushed down from the steep sides of the mountains surrounding this garden of delights. Just like the Hunza Valley, it was filled with peach trees of many varieties and apricots, apples, and pear orchards grew everywhere from the valley floor to innumerable terraces climbing up the slopes of the valley. Everywhere were people, animals, and plants living in perfect balance with nature, in a harmony that enchants life into beauty and abundance. Shenrab had never seen a valley so dedicated to plants and trees of every variety and color growing naturally and fed by many creeks and waterways that ubiquitously filled the landscape. The sound of water gently bubbling along everywhere caused the air to be filled with a cool, damp fragrance that Shenrab took to be the smell of heaven. Shenrab looked at Qui Ye, who had just picked a sprig of peach blossom and woven it into a crown she put on her head. Shenrab's heart thrilled to bursting in this

glorious moment, the happiest moment of his life, as he and Qui Ye meandered up the road into the valley center.

At the meeting house of the elders, the two dismounted and tied their horses taking a long moment to look into each other's eyes to lend support and calm to the next step of their shared destiny. Just as before, the elder's welcomed them but asked many penetrating questions of Shenrab to assure his worthiness to be the chosen one of his valley. After many questions, it became clear to Qui Ye and Shenrab that the elders knew little more about this expedition than they did, or the next steps in the process. The elders had never been to the throne of the Queen Mother, not a one of them. They could only tell the explorers what little they knew. But they did believe that all twelve of the chosen ones would have to trek up the "inaccessible mountain" to find the home of the Queen Mother of the West. Occasionally, one or another person comes down from the mountain to do the Mother's bidding; but otherwise, the mountain lives up to its name – inaccessible.

This news came as another in a series of shocks to Qui Ye and Shenrab. No explorer had ever gone up this mountain to Nagar and returned, but emissaries have come down and returned. This led Shenrab to wonder if those who attempted either died trying, or perhaps stayed there because it is so wonderful. He and Qui Ye wondered what would happen next after they thanked the elders and made their way to where the other ten chosen ones were sleeping in an open barn.

The morning light was shattered by the call of a man yelling to the explorers to rise and come to the community house as soon as possible because the Queen's emissary was waiting for them. This was an abrupt way to meet your destiny, but they all quickly mustered and hurried to meet the call. Once inside, it was obvious the elders had risen early and already greeted the emissary and discussed their concerns with her.

Without any ceremony or hesitation, the emissary began, "My name is Unam, I am the messenger of the Queen Mother of the West and I have come to train you so that you might make the passage to Nagar to meet the Guardian of the One. I bring thanks to the elders and the chosen explorers from each of the Twelve Valleys in answering the Call. Not all the explorers gathered here will complete the journey

and expedition. It is filled with dangers, suffering, and sacrifice. The expedition of the Great Yu could take years, if not decades, but understand that our participation and leadership in this expedition is a matter of life and death for Nagar and our way of life in the Twelve Valleys.

“Usually, anyone who treks into Nagar must stay to protect the mysteries of the Queen Mother. But in this case, the Queen Mother wants to meet and bless each of the courageous souls willing to undertake this expedition. Much learning must take place before the summer when the group will be accompanied by warriors from the valleys joining them on the journey to the Great Yu. The contingency of the Twelve Valleys will deliver one hundred heavenly-horses from the Ferghana Plain as a gift to the Great Yu’s expedition, as well as offering their best young explorers to help accomplish the great mission.

“Anyone who attempts to come to Nagar must realize that it takes days of trekking over rough mountainous terrain, hazardous waterways, rugged hanging bridges, and a labyrinth of tunnels, all of which can present dangerous challenges. Once you commit to follow me, there is no turning back and you must never speak of what you see to anyone outside of Nagar. Truly, once you have visited, you won’t want to return home, but each of you will return and will be prepared for the expedition, or you will be found unworthy of the mission, or even die in the trying.

“If any of you desire before tomorrow morning to withdraw your name as a candidate, you are free to do so. I imagine you might have many questions after what I have told you. Please feel free to ask,” Unam said in a solemn and deathly serious tone.

Even though there were questions from some who had trepidations and fears, there was little information Unam was willing to tell any further than what she already said. The doubts, hopes, dreams, and nightmares of the Twelve Chosen roiled inside their minds but were, for now, hidden on the faces and in the voices of the explorers. They had just been given the most incredible choice of a lifetime, far beyond their wildest dreams or imaginings.

“My young students, take heed and be prepared tomorrow at break of day to travel as light as possible. Bring nothing you are not ready to leave behind. Make ready, for we shall return here to begin the caravan journey to the east in a few months,” Unam said, and then turned and went outside to sit by the stream.

Sunrise came early to Unam’s group of explorers. The valley people waved goodbye from below and the line of hikers headed due north into the steep and rugged mountains that looked impassable from the high ridge the group mounted as a saddle leading to the bare, jagged peaks above their head. It was no wonder that this passage stayed hidden since no one in their right minds would think about trekking up a seemingly impassible mountain face. Steep turn after steep turn let the group wind its way up the incline, directly behind Unam like a caterpillar working its many legs in harmony.

After numerous hours of steep ascent, the group came to a sheer granite cliff, thousands of feet high, looming before them like an impenetrable fortress guarded by stone giants. Unam continued without hesitation directly up to the wall and then stepped into the wall and disappeared. Qui Ye was right behind her and didn’t see where she went. She hesitated and poked her head in the direction Unam had gone. An invisible corner that turned back upon itself was one step further. She took the step and found herself on the narrowest of ledges one could imagine. It was a crack in the rock wall that allowed one person to squeeze through carefully. There was no room to turn around or sit down. It felt to Qui Ye as if she were passing through the birth-channel again, as a kind of second birth. She looked behind her and the others had followed her slowly and carefully through the tight squeeze of a passage.

After a long time of shuffling through this frightening situation, the tunnel on the left side evaporated into a large cavern which dropped off into a river far below. There was just room to turn your back to the wall and edge along what was left of the path. The rock ledge was narrow and wouldn’t allow them to walk normally. Only putting your back against the wall and taking small steps would suffice. More than one backpack, coat or personal item fell from the cliff as the group crawled along looking at the deadly drop in front of them. The mountain wall on the other side of the crevice was now distant and could lend no help. The cliff path continued to slowly

climb up the side of the mountain with each turn revealing thousand-foot drops to the river below.

Unam finished the last side-shuffle off the cliff path into what seemed to be a giant riverbed of stones of all colors guiding a wide river over a waterfall plunging down to the ravine below. The riverbed was full of rounded stones from lava rock to crystal. The lovely sight was breathtaking to behold. You could see every type of rock and mineral that Shenrab knew, and many others, shining in the sunlight. The open slope before them got wider at the top and he imagined in ancient times the glacier waters tumbling these stones into smooth and glossy gems from the contents of the mountains in front of them, varieties of jade, crystal, olivine, black lava rock and peridot. These mountains are wondrous with their variegated jewels, Shenrab thought to himself. Even water-clear quartz crystal was glistening amongst the rainbow-colored gems. The first impulse of the young explorers was to stop and choose a few small jewels to take with them. But Unam did not slow down.

The steep climb became more difficult as they trudged through the sand and the rounded pebbles that shifted with each footstep. There was no sure ground, just hard, rounded stones that wanted to roll down the mountain. The occasional large boulder was a pleasant break in the shifting incline of marbles and balls. But eventually they reached a solid slope above the riverbed and they took to a path along the steep wall next to a great and mighty water-fall. The path was no more than an insinuation and it was made of endless hairpin turns that zigzagged up the wall to where the river became a waterfall.

Unam lead the group to the top of the waterfall where they came upon a view of the bowl-shaped valley which produced this mighty river. Below them, Shenrab could see the valley of stones they came through. There was no sign of Gulmit or any other inhabited valleys or meadows. He was looking at land that no one inhabited at all, untouched by humans. Before him he could see a valley full of waterways of every imaginable size and shape, all leading to this mighty river and the waterfall they stood next to. They could all see that the valley in front of them was more water than land but everywhere there were footholds amongst the soil and paths adorned with brilliantly colored flowers and trees that burst into profuse blossoms filling the

air with an enchanting fragrance. Each of the young explorers wanted to sit down, rest and simply smell the air and feel the spray of the water upon their face.

“Do not drink the water or eat any of the fruit you see in this valley, or you will never be able to leave. You will simply lie down and dream yourself to sleep. Come, we must make it to the end of this valley before sundown or else we might go to sleep and not wake up,” said Unam with calm resolve but in a tone of doom. She turned and bound down the grass slope along the river towards the setting sun. The pace quickened and she turned neither to one side nor the other as she sped along the river towards the end of the valley that rose high into glaciers of snow and ice.

All along the river, it seemed that faint voices in conversation or singing a sweet song filled the air although the group was silent, and no other human was in sight. It was strange that no animals, whether bird or fish or rabbit was to be seen. Nowhere was there any sign of animals in air, water, or land. This gave the garden valley a strange sense of loneliness and solicited a dreamy desire for warmth and comfort, even though the valley floor was awash with water flowing everywhere. Only the deft feet of the fairy-like Unam could find the dry path between the watery ground that was more of a marsh than a mountain meadow. An ocean of water seemed to be supporting islands of flowers, one more beautiful than the next and each with an alluring aroma that reminded the travelers of home, mother, and the hearth.

As the sun reached three-quarters, they came to the end of the valley floor that rose towards the incline of the northern end of the bowl-like valley. There, in front of them was a glacier that extended to the summit of the mountain peaks. Numerous rivers flowed from the end of the glaciers feeding this valley of floating flower-islands, this watery world of stillness and babbling brooks that lulled them into a dreamy world of timelessness and endurance.

As they came closer to the front wall of the glacier, they could see ice tunnels emitting many rivers and streams from the thaw. Some were great tunnels and others simply ice caves hardly big enough to climb inside. Unam led us to a medium-sized creek sheathed by a cavern of ice that was filled with a brilliant blue light from the sunlight filtering through the ice above. They walked into the mouth of the ice-cave and proceeded along the edge of the creek which had carved out this tunnel

when the water flowed heavier in times past. The warm air rushed into the ice-cave from the opening and beckoned the group forward with the rush of flowing air. It gave them hope that this cave came out somewhere higher than the glacier above them.

After walking a long distance, the ground turned steeply uphill and yet the cave's contours stayed the same as it enwrapped the flowing stream which led to a large cavern where many waterfalls poured into a huge cauldron of water that rushed into a river flowing out a mammoth opening below. Unam guided them over granite stones with slippery footholds towards one particular waterfall which was not so large as most of the others. She walked straight up to it, and then walked through. We all followed her without question because we were used to her silent leadership of teaching by doing.

On the other side, drenched from the waterfall, we looked up to a high ridge above us, which Unam was already climbing in a bit of a rush as the light of day was waning. We followed, as usual, in a close line behind her trying to follow her exact footsteps and handholds to maneuver through the vertical climb to the highest point we could see above us. The climb was hundreds of feet straight up, but the rock was granite and easy to find a good route, as if many before us had climbed these very footsteps.

At the top of the wall, Unam was standing and looking out towards the mountain top to the north, a huge glacier was to the left in the valley from where they came. To the right, a series of sharp and jagged peaks, not covered by snow, climbed before us to the ultimate summit far away to the north. On one side was snow and glaciers, on the other was bare peaks bereft of any trees and nothing but treacherously steep valleys with rivers far below. Each young explorer looked back at the valley below and wondered how they ever made it through those tenuous ice tunnels, enchanted marshes, and treacherous mountain passes to reach this beautiful and frightening plateau. If it were not for the unshakable confidence and calm of Unam, the others would have fainted from the overwhelming surprise, wonder, and awe they were feeling.

The sun was setting, without a second to spare. Unam lead them down the side of the mountain to a cave where they all curled up next to a fire she made from roots and brush. The young minds raced with dreams and visions of what they had witnessed that seemed to go far beyond the real or normal experiences of their lives. Without a moment of actual peaceful rest, they woke as a group to the first rays of sunlight piercing the mouth of the cave. They ate and drank what little they brought for nourishment and started off without delay. Yesterday had been the first day of the trek and Unam knew they still had a full day ahead of them before they could rest. The dangers were not exhausted yet, and the spirits of the mountain could be unforgiving.

Before them was a most humble rope-bridge spanning a crevice that seemed like an abyss of death calling you by name. Though Qui Ye, who usually followed directly behind Unam, was the boldest of the group, she hesitated to step quickly after Unam who had just mounted a bridge with ropes on the left and the right, tied to one rope below to walk upon. The rope bridge swayed and bounced up and down rippling from Unam's footsteps. Qui Ye was scared the rope-bridge was too flimsy and wouldn't hold two or more people. Just then, Unam turned and said, "One at a time."

Each young student of Unam had done just what she showed them to do, but heights scare some people, especially on a thin, ancient rope-bridge with a gorge below them. Surely, they thought, it must be safe because Unam crossed, even though she moves like a sky-dancer on clouds. It must be secure since it has worked for such a long time, the Twelve thought to themselves. For others, this was the hardest test, to throw your life and fate out into thin air, with no net below you, only your certain death. Thus, it took quite a while for the group to cross the bridge to the cliff path beyond. Now, for the first time you could see proof of human life with cleared pathways along the steep cliffs and bridge after bridge crossing chasms that would be too deep to traverse any other way.

The snow-free mountain passes and the warm gusts of air rising up from the valleys far below created an atmosphere like walking on clouds or hiking in another world altogether different from the one below. The high-altitude air made them feel dizzy with exhilaration and hints of altitude sickness, just when they had to concentrate

on crossing bridges made of ancient tree logs, woven limbs and roots, woven ropes, and the infrequent wooden slab.

Time after time, the crossing of another abyss still did not lend to easing the fear and terror of tight-rope walking through thin air. Even the occasional wondrous sight of the valleys below did not calm the deep concern of death at every footstep. Unam was right that the path was rugged and could take your life in a quick moment. This concern was on every mind as they passed through the airy roof-top of the inaccessible mountains of Nagar.

Before them was a bridge made of stone, like none other before it. It crossed a large gorge and was ingeniously designed like the growth of roots more so than stones stacked together. It seemed to solemnize a border between worlds as a witness or guardian. No signs of life were about and over the bridge a path led directly to a wide-mouth tunnel, obviously a dormant lava tube that at one time flowed red hot magma through its riverbed of cooling lava. The chasm the bridge spanned was as deep as they had ever seen, and a river of magma flowed slowly beneath them. Sulfuric steam rose from the abyss and the ground quaked at the movement of the lifeblood of the earth creeping along in the molten river below. The air became noxious and poisonous from the metals cooking below them. Unam bounded over the bridge without looking down or hesitating to wonder at the raw power. She quickly entered the tunnel and moved forward towards light at the end of the tunnel. The group followed behind her and all but a few scurried into the cave leaving the inferno behind as a bad memory. But those who lingered regretted it once the fumes had damaged their lungs and eyes.

The tunnel was dark, but it was easy to see that there were many offshoots of tunnels leading in many other directions. It was a labyrinth created by the flow of the active volcanic fissures below them. The light was provided by a cluster of plants that were planted in bowls built into the wall. Glowing plants. They were very dim, but you could see one after the other just when you needed to know which of the tunnels to follow. Unam was adept at following the dim plant light as she walked at a normal pace through the tunnels. She turned and looked at the group with a stern look and said, "Don't get lost, some of the ground you walk upon can break and you

might fall through to a river of magma below you. We must walk quickly so the fumes do not overwhelm us and cause us to faint.”

This bit of encouragement closed the ranks of the Twelve as they kept a close eye on the person in front of them. The group moved along like an underground animal anxiously seeking the light. The heat was nearly unbearable, and the air was so moist and noxious that they wondered if they had come through the other challenges just to die here in this cave, being cooked to death.

Nagar Valley

Finally, at long last, they could see daylight ahead of them and they breathed sighs of relief and gratitude for the bright clean air that was filled with every aroma that they had ever experienced, and yet forgot about until now. The black dark of the lava tubes were happily left behind as their feet felt lighter and their spirits soared into the blue sky above them. A whole new land lay before them like a garden paradise filled with all of the flowers, plants, and trees they had ever seen and many, many more they had not. Beautiful mountains surrounded the round valley with tall granite peaks rising like sentinels posted at the twelve gates of heaven. A warm breeze waft through the air filled with divine fragrances and intoxicating aromas.

As they walked forward to a cliff overlooking the vast round valley, they saw wonderous groves of tall trees of all sorts, orchards of blooming fruit trees of many varieties, and humble domiciles that fit into the environment so seamlessly that you might have imagined they grew that way naturally. The cultivated fields were fed by irrigation canals that joyfully bubbled along, and the terraces around the valley were like steps to heaven filled with every color of blossom and shade of tree. All the gardens of Hunza, Gulmit, and the other Twelve Valleys paled in comparison to the wonderous and diverse bounty the Nagar Valley now presented to them.

“May we rest for a while by this stream and take nourishment from these fruit trees and the fresh water flowing by?” Qui Ye asked.

“Indeed, now is the time for rest and to do what only can be done in Nagar, to eat the fruit that will extend your life and bring you bodily health and spirit courage. We had to first make it to this valley before anything else could be said or done. Eat to your fill and drink deeply and soon the light-headedness and disorientation you feel will disappear. The fruits you eat are hybrids from the Mother Tree, which you will see later today. But first, I must congratulate all of you for surviving the four challenges in good stead. As you can see, what I told you was true – the way is difficult and impossible for many. The faith that your elders placed in each of you was well-founded. The Queen Mother of the West will be very happy that all of you decided to make the pledge to serve this mission and have passed through the challenges of earth, water, air, and fire. Eat now, the fruit will renew your strength quickly and then we will go to the throne of the Queen Mother,” Unam said with true happiness in her voice. This was a side of her they had not seen before, and it was as refreshing as the fruit and spring water that was renewing their bodies.

After the noon day sun had baked their weary bodies into a blissful surrender, Unam stood up and began walking down the path towards the far end of the valley. Through delightful fields of grains, vegetables, and fruit trees mixed with herbs and flowers, the group walked leisurely up the middle of the valley waving at those tending the fields, fishing in the rivers, and harvesting the fruit trees from the lush landscape that burgeoned with abundant gifts of the earth. No one stopped their work to talk, but just smiled and waved as if they had no care in the world but to be at one with nature around them. Every person seemed young and happy, and it was impossible to guess their ages. They all seemed thoroughly engaged in their industry and at home with the visitors. With every step, the group felt more at home and watched their fears and cares melt away in the warm afternoon sun.

Though they walked for the rest of the day, it seemed like only a moment. The sun was going down below the crests of the mountain peaks and the end of the valley was rising before them with another bowl-like cliff hanging above the steep walls of rock. The top of the bowl hung out like the brow of a forehead creating a shelter for the protected area below. Qui Ye and Shenrab could now begin to see what was at the back of the valley, up against the curved rock wall that rises into a stone canopy, like a helmet protecting a head. Underneath, there seemed to be a tall object that they could only imagine might be the World Tree, the Great Mother Tree, the One

Pillar to the Sky where Fond Care and Foremost come to rest in the shade with the Queen Mother of the West, the Jade Empress. All of a sudden, Qui Ye sensed she was walking on the roots of the Mother Tree, and that all the plants and trees spreading throughout the valley are her children, the fruit of the One. She knelt and put her hands in the soil knowing she had come to her divine home, the land of the union of the Learning Tree and the Neverdie Tree entwined as One.

Shenrab stood transfixed as he looked at Qui Ye and felt deep in his heart of hearts that he had come home to a place he had never been before, his destiny, where his soul is at peace and his spirit set ablaze from on high. He, too, was overwhelmed, but not through the plants and trees of the Mother, but by the sheer magnitude of the phenomena and the empty feeling that he had nothing equivalent to give in response to the continuing revelations unfolding before his newly opened eyes, his uncovered heart, and the sense of belonging to something higher than any virtue he had ever aspired to. He dropped to his knees and wept tears of joy at reaching this holy place, this sacred ground of Nagar, the inaccessible heaven on earth. The two explorers looked at each other and understood, without words, exactly what the other was thinking and feeling. Together they were both humbled and knew that all would end well if they stuck together, for they needed each other to face what may come next. They knew at that moment, that they had loved one another since first they had laid eyes upon the other.

As the two explorers looked up at the group moving forward on a well-worn path surrounded by garden delights everywhere they turned, they saw a golden eagle perched on a tree off to the side of the path. She was beautiful and kept fluffing her feathers and starring at Qui Ye. The two had entered some eye-spell that built a bridge between them. The eagle leaned forward on the branch and then soared down from the tree to the far side of the stream and cried out as if to announce Qui Ye's arrival. Shenrab took it as a sign and offered an oblation to the stream and the spirit of the golden eagle, the lord of the sky. The eagle bent over and drank from the same stream that Qui Ye was drinking from. The two seemed to join as one mind as the eagle leapt into the air and flew off in the direction of the World Tree. Qui Ye laughed with joy at the encounter and gave prayers of gratitude to the Sky gods, Fond Care and Foremost, who used the mountain eagle to deliver a message of greeting.

Shenrab helped Qui Ye up from the warm moist earth. Her eyes were still wet from the tears she had shed realizing the nature of the holy ground they stood upon. Shenrab, too, had recovered from the rush of realizations that arose concerning this journey, which had turned out to be much more than he believed he could comprehend. Together, they walked hand in hand behind the others and, for a moment, were perfectly content with life and what fortune had brought them. They couldn't imagine what lay ahead on this sojourn. They knew their destinies had been inextricably woven together and in their hearts that they were becoming much more than they could have ever dreamed possible.

After hours of walking, the Great Tree, and thus the throne of the Queen Mother came into view as they came to the top of a hill in the middle of the valley's plain that was filled with the colorful gifts of nature's harvest. In front of them, they could see at a distance a great tree, perhaps four hundred feet tall and fifty feet wide. It was like nothing Qui Ye could have ever pictured, for it had green leaves and pine needles together in one tree, as well as colorful fruits and blossoms in some areas and different ones in other areas of the massive tree. The lower limbs hung rich with exotic fruits that resembled the ones they had eaten when they entered the valley; the fruit that had totally replenished them and left them full and well nourished.

Behind the World Tree, the Pillar to the Sky, was a rock cliff with a red river flowing over a waterfall and cascading down the mountain slope to meet a white river from the other side flowing down from a waterfall into a shared pool of red and white, hot and cold, female and male forces of the mountain whose rivers joined together creating a boiling pot of spring water bursting out from the weight of the mountains above. The pool mixed the rich minerals of hot, red iron and cold, clear silica from the surrounding red granite to once again combine into a fountain of life that flowed from the pool above into a river that splits and flows around the Great Tree which is planted on an island fed from the two rivers above. In front of the island of the World Tree, another great pool gathered into a calm, mirror-like pond where the white swans of the west come to feed.

On a limb midway up, Qui Ye could see her new eagle friend landing and fluffing his wings. In front of the Great Pillar to the Sky was the Queen Mother's throne, which

seemed to be a natural outgrowth of the tree but looked like an elaborate arrangement of flowers. In front of the throne was a great jade fountain which gathered the waters for the purposes of revealing the oracle leaves that occasionally fall from the Mother Tree as harbingers of her wisdom.

Each step towards the Blossoming Island and the Great Tree only caused more insatiable, unanswered questions to arise in their shared souls. They gripped each other's hands ever more tightly and yet walked ever more lightly with a gate of levity they had never experienced before. Each step took them closer to what most people would call a myth or exaggerated story, a fairytale at best. But this dream was real and squeezing each other's hands kept them from vibrating out of their body with shock and ecstasy. Their hearts jumped for joy as each stride removed the distance separating them from becoming one with the Queen Mother and the Tree of Life.

At last, they stood in the shade of the Mother Tree, and they fell to their knees and gave thanks to all that they knew to be holy. Here before them, a wonder that takes no faith to believe in to find the holy divine. They could see her unparalleled majesty, hear the wind speaking through her boughs, smell her intoxicating fragrances, and be soothed by her enchanting charms. Every babbling brook that surrounds the One speaks the language of nixies, sprites, and sylphs echoing through the leaves and limbs of the Learning Tree, speaking the oldest language known to humanity, Zhang Zhung, the language of the birds and wind, mountains and rivers, earth, sea, and sky.

The sky suddenly opened to a glorious sunset as a golden light filled the air with an atmosphere that was some type of ambrosia and nectar, the blood of the immortals found in the twilight-gold of the setting sun. The Mother Tree knows that her realms are the home of dawn and dusk and the eight suns in between. She was there in the Ancient Wilderness when the sky gods were born, in the Land of Lu, where Fond Care and Foremost came to birth; where Yellow himself witnessed the overthrow of the sky and saw the coming floods of water. She, the Pillar between Earth and Sky, is where the Milky Way of the Mothers feed the children of the earth through the eternal lights of the sky, both day and night. There, beneath the limbs of the ancient Mother, the group fell gently to the ground and sank into a twilight paradise of

singing night-birds and babbling brooks echoing in the winds rustling the leaves of the Tree of Wisdom.

Shenrab awakened and opened his eyes as he looked up into the wonder and majesty of the Mother Tree and then quickly closed them again trying to compare the dream paradise that was fading from his night consciousness to the unbelievable paradise that in which he found himself lying. He could not tell which one was real and which was a dream. Then he felt Qui Ye's hand touch his and he remembered more about where he was and who was there with him. He turned his head and opened his eyes to see Qui Ye smiling at him with the most radiant countenance he had ever seen. Shenrab was overwhelmed and speechless. He could only smile the biggest smile of his life in return to his love.

As they sat up, they could see that they were the first to arise as the sun had not yet peaked above the surroundings mountains. They sat near each other, and without speaking seemed to communicate everything that was upon their hearts with thoughts that carried pictures and emotions along with them. They could feel the anxious trepidation, the exalted exuberance, the graceful majesty of what surrounded them and the unknowing of what their future might hold. They both acknowledged each other's feelings that were about to burst from their chests with questions, thankfulness, gratitude, love, and wonder. No words would come, but the communion between them was beyond either of their ineffable imaginations.

Eventually, the whole group arose and looked around in similar awe, shock, and disbelief. Still, no one spoke. After a while, Unam appeared out of nowhere and told them to eat fruit from a nearby tree and drink from the brook near its base to refresh themselves. The fruit was like the food of the gods and the spring water seemed to be the elixir of life. They were more satisfied by this food and drink than ever in their lives.

“Exchange your clothes for these white linen robes after you bath in the river. Then join me at the foot of the bridge that crosses over the red and water rivers that surround the Mother Tree,” said Unam calmly and with profound peace in her voice.

When they had gathered at the white marble bridge, Unam led them across towards the base of the Tree and the jade fountain in front of it. As they got closer, they could clearly make out the Queen's throne, which was an outgrowth of the Tree itself. It was surrounded by different blossoms that could be seen sprouting all over the Tree. It seemed that every blossom of every tree in the valley was grafted to the Mother Tree, and all joined together in a celebration of color and beauty in the Queen Mother's throne. It was truly a divine sight to behold.

Unam instructed them to sit down in front of the jade fountain as she walked to the other side of it and picked up a long brown leaf that came from the Mother Tree. She placed the leaf in the water of the fountain and moved it about underwater for a while until she was satisfied with the process. Then she walked back around and stood in front of the Twelve. She held the leaf to the light and showed them what was on it. In silvery forms and sigils, that looked like some ancient language, the leaf transformed into a glistening page of wisdom-filled insight to the eyes of the initiated who could read the language of the trees, the oracle of the One.

“This leaf fell from the Great Mother Tree the day you arrived and lay under the shade of the One Pillar. From this oracle we divine the present and see the future. Once you have been taught what each area of the leaf represents, you can find the position of the wandering stars at this exact moment in the twelve houses. The correspondences, ascendancies, and hindrances to the wishes of the wandering planets can be read like a language from the leaf. After reading the message from the stars from this oracle, we put the leaves in a Book of Wisdom to chronicle the Tree's great history, which is derived from its mighty pillar that reaches into the stars and communes with the spirits of wisdom. This oracle has been in Nagar for ten thousand years and the priestesses of the Mother Tree serve humanity through this oracle. This particular oracle leaf, tells us that all of you are worthy to be emissaries of the Queen Mother, but you will have to train and study hard before you are ready. All of you will begin the great expedition and join with the Great Yu on his exploration of the world for the secrets of long-life and immortality. His obsession for eternal life in a human form is a common illness of Chinese emperors that is dangerous to our survival. All of you will strive with great strength to avert these defilements of the Queen Mother and the World Tree, but some will not return. Each will become an emissary of the Queen and will be humbled by the experience.

“It is the Queen Mother of the West’s duty to protect the secrets of long-life and immortality. This valley was created when the Queen Mother and the Jade Emperor, Buddha Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche had to fight the Sun Monkey King, Sun Wukong, when he invaded Zhang Zhung and the palace of the Queen Mother of the West on the high plateau of the Kun Lun Mountains. This war waged for long years until Shenrab found Nagar, our hidden and protected valley, where we could bring the cuttings from the First Mother Tree for protection. The wonders of this valley are a copy of the Queen Mother’s fairyland called West Flower, or Xihua, which was also called the Perfected Marvel of the Western Florescence and Ultimate Worthy of the Cavernous Darkness. She was the guardian of the Peaches of Immortality and the First Great Tree. Her consort, the Jade Emperor, helped rule from Kun Lun as the First Rulers, the King and Queen of the Jade Mountain and the seers of the Jade Pool.

“The *Book of the Mountains and Seas* describes their kingdom that was called Flower and Fruit Mountain where the Mulberry Learning Tree, the Neverdie Tree, peaches, apricots, apples, crabapples, melons, the Ginseng Tree, and other wonderous trees and plants grew. From these long-life trees, the Queen Mother and King Father distilled the fruits into heavenly wines and pills of immortality that kept the immortals young for centuries. These magic substances also granted the ability to fly, radiate, cartwheel across the sky, live without other foods, and be able to learn and use magic spells.

“Some of you may have heard these stories from the elders. But many parts of history have been changed over the millennia and the true meaning lost. The first book of the Chinese, the *Book of Mountains and Seas*, was the story of these enchanted lands of the Queen Mother of the West. The second oldest Chinese book is *The Journey to the West*, which are deliberately mixed-up and confused histories told by the warring conquerors of the Wukong clan. The truths that I am about to tell you were lost to all but a few initiates and the inhabitants of this valley.

“In the ancient days, when Buddha Miwoche had set out from great Mount Kailash, the home of the mountain gods, to the Hot Water Valley, called Zhang Zhung, he brought with him the Neverdie Tree and the Learning Tree and planted them in his new home. The valley was green year-round from the warmth of the volcanic

fissures beneath the mountains and valley floor. In a high elevation canyon, where the weather was perfect all year long, the Queen Mother of the West planted the two trees that grew into one magnificent world tree that blessed the valley for many centuries. Then one day, the Sun Monkey King and his clan took over the original home of the Queen Mother and Shenrab, the Happy Land of the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit, the Cave Heaven of the Water Curtain, on Mount Kailash. The Sun Monkey King was not quite human and possessed great magic powers derived from the Cave Heaven of the Water Curtain. Wukong, as he was called, was jealous of the Queen Mother and Shenrab and after many years amassed an army of his clan to attack Zhang Zhung and steal the fruit that brought long-life and immortality.

“Buddha Miwoche, the great magician that he was, defeated the Sun Monkey King and moved the people of the valley and its trees to the Kun Lun Mountains and once again planted all of the wonderful, life sustaining flowers, fruits, and trees that had made Zhang Zhung a beautiful paradise. But once again, Wukong found the paradise of the immortals and this time he drank the elixir of immortality, ate all the peaches and pills of immortality, and cut down the Great Ginseng Tree and stole its fruit. Shenrab was able to finally subdue Wukong and imprison him under a great stone with the help of the goddess Quan Yin.

“After twice having their paradise destroyed, Shenrab and the Queen Mother moved to the Pamir Mountains in the far west, into this magical valley kept warm throughout the year by volcanic activity and fed by the mineral-rich glacial waters. This new valley was almost inaccessible and easy to keep hidden due to the rugged high-elevation mountains around the valley. Buddha Miwoche fashioned great bowls out of the mountain peaks around the valley that had special minerals and metals made into mirrors that shine light across the top of the valley controlling the weather allowed to make it through this barrier. This shield acts like a lens that can melt away undesirable weather patterns or gather the desired ones.

“The Sun Monkey King’s obsession was not diminished even in his prison under the stone. His thoughts went out into the world around him and found a home in the Chinese Three Sovereign Kings, the first of whom was the great Yellow Emperor, Huangdi, who started the Xia dynasty. This powerful ruler was a sage-king whose wife invented the process of making silk. She learned this secret from the Mulberry

Learning Tree. She also knew of the other magical trees, but none were able to be found, even after the Yellow Emperor sent out explorers in all directions seeking these magical trees. The maps, specimens, and descriptions of these expeditions were written down as the *Book of Mountains and Seas*. The lands of the Queen Mother of the West were described in these books, which were often taken for simple folklore, legends, and ancient myths.

“Even though the explorers traveled the known world, including the East Across the Sea and into the Ancient Wilderness, they could not find the Queen Mother and attain the Peaches of Immortality that the Yellow Emperor desired with all his heart, even though Sun Monkey King had filled his soul with this obsessive desire.

“The other Three Sovereign Kings also desired this most valued treasure and continued the search using the *Book of the Mountains and Seas* as their guide, but to no avail. Later, the Five Emperors of China also searched everywhere for the prize of long-life and immortality. Often, they would try many other things to extend their lives due to their frustration of not finding the hidden gardens. They reverted to the folklore of imbibing liquid mercury to extend their lives but, in fact, this practice shortened their lives and fueled the insatiable desire to search the world over until they found the land of the immortals and their nectar and ambrosia.

“After these eight original rulers of China had failed in the mission, the Great Yu, who is the ruler now, has decided to try again to find the Mother Tree or her descendants. He has searched the many libraries of knowledge, specimens, and maps that have been accumulated by his predecessors and now he will launch a full-scale expedition beyond that of prior kings and emperors. His spirit is possessed by the desires of Sun Wukong. The Queen Mother and her followers fear that the Great Yu will find our valley in his new expedition in search of long-life and immortality. Thus, we have brought the Twelve Chosen Ones here as the best and the brightest youth to help us turn Yu’s desires, and his expedition, to the East Across the Sea and not to the West.

“Your mission is to join Yu’s expedition as experts in the content of the *Book of Mountains and Seas* and convince the expedition to focus on the East Across the Sea, where the stories tell that the original Learning Tree was planted and the sky gods,

Fond Care and Foremost, were born along with the Yellow Emperor. The descriptions say that in the North, South, and West three trees grow that have magic powers but that the trees of immortality are in the East Across the Sea beyond the Ancient Wilderness. That is where we must direct the expedition, not to the West which might compromise the Queen Mother and the World Tree once again.

“Let me quote from the *Book of Mountains and Seas* that you will have to memorize by heart so that you can convince the Great Yu and his counselors that the prize will be found in the East Across the Sea.

Beyond the East Sea is the Big Chasm. It is the country of the great god Young Brightsky. Young Brightsky nurtured the great god Fond Care when he was a child.

Loosehair Mound – that is where there are legacy jade, green horses, the look-flesh creature, and poplar, weeping willow, sweet quince, and the sweet-bloom tree. That is where the sweet fruit trees grow. Loosehair Mound lies beyond the East Across the Sea. Two mountains hem the mound in. On top of it there is a magic tree. Below this land lies Hotwater Valley. In Hotwater Valley there is the Learning Tree, the Mulberry Learning Tree where ten suns are bathed. Hotwater Valley is situated north of Blacktooth land. There is a very big tree standing about water. Nine suns occupy its lower branches, and one sun occupies its topmost branch.

North of the Openbright there are the look-fresh creatures, the pearl tree, the patterned jade tree, the scarlet-jade tree, the Neverdie Tree, and also the Divine Wind bird and the Wonderbird which wear a shield on their heads. And there are the scarlet willow, the tree-barley, cypress, the sweet-water tree, the wisdom tree, and thorn trees. The wear-ever fruit tree – on its crown there is a three-headed one who oversees the precious gem tree.

In the middle of the Ancient Wilderness there is a mountain called Mount Highhairshake-bigheadram. On its summit there is the Learning Tree. Its trunk is 300 feet tall and its leaves are like the mustard plant. There is a valley called Hotwater Valley. At the top of Hotwater Valley is the Learning Tree. One sun is just reaching the crown of this tree, and one sun is just rising from it. The suns are each carried up by a bird. There are the birds of five colors. They are the friends of the

great god Foremost. The great god's two sacrificial mounds on earth are presided over by the multicolored birds. Sovereign Millet lies buried on it. Here there are waxy beans, swelling rice, rich millet, and full-seeded millet, and this is where the hundred grains grow naturally in the wild. Winter and summer they self-seed and form plants. Here is where the Wonder-bird sings freely and the Divine Wind bird dances freely. The tree of Divine-powered Long-life bears fruit and flowers here. This is where plants and trees grow in profusion. Here there are the hundred animals which herd and flock together. Here they live among these plants. Come winter, come summer, they never die. Here is a tree with green leaves, a purple trunk, dark flowers, and yellow fruit. Its name is the Founding Tree. It has no branches, but it has nine tangle-woods above and nine vast root knots. Its fruit is like hemp. Its leaves are like the spike-shrub. The great god Great White-light passed by this tree. This is where the great god Yellow made those arrangements.

The Queen Mother, Hsi Wang Mu, leans against her raised seat. She wears a victory headdress and holds her staff. To her south there are the three green birds which gather food for Queen Mother. The place where Queen Mother of the West resides lies north of the Waste of Offspringline, on Mount Offspringline where the Neverdie Tree grows. It is also called Mount Jade, Mount Flamingfire, Queen Mother Mount, and the Home of the Precious Gem Tree and the Peaches of Immortality.

“Thus, the World Tree, the Learning Tree, is the Tree of the Sun that washes the sun each day and renews its energy to rise to the top of the tree as the new sun of the day. It is the eternal tree, the Neverdie Tree where Fond Care, Foremost, and the Yellow were born and take solace. It is there that we must convince the Great Yu to send his expedition, the land of the immortals and the home of the food of the gods,” Unam said as she finished her lesson to the Twelve.

Unam paused for the long time letting the words and images settle into the Twelve. No one moved, spoke, or in any way indicated that they understood what Unam had told them. But after a while, the reality began to sink in that the Twelve were the best hope the valley had of surviving. The pressure of thinking about convincing the Great Yu to listen to their ideas of where to search dissolved some of the wonder and magic of sitting under the World Tree. Here before them, was the astounding reality and they felt small and inadequate to the task Unam had set before them.

Every one of the Twelve was feeling overwhelmed and surely needed time to digest what Unam had told them before they asked any of the many questions that were gnawing at their hearts. Unam instructed them to get up and cross the bridge to where twelve young people were waiting to greet them. Each of the young people took the hand of one of the Twelve and led them on a particular tour of the valley that was especially designed for them. Shenrab was taken into numerous rooms carved into the mountain walls behind the World Tree. There were many rooms filled with the Books of Wisdom made from the oracle. Long stairways led into upper rooms that looked down on the valley. Eventually, his guide led him out onto the ridge surrounding the valley where he could clearly see everything below and the twelve man-made bowls pointed to the center of the valley. The circle of bowls was visible across the wide opening of the valley. His guide explained how the bowls were created with yttrium, silica, and iridium painted on the inside of the bowls helping them resonate together in union with the other bowls.

Qui Ye was greeted by a beautiful young lady who answered many of the questions bouncing around in her head and heart. She helped quell Qui Ye's lack of confidence to be the great leader and explorer that it would take to accomplish Unam's goal. Fortunately, her guide knew many details about the mission, the ancient books, and the importance of maintaining the secret of Nagar Valley. Qui Ye was shocked to find out that her guide was 57 years old, even though she looked like she was very young. Since Qui Ye was a botanist, her guide showed her the orchards, gardens, and groves and explained what each tree and plant was and how they were crossbred with other plants and flowers to create foods that feed the spirit. Only one piece of fruit a day from the valley was necessary to live, and each day the people of the valley worked to grow more fruit. Everything here was about flora and there were no domesticated animals, only eagles, goats, and sheep in the high places above the valley. Qui Ye's guide taught her how the irrigation system works and how special metals and minerals were mixed in the various creeks and brooks that watered the valley to produce special effects. Qui Ye had never imagined that such a wondrous garden could exist, not even in a fantasy.

Shenrab purveyed the entire mountain ridge that the Twelve had climbed and was amazed how perfect it was to maintain secrecy and inaccessibility. As he looked

further up the mountain range at the continuation of the ridge that they were situated on, he could see the distinct possibility of other carved out valleys in the elevations above where they were standing. His guide sensed the question arising in Shenrab and answered the question before he could ask it. Yes, Shenrab was told, there are three valleys beyond our valley for the ascended master beings who have come through Nagar and passed into the Caves of Evermore, as they are called. Those beings do not return to Nagar, and no one from Nagar ever goes into those caves and valleys unless they plan to not return. We do not know exactly what happens to them, but we are told they transcend the physical world and live for ages meditating on wisdom and love. We believe it is their prayers that sustain and protect us.

This news came as another overwhelming reality that was creeping into his heart. What Shenrab had always believed about Buddha Miwoche, Skytheonos, Zarathustra, Manu, the Queen Mother, and the other immortals was actually true. Their stories didn't happen somewhere in an etheric land between earth and sky, they happened right here on this mountain. Even the great sky gods Fond Care and Foremost were raised under the purview of the Queen Mother and the World Tree. All of these new thoughts cascaded into hyper-connected thoughts that seemed to be unending.

“Then why does the Great Mother and your whole valley keep the fruits of immortality from the rest of humanity? Why do we need to keep it a secret to protect the few who can find this inaccessible valley,” Shenrab said with such confusion that he didn't even know what he was asking.

The guide just looked at Shenrab with compassion and understanding, without any condemnation or judgment on his face. “Because it would be abused again, like it has been in the past. **When the Mother culture of peace and abundance was wiped out, the Father culture of war and control took over and all remnants of the past had to be extinguished and hidden by the conquerors.** That is why we absorbed the Mother cult of Buddha Miwoche's Bonpo, the Shakti cult of the Hindus, and the Vajrayogini and Kali cults. The Mother cults have been overwritten with the male, warrior cult which is based upon conquering for power and self-aggrandizement,” the guide said with the voice of age and wisdom.

Each time the guide spoke, his answer was self-evident and seemed to already have a home in Shenrab's heart, as if the truth of the present reality was a part of himself that he already knew. The stories of the past seemed to be part of his present. Past, present, and future all seemed to meld into one flowing river swirling around him.

Each of the Twelve had a similar guide to Qui Ye's and Shenrab's personal guides. They looked as young as teenagers, but were much older and so full of wisdom and peace that every question was answered to perfect satisfaction. Each of the Twelve had a special skill that was enhanced by what their guide showed them in the valley and the many domiciles and rooms carved into the walls of the valley behind the terraces. Beautiful homes and happy families filled every nook and cranny, and the engineering of the valley was mystifying and ancient. Every single inch, every plant, every waterway was laid out in geometric patterns that blended perfectly together to make the finite appear infinite. You could get lost in the wonder and beauty by just turning a corner to find another marvelous spectacle. Every type of industry of life was harmoniously mixed with natural forces that could create a living bridge over a river or grow a tree into a house. Everything seemed ancient and yet brand new and burgeoning with creative life. The people of the valley lived in balance and equanimity with the forces of nature that they had learned to harness for their needs.

Each morning, the Twelve gathered with Unam to learn, memorize, and discuss all elements of the *Book of Mountains and Seas*, the *Five Treasuries*, the *Journey to the West*, and the magic doctrine of Buddha Miwoche and Bonpo. Occasionally, Unam would answer questions on other doctrines of Manu, Skytheonos, Zarathustra, Kali and other great teachers. Many times, Unam spoke for the Queen Mother, who the Twelve had not seen yet. No one spoke much about her but when they did, the most solemn mood came over them and they spoke as if they were One United Heart praising her to the highest heaven.

After many days of this type of learning, Unam spoke to the Twelve from under the World Tree and in front of the jade fountain in the following fashion, "The time is at hand. You have been found worthy, tested for true, and able to be One with the Queen Mother's teachings. Now is the time for her blessing."

At that, the Twelve were awestruck as they saw the Queen Mother appear as if she had walked out the World Tree itself, or from some hidden fold in the bark, and slowly but majestically assume her living throne. She had a staff in her right hand and a Learning Tree blossom in her left. "Come forward my children," she said with the love of a mother.

They all gathered around her, hoping they could touch this living wonder just to make sure she was real and they were not dreaming. Her smile was the gentle golden light of twilight mixed with the tinkling starlight of the celestial heavens. Her cloak shimmered with the distant light of millions of stars like the shawl of the Milky Way offering her wisdom, light, and nourishment for her children. Her loving kindness filled each heart to overflowing and she seemed to be the sacred stillness that never rests, love that is undying, infinite graciousness, and warmth that enwraps and comforts you into blissful dreams. The Twelve were like a brood of kittens gathered at the mother's breast, hungry and yet content to just lie next to their source of life. This feeling must be what created the beginnings of worship, religions, myths, and holy legends. They wished that the moment would never go away.

Unam stood to the side, and for the first time smiled with a radiant, warm smile that showed her true beauty to the Twelve. In that moment, they all became a child of the Great Mother whose love for each of them was more moving than anything they had ever experienced. It was a transcendent moment that carried each of them upward through the One Pillar into the sunlit sky above and to the stars beyond. Each one felt their direct connection to the Sky Gods, to the Earth Mother below, and to the many faces of the Great Goddess and her embodiment in the Queen Mother of the West. Myth, fantasy, and history melted into one eternal moment.

The Queen Mother took the blossom in her hand and touch the head of each of the Twelve, one at a time. The empowerment that followed her blessing changed their souls and spirits forever. Their physical bodies no longer had power over them, illness was stayed, sickness was banished, and old age hid his tiresome pains as each of the Twelve became an emissary of the Queen Mother and the One. Each young explorer felt courage arise in their souls, confidence in their thinking, and an

indomitable resolve to serve and protect the sacred mysteries that had been revealed to them. Each one now stood as a singular sentinel guarding the path of the immortals who had created, lived in, and traveled beyond Nagar Valley.

The Twelve all wished they could permanently dwell in the blessings they had received from the Queen Mother, Unam and her guides, and the people of the sacred valley. But it soon transpired that they made ready to leave the valley and join the preparations in Gulmit Valley as the great caravan and herds of heavenly horses gathered to accompany the Twelve to the Great Yu. They prepared all that their teachers had taught them and carried with them seeds of many plants and dried fruit to enhance their strength and stamina on the long trip ahead. Each one had been specially prepared to carry out the mission, even if the others failed. All Twelve Chosen Ones were now united as one, but must be prepared to carry on with or without the others. The continued life of all Twelve Valleys and Nagar depended on them personally. They might not return from their expedition, but the life of the valley must continue unharmed.

When they were readied and prepared to face the long and dangerous trek down the mountain, Unam appeared in a new outfit and with a bag over her shoulder. She approached the Twelve and they knew, without her saying, that she too was going on the expedition. This was the greatest gift the Queen Mother could have given the Twelve. "Yes, I will be accompanying you all the way to the East Across the Sea and into the Ancient Wilderness. I could not abandon you, for you are like my children now, and I must protect you as you have given your lives to protect ours," Unam said with great strength and confidence.

The young explorers were ecstatic at the news and this bolstered their commitment to the mission. The high priestess herself would lead them and this lightened their footsteps as they started off down the road. Many of the valley people gathered along the road to see them off and wish them well. Though the Twelve had entered the valley as unknowns, they were leaving as heroes who carry the hope of the people in their hearts. The moment was joyous and serious, and lifted the spirits of the Twelve even more than before. Somehow, they knew they would succeed, even though some of them may never return to the valley again.

The Expedition

The return trip down the valleys and rugged mountains, across the terrifying bridges and through the mystical water-lands that emptied out into the Wind River Valley, filled with glistening stones and crystals was no less amazing on the descent. No one stopped or bent over to pick up a single beautiful gem out of respect for what they had seen and where they had been. No words could explain the devotion they had for these enchanted lands. They felt privileged that they, among so few, had made it to the Nagar Valley and returned to normal life. Of course, everything looked pale and old and disenchanting before their newly opened eyes. They spoke less and less of the memory of the beauty and divine nature they had witnessed. They could speak to no one except the Twelve and Unam about their inner stirrings and the results of the knowledge they had attained that would hopefully, over time, grow into wisdom and discernment. Not even the elders could get them to say a word about their experiences, even though they tried many times.

One hundred Ferghana horses stood ready in the corrals, and the horsemen seemed anxious to start the journey. Dozens of other swordsmen and bowmen were also packed and ready to go, as if they already knew when the Twelve would return. Pack horses laden with the supplies they would need on the first part of the journey were loaded with food and necessities donated by the Twelve Valleys. This was the biggest and most exciting event the valley people had ever heard of, let alone participated in. Shenrab was amazed by the preparations that awaited them and he gave up his longing to say goodbye to his family and the people of Gilgit Valley after seeing that all was made ready and prepared. Obviously, the Twelve explorers were expected to join the awaiting group without hesitation and begin the journey without rest or recuperation. Fortunately, the long-life fruit of the valley gave the Twelve the energy and strength to launch into the expedition immediately. All was prepared, and the explorers were ready to begin. Thus, Unam and the Twelve did not hesitate to mount their horses for the journey ahead. The people of Gulmit cheered the group on as the caravan wound its way down the Gulmit Valley and onto the plains below.

Each day was the same, wake and travel by horse as far as the next resting place or oasis to gather round the fire at night and practice Chinese with one of the

translators in the group. They had to be on guard so that no conversation might bring up anything that might let others know the true plans of the young explorers, even though many questions were asked by the others in the caravan. Most assumed these brave young people were going off to impress the Emperor of China and parish on his crazy mission to find immortality. You could see on their faces the pity they felt for these children, offered up as human sacrifices to a king of a country they had only heard about in rumors from travelers. But they were still trusted protectors who guarded the Twelve, and their gift-horses, from the dangers and robbers along these well-used trading roads.

Once the caravan reached the city of Kouton, a major trading city between East and West, the road finally turned from dangerously narrow mountain passes to open plains in the high plateaus above the Takla Makan Dessert, the Tarim Basin, which lay as a vast ocean of sand below. From Kouton onward, the path would be clear as they followed the Tarim River from oasis to oasis. Green pastureland, irrigated fields, and groves of trees grew up all around the river in stark contrast to the dessert beyond. Above their heads in the distance hung the Tien Shan Mountains that would accompany them the length of the trip to Yu's city on Lop Nor Lake, which once was called the City of Manu, founded at the confluence of the Tarim and Altai Rivers. In ancient times, the entire basin was a colorful garden of paradise filled with forests and arable lands rich with all types of fruiting trees and grazing cattle. Eventually, the trees were mercilessly lumbered and the sands overtook the paradise, leaving it to become a barren wasteland except for the green that clustered around the few diminished rivers.

Slowly the caravan made its way beneath the caves where the Tocharians had carved into the mountains their homes and temples dedicated to Buddha Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche. There were many beautiful paintings and statues dedicated to Bodhisattva Miwoche. The caves were a wondrous learning experience for the Twelve who learned many things from Unam and Miwoche's followers about Bonpo, Zoroastrianism, Shivism, and the followers of Kali and Shakti. The temples were filled with sacred writings that harkened back to the times described in the *Book of Mountains and Seas*. More and more, Shenrab found himself learning about his namesake, who, even though the Gilgit Valley worshipped, he was not well

acquainted with except through his maps and Miwoche's travels found in Bonpo texts.

Buddha Miwoche was famous in all the lands that Shenrab was traveling through. Wherever they went, the Buddha had already been there before in ages long past. Stupas were dedicated to him in many places to thank him for using his powerful magic to tame or banish the evil demons and fierce elementals and deities who haunted the mountains and rivers. Buddha Miwoche was the most powerful shaman of those lands, and his influences could still be felt thousands of years after he defeated the hungry ghosts and helped culture develop wherever he traveled. He also was the famous horse breeder who tamed the wild Mongolian horses and bred them with yakut horses to make the famed heavenly-horses of the Ferghana Valley, some descendants of which were among the gift-horses they were offering to the Great Yu.

It took months to slowly herd the horses and drive the caravan along the mountainous ridges above the desolate plain below. It was just enough time for the Twelve to finish their training and master Chinese so they could fully integrate with the Chinese expedition. Each night around the campfire, the Twelve practiced arguing their case in Chinese to focus the expedition on sailing to the East Across the Sea to find of the tree of immortality, the Neverdie Tree. Unam listened and was convinced that the Twelve were ready to join the debate with the best Chinese counselors and demonstrate the merit of their ideas which could be justified with quotes from the most ancient Chinese texts. Truly, the Queen Mother was correct about this plan and Unam was certain now that the Twelve could accomplish the task, even without her.

Not many days after Unam's moment of realization, the city of the Great Yu came into sight in the valley below them. Both fear and joy arose in the hearts of the entire caravan. Their destination was reached and there were high hopes of success and glory for the Queen Mother. These thoughts bubbled up as elation, and yet also struck doubt, fear, and unknowing into their minds.

The City of the Great Yu was not large, for it was one of many that he inhabited throughout his kingdom. It had been built millennia before upon the plan of Manu,

the great lawgiver, in concentric circles with water canals connecting the circles. Six great pyramid temples stood on the edges of the outer circle, and one mighty temple dedicated to the sun stood in the middle. Great polished stones were mounted on the tops of the temple that gave off beams of light connecting temple to temple. The Sun Temple in the middle had a golden pyramid on top that took the light of day and turned it into a brilliant light that could be seen raying out in all directions. The two great rivers of the Tarim Basin joined together just before the city walls carving out a basalt outcropping into the appearance of a head with eyes, mouth, ears, and nose. It was said that this natural carving represented the Great Yu and was used as a temple for his worship. Yu had saved the people after the great flood and rebuilt the City of Manu, renaming it the City of the Great Yu, savior of the people.

All about the city were gardens hanging down into the waters below with mighty trees growing from every parcel of land available. The irrigation fed the abundant vegetation, and it had a slight resemblance to the water-lands of the Nagar range. It was a wonder to behold, and every member of the caravan was excited to enter this glorious city.

The caravan and its troop were welcomed with great joy by the city inhabitants for they had heard of the offerings of the Twelve Valleys to Yu's expedition. The people of the city were very happy to accept the help, especially the gift of the heavenly-horses that would be essential for the success of the expedition. The Chinese were not exceptional in their horse-breeding and respected the skill of these horsemen of the valleys.

It wasn't long before the troop became familiar with the city and made fast friends with the people who were designated to participate in the expedition. These were wonderful times to practice convincing the expedition members that they should focus on the land East Across the Sea to find the key to immortality. These conversations finally led to the day when Yu himself called the members of the expedition into his Sun Temple to discuss the final plans and set the date for its departure. During these discussions, the Twelve led the way while Unam simply listened. The youth had the strength, stamina, and fresh ideas to dedicate to the project and thus were listened to carefully by the Chinese and the other explorers who had gathered. The matter of re-exploring the lands of this continent were well

documented in the *Five Treasuries* and should not be repeated argued Qui Ye, who had become one of the most outspoken during the discussions. She pointed out that the sacred longevity trees originally grew in the East Across the Sea, according to the *Book of Mountains and Seas*, the most ancient and holy book of the Chinese people.

Qui Ye and Shenrab suggested that the expedition cross the sea to the East Across the Sea and then divide into five groups, one for the North, South, and West and two groups for the East, one of which will travel into the Ancient Wilderness where the trees grew in ancient times. Their arguments were so astute and convincing that the Great Yu himself asked them questions and sought full explanations for their convictions. Eventually, the debates turned into discussions that finally turned into agreements and, at last, consensus. They had won the hardest part of the battle and sealed the safety of Nagar, which would remain hidden and untrammled by the obsessive desire of the Great Yu who was unwittingly following the wicked desires of Sun Wukong from under the stone. Unam and the Twelve could not have been happier at the results and they were tremendously proud of Qui Ye and Shenrab. Now, the expedition was to head in the right direction – the East - and all would be well in the western valleys, their homes, and the blessed mysteries of the Queen Mother and the One.

Sojourn Begins

The long caravan of hundreds of horses and carts set out from the City of the Great Yu, with Yu himself accompanying this glorious expedition as his people gathered along the road to cheer and applaud Yu and his retinue. The trip to the coast seemed short to the explorers because they were continuously celebrated along the way and treated like sky-heroes come down from heaven to raise earth into the divine beyond. Qui Ye and Shenrab felt like conquering heroes whose day of victory and praise had come at last. All that they had gone through, fear and terror, hope and dread, and the suffering and joy all flooded back to them in an instant. Shenrab looked over from the back of his favorite mare to Qui Ye riding next to him on his

second favorite horse. She returned the glance, and the two once again melted into one another and began to speak without words about the hopes and dreams that they might create together on this journey. Something inside of them believed they might never return to their homes, or to Nagar. Even though this feeling should have made them sad, it actually made them happy for the sheer pleasure of knowing that they would be together until the end. This thought filled them to the brim and the love they felt for each other spilled over as a bounty of joy and ebullience. They were One again, like they were in Nagar, but this time they knew it was forever.

Every adventure has setbacks, and this expedition was no exception. There were plenty of troubles, difficulties, and disasters that assailed their efforts. But the Twelve Chosen were placed in the group going to the East and the Ancient Wilderness. They were all placed together as one team aboard a huge sailing vessel. There were many other vessels carrying the other members of the expedition, their horses, animals, supplies, maps, and tools. They launched from the East coast of China in the year of the Rabbit and during the 79th year of the reign of the Great Yu. Hopes were high, and the emperor himself was there to see them off.

Disaster sometimes doesn't wait to strike and that was true for the Chinese fleet of explorers. After only a few days sailing East, a powerful storm arose that blew some of the ships off course and they were lost to the rest of the fleet. The remaining ships also had been driven by the winds far to the north instead of the east. Thus, the Twelve's ship, along with a dozen other ships, discovered land before their eyes after months upon the ocean. It was an island with great plumes of smoke arising from a valley beyond the coastal mountains. They landed and made fresh provisions of water, fish, and other animals of the sea. The island had a few white foxes and bears but otherwise was somewhat desolate. The smokes turned out to be a valley of a thousand plumes of smoke arising from volcanic activity. The cartographers began their maps, the botanists gathered their specimens, illustrators drew pictures of the landscape and the expedition's exploration officially began.

The small fleet of ships traveled within sight of the shorelines of island after island heading east. Ships were dispatched to investigate each island and records were made as they traveled along the many islands that were getting larger and larger. Finally, they reached a continuous strip of land that widened into what they

imagined was the East Across the Sea, albeit even if they were in the extreme North. Their suspicions were confirmed two days later when they saw very tall mountains in the east and a new landmass running south as far as the eye could see. They had arrived, and their hearts were deeply thankful. What had started out as a possible month voyage had turned into months of exploring lands not appearing on their maps. Now, before them was the first goal, to land in the East Across the Sea and follow the map of the Land of Lu south, down the coast for thousands of miles.

As they got closer to land, they could see high peaks in front of them and mighty rivers rushing down from snow-capped mountains. To their great surprise, they could also see inside the wide bay in front of them a group of Chinese ocean-going vessels. A loud cheer went up from the crew when it was clear they had reunited with some of the other ships of the expedition. It was a welcomed day, no matter which of the ships it was, for they all were blown off course early on. This could be a remnant of the North, South, or West groups.

The rejoicing and cheers that arose from the explorers on the land was an exhilarating moment of elation that was more than welcome. Friends hugged, and tears were shed over the fate that had spared these two groups of the original expedition vessels. Soon, Unam was sitting with Qui Ye and Shenrab at the table of the leaders of the other group. The North group had built a small cluster of houses on the edge of the sheltered bay. It seems that they were one of the groups going North and they came through the storm fine, even though some of their compatriots had not been heard of since. They had carried on the mission and landed at what they thought was the North. Moving inward from the sea, they identified the tallest mountain described in the North in the texts and on the maps. They found the very mountain, as described, that should then lead the others down the coast by following the descriptions of the various mountains encountered along the way. Thus, it was true. The descriptions of the *Book of Mountains and Seas* were real, accurate, and a reliable source to make their way through these lands. This news was the best they could imagine. Unam and the Twelve, with their teams of horses, supplies, cartographers, botanists, animal tamers, and the seeds of Nagar Valley could now find their way through the descriptions to their goal. Thanks to the North group, the first marker of their journey had already been found.

The North group had built an encampment along the shore in hopes of other vessels finding them, just as the East group had done. They also had abundant stores of food, water, and supplies to share with the East group who would soon be moving down the coast identifying the mountain peaks along the way. According to the maps, it was one great mountain range after the next through plenty of snow with good hunting and fishing. Not much grew there, so they would stay somewhat near to the coast, meeting up with their ships occasionally as they went south. They were actively looking for signs of immortality through the descriptions of the land in flora, fauna, or contact with the sparse population of natives described in the *Book of Mountains and Seas*. They needed to find two places: a grove of Neverdie Trees, and the Learning Tree or a place to create hybrid trees created from the natural surroundings that might become another World Tree. They also dreamed of finding the original magic trees themselves in the Ancient Wilderness. If this could be done, the Great Yu might be satisfied with the new tree of immortality from the East Across the Sea – the place they had come from in the beginning. Then, perhaps Yu’s alchemists could attempt to distil its sap into an elixir of life. If they could find the Neverdie Tree and send a living sample back to Yu, this could busy him for years and keep him from turning his penetrating eyes to the West and the valleys of the Queen Mother.

Qui Ye was fascinated by what the North group’s botanists had discovered on their journeys into the interior. They had found metasequoia trees, or dawn redwood trees as they were called in China. These “mothers of all conifers” were also deciduous. In the most ancient times, metasequoia covered vast areas of the world and gave birth to many varieties of pine trees. This would indicate that other Chinese expeditions or migrations might have carried the dawn redwood to the North in the Land of Lu. Most of the metasequoias they found were under permafrost and seemed to have all been “blown over” by some tremendous force, perhaps a volcano or a great sun-wave that flattened them all in one direction. It was a most amazing discovery that raised more questions than answers. On the coast, the botanists had found sitka spruce that grew to great heights where marshy water-lands were available to them. Some grew over two hundred feet tall in these optimal conditions. It seemed that the coastal weather, the salt in the air, plenty of ionized minerals, and a strong silica content in the soil had caused this gigantism.

Shenrab was across the camp listening to the explorers tell of the Yokut and Inuit natives who inhabited this cold and often desolate landscape. There, settlements go north to the land of the cold-rainbow, the aurora of splendors that rotates like a crown around the top of the world. The colorful phenomena shocked the North explorers and they never seemed to get used to the spectacular displays which were entirely new to them. There are great inland seas filled with icebergs and whales. One whale was all white and seemed to be friendly and chattered away at the explorers. Sea lions, walrus, seals and a variety of other great whales had been observed and recorded. But the most unusual was a spotted, small whale with a giant horn protruding from around its mouth, a sort of spear-like tooth. In fact, the North group claimed they had found the source of the Chinese myth of the unicorn, an ocean unicorn of sorts.

Other North explorers were bragging about the highest peak they found, which oriented them to their ancient maps, that was over 24,000 feet high. The slopes of the mountain were filled with giant black bears, grizzly bears, brown bears, mountain goats and sheep, giant horned moose, huge herds of swift running caribou, and horned bison. Eagles, falcons, hawks, seagulls, osprey, and many, many other fowl of the air were discovered and recorded. Salmon filled the rivers and bounteous ocean fishing kept the captains of the ships busy. Huge whales of many other types, as well as many types of dolphins filled the bays and often leapt out of the water in fantastic displays. There seemed to be no end to the unbelievable stories the North group shared with the East group.

After leisurely days of preparation for the land trek down the inner mountain range, as described in the ancient maps, the East group said farewell to their friends and set off with their horses into the interior lands some miles from the coast. The captains of the East vessels raised anchor and slowly began their cruise along the coastline, mirroring the inner group's travels to the south. The coastline seemed to be filled with islands of every size and shape that made a sheltered passageway down the coast.

Qui Ye looked at Shenrab and smiled a radiant glow of excitement, anxiousness, and thrilling wonder. She could not be happier with the wonders that the Land of Lu had already brought to light. She pushed her mind forward to imagine what they might

find along their path. Since the ancient maps were correct about the North, surely, they would be correct about the East and the Ancient Wilderness beyond. She felt it was most likely that they would find the Neverdie Tree some thousands of miles to the south of where they had landed. She couldn't imagine anything more wonderful than the love between her and Shenrab and the exhilaration and pride of finding such magical and powerful creations of nature. She wanted to share all of this with Shenrab, but just a reverent glance between them communicated what she wished to convey. Shenrab looked at her knowingly and said, "Yes, my love, I feel it too. We shall find the tree, and ultimately do even more than we set out to do. This is a magic and ancient land that has many wonders to reveal."

Unam, as usual, led the long line of horses and explorers winding its way up the slopes of the foothills that mounted their path to the higher mountains in the distance. No doubt the heavenly-horses were bred for high mountain travel and were the best companions they could have to bring them the strength and courage to move ever forward in a sure-footed fashion. Their companions even find their own grass beneath the snow at end of the day and drink the little water they need from the snow. Shenrab felt at home in this atmosphere and looked forward to each new mountain peak and valley making offerings and oblation along the way. Soon, a large golden eagle joined them from above and followed them as they climbed higher and higher into the mountain range. Below in the valley, they saw massive herds of caribou grazing. According to the maps, this high elevation mountain range runs a thousand mile south until it meets a new set of volcanic peaks that continue the march to the south. After that, their next challenge is a set of mountains 150 miles from the coast that rise 15,000 feet above the valley floor and create groves of old, tall trees.

Day after day, Unam was able to find each new peak that was described on the map of Lu. She paid homage to the spirits of the mountains and rivers and always asked permission of the landscape to bless our travels. She did the same with the Mono Indians who inhabit the mountains and live in harmony with nature keeping its beautiful balance. The Mono Indians told of the great areas their people had settled over time, which they now share peacefully with the Martis, Plano, and the Miwok Indians. The Miwok told of other Chinese explorers who had visited in the distant past, traveling throughout the land and recording all they saw. There was only

respect and recognition of their stewardship of the land that passed between Unam and the tribal peoples. Unam's abilities with language were extraordinary as she was able to communicate with sign language, pictures, or basic words that convey the friendly intent of our expedition. She told each tribe that we would try to help in any way that we could and occasionally we had a new answer to their problems just as they had answers for ours. There was never a moment of fear created by these tribes and only kindness and good fellowship followed encounters with them.

The travel logs were filled with entries, specimens were collected, illustrations of the fauna and flora were made, and tales were written about what was seen and experienced by the explorers. The expedition only stayed in one place for a short while as hunting parties were sent out and supplies restocked from nature. The daily routine of trekking high elevation passes, and the valleys between, became a delightful walk in a giant park. Every little while, a new wonder showed its face and excitement would fill the air with chatter and laughter. Qui Ye and Shenrab couldn't be happier, even though their duties often led the two of them in different directions to examine some new find. But each night around the campfire, their conversation never lulled as they shared their discoveries, hopes, and dreams with each other in an endless conversation of love and respect. They never tired of each other's company and their gentleness and consideration for each other grew each day.

Four months and hundreds of journal entries later, the group went due west to find the great inlet sea and their ships along the coastline. A wide entrance to the inlet sea was described on the maps and that is where Unam had agreed to meet the captains and regroup. Just as planned, the group spilled out of the mountains and down to the inlet sea which led them to the coast where their ships awaited, loaded with fresh fish.

Cheer and good fellowship arose from the shores of the reunited groups. The captains had built some huts to house the crews until the land-explorers arrived. The sailors seemed to have a lovely life living from the bounty of the sea. They had wonderful stories of the sheltered passages they had discovered when sailing south. Breathtaking walls of granite mountains came right down to the shoreline on both sides of the passage while pods of orca whales followed them through the weather-protected, deep channels. Fishing was fantastic with many varieties that they had

never seen before. The abundance was magnificent, and they had only met friendly natives who were happy to trade and share their knowledge of the area. One great island had trees 200 feet tall and valleys so beautiful that it was hard to leave them.

The mountain explorers shared their stories and discoveries, and the welcoming party went on for days. They enjoyed sharing their new foods and experiences with great delight. The homecoming was a most welcome break from the continuous up and down of the mountains. The sailors were thrilled to try new dried meats and the strange new foods the natives of the mountains had shared with them. The sailors told them all about this great inland sea that was a protected harbor against the storms of the open sea. They had explored it thoroughly and found high mountains and tropical rainforests on one side and open plains that led to singular peaks of dormant volcanic mountains on the other. These were the mountains described in the texts as cascading south from the inland sea. It was these mountains that the land-explorers would find in their next thousand-mile trek to the assumed home of the Neverdie Tree. At that point, the sailors would rendezvous with the land trekkers in the next great inland sea some months from then. But this made the parting no less sad for both groups as the sailors watched the long train of horses heading south into the mountains beyond.

The volcanic cone mountains were a wonder to behold. The thought of all of them being active in the far past brought fantastic imaginations to the travelers. Fortunately, their separate and singular nature made it easy to travel the plains beneath the peaks and not have to trek from ridge to ridge. This made the going easier and quicker. The Mono Indians were very helpful and they themselves had domesticated horses much like the East group's own, except they were not long-haired nor did they have broad hoofs. These horses of the Land of Lu were bred for speed and distance riding and were much taller with longer legs. The horsemen like Shenrab, had a wonderful time sharing knowledge of these things and dreamed of the days when they could cross-breed new lines of horses combining the best of both breeds.

Eventually, the group came to the end of the cone mountains and climbed the foothills into the mountain range they had been waiting so long to find. These mountains were granite and ranged up to 14,000 feet high in some places. To the

west of the range an open plain extended to the coastal foothills. Moisture carrying salt in the air rose to the western slopes of the mountain range causing extraordinary growth of trees that otherwise would never get so tall, so wide, or so old. They had seen this effect with the trees on the coast below the inland sea. Coastal Redwood trees grew more than 350 feet tall, the sailors told us, and they could even grow out of the stump in clusters. Some of these trees were calculated to be over 2,000 years old. Something in the ocean salts might make them so big and so old was the speculation of the botanists. But whatever the magic was, it was found widespread that pine, fir, spruce, cedars, and many other trees grew to great heights and size if they were near the coast or inland at high elevations in the western slopes of this mountain range.

All along the way, Qui Ye and Shenrab were busy cataloguing the plants and trees, deer, elk, mountain lions, and bears. So many new things needed to be recorded that it often slowed the group down trying to make their notes, maps, and collect their specimens. There was never a moment to loose and the work left them tired and accomplished by the end of the day. Qui Ye was most happy to find that there were special forces, influences, and magic to these lands, especially in the high elevation meadows and forests. She had never seen so many tall trees and deep forests. Just when she thought she could sit down and listen to the wind in the high canopies of the trees, she would notice that a huge elk or mountain lion or bear was watching her as if she was disturbing their peace. The mountains were full of life of every sort. It was a wonderland of mysterious and grand creations that she could not wait to experiment with, but the group never stayed in one place long enough to for her to sprout, grow, or graft anything that might tell her more about what she was seeing and its potential.

The day finally came when the group came upon a lovely forest of huge fir, spruce, and pine trees. Plenty of water flowed down in streams and rivers from the snow-covered peaks above. The elevation of the groves and meadows was between five and eight thousand feet, the exact height they were looking for, and had a western exposure to the rising clouds from the ocean. The Mono Indians of the area were very sparse and the group was not infringing upon their hunting grounds or water supply. Everything was perfect for starting a nursery of trees that could be experimented with. Hybrid trees, derived from the massive trees that were already

very old, would be perfect. Unam gave the directive to set up a permanent camp in the open meadows near the strongest river. She sent a small group to the coast to meet with the captains and she told the group that she had decided that she and a few others would take horses and travel further East into the Ancient Wilderness in search of the Learning Tree, where the sun rises from a great canyon into the branches of this World Tree.

The news shook up the group, but they knew that Unam was wise and strong enough to make the trip. With swifter horses they could cross the great basin and the plains to another range of mountains that traversed the Land of Lu from north to south with a two-thousand-mile long ridge of high elevation mountains. It was there that the *Book of Mountains and Seas* claimed the sky gods were born and Yellow himself spent his youth. Whatever these mysterious passages meant, Unam was determined to discover what remained.

The building of the nursery, and village around it, was a great pleasure to the group. The many months of sea travel, mountain trekking, and grueling climbing had strengthened the group but created a longing to settle down and enjoy the round of the seasons in one place. Qui Ye was put in charge of the nursery and she immediately got to work testing seeds, growing sprouts, and grafting the samples she had brought from Nagar into baby specimens of redwoods, pines, spruce, and firs that seem to love to grow quick and large in this rarified mountain retreat. She also searched the local area for new varieties of trees with distinguishing characteristics of long-life, adaptability, and healing properties. The local Yokuts were expert in these areas and were always willing to share their knowledge and experience.

One day, while Qui Ye and Shenrab were searching the southern reaches of their mountain retreat, they came across an ancient tree that stood alone in the rocky terrain and was so wind-swept that it had grown the way the high winds had shaped it. It was most peculiar and seemingly quite old. Examinations of other tree stumps in the area demonstrated that this bristle-cone pine was almost three thousand years old. Further exploration, which took them across the valley, led them to an entire grove of these bristle-cone pines growing on the calcium of the White Mountains, as they named them. These trees were short, weathered, grew separately as single trees, and had little green foliage. One ancient grandfather tree

may have been the oldest tree in the grove, and they estimated it to be possibly ten thousand years old, if the growth rings of the other large trees in the area were any indication. It took a long time to dawn on the couple that they were looking at the Neverdie Tree, the goal of their expedition.

They took graftings, samples, cones, and even small trees back to the nursery to study them further. They didn't know if they should claim they had found the Neverdie Tree. The more they studied and experimented, it became clear that they had done just that. Now, the work could begin in earnest. They began to crossbreed the bristle-cone pine with the foxtail pine they had earlier discovered growing on their silica-based soil. Between the calcium of the bristle-cone pine, and the silica of the foxtail pine they found a balance in minerals that was strengthened further by the trick Qui Ye was taught in Nagar – fire induced seed sprouting. This methodology created a tree that was born of fire and snow, female silica and male calcium, and the long-life characteristics of two of the oldest trees they could find growing naturally in this etherically enhanced environment.

Qui Ye then began crossbreeding and grafting the coastal redwoods with the dawn redwood, the metasequoia, the mother of conifers. She was amazed by their compatibility and soon developed a hybrid pine that had the strength of pines, redwoods, firs, cedars, and spruce combined. The waters of her nursery were filled with etheric life and natural magic that helped the seeds quickly turn into trees. She noticed that if she crossed the hybrid Neverdie Trees with the gigantic trees derived from the metasequoia, they blended perfectly and the resultant tree continued to hold the strong characteristics of long-life, huge size and shape, fire-resistant bark that is thick and bear-like, and seeds that only sprout after an exposure to fire. Even the pinecones of these new hybrid trees stayed tightly closed unless fire opened them. Thus, the curse of a tall tree, lightning, might not burn down these fire-resistant hybrid trees, and even if lightning struck and a forest fire burns the forest floor, it would also open the cones and activate the fire-treated seeds to grow in the burnt materials which provided excellent nutrients for the seedlings. It seemed like Qui Ye had bred a perfect combination of tree characteristics all in one tree. If Qui Ye's experiments prove to be what her early results indicate, she not only had found the Neverdie Tree and can send back samples, but she had also created a tree whose lifeblood, its sap, might be a key to long-life, if not immortality. Certainly, some

medicinal substance from a tree that can still be growing after ten thousand years, just like the Mother Tree in Nagar, should have a good chance to provide positive results.

Qui Ye and Shenrab kept the research to themselves, so as not to upset the search for further wonders of Lu. Shenrab began to spend all his time working for Qui Ye in the nursery. He became her best student and hardest worker. He was amazed at her brilliant thinking and masterful skills. Perhaps someday she will be placed on the Throne of the Queen Mother under the One he mused. Or at least, in his mind, she was the best candidate. Qui Ye was still young and yet had done what no other had done before outside of Nagar. She had taken her wisdom and understanding of plants to a higher stage of cognition. She seemed to be able to read and write the creative designs of plants and know ahead of time what the results will be. Anything she touched bloomed like it was springtime. Working beside her was a dream come true for Shenrab as they actively accomplished the task they had been sworn to complete. They had come further than either had ever imagined possible for any two people, let alone the two of them. Love grew between them like a seed planted by Qui Ye, filled with the magic and wonder of the Queen Mother.

Years went by and the nursery became a garden of paradise much like Nagar. Qui Ye had used many of the seeds she brought to grow the wondrous fruits of Nagar Valley there in her nursery. Thus, they would eat one of her fruits and be sustained for days, plus it kept them young and strong. A village sprung up around the nursery and the original encampment, and Mono natives were engaged by Qui Ye to plant thirty-three groves of her new trees, which she called "sequoia", after its mother the metasequoia, the original conifer. This new tree could only be planted after being scorched by fire in a special procedure and then planted in prescribed planting designs on the western slopes of the mountain range between six to eight thousand-foot elevation near snow-pack run off in meadows rich with silica-based soil. These designs could only be carried out by Qui Ye and Shenrab, with the help of many Mono Indians.

These thirty-three groves became the children of Qui Ye and Shenrab. They were their progeny that held the possible secrets of longevity and immortality within their being. Each grove was masterfully crafted as a permanent culture that would

support giant trees for millennia, or more. For all they knew, each tree held the secret elixir of life that Yu, Yellow, Fond Care, and Foremost all longed for and never attained. The couple, and indeed they were a couple by now, were like the mother and father of these wondrous, potential fountains of youth. With as much care and love as a parent, they sprouted, tended, trimmed, and pruned every tree in the thirty-three groves. Every bubbling spring was kept clear, every stream and brook flowing, and the forest floor clear and healthy. Year after year, the groves grew from a nursery into a budding forest and Qui Ye and Shenrab grew happier and more in love each day.

One concern bothered the couple. Where was Unam, and had she been successful in finding the Learning Tree? It was true that Qui Ye had solved one problem by finding the Neverdie Tree and creating the hybrid sequoia tree, but if Unam could find the Learning Tree it might be possible to join it to the Neverdie Tree and create another World Tree here in the Land of Lu. This too would be an incentive for the Great Yu to not look for the One Tree and the Queen Mother of the West anywhere but the Land of Lu.

It wasn't long afterwards that Unam and her team appeared in the village. Everyone was ecstatic to reunite with their beloved teacher and dearest friend who was like their spiritual mother. She seemed as always, calm and introspective, but she spoke with great vigor that night around the fire. "We have found the peaks and valleys we set out to find but not the Learning Tree. The great canyon of the sun was as it was described, a most incredible wonder. You can understand why the ancients said the sun rose and set in this canyon. And on the rim of the canyon, looking down into the deepest layers of the earth, was a straggly, bristly looking pine tree wind-swept into a contorted posture of surrender to the gales of time. We assumed that she was the Neverdie Tree, as Qui Ye has discovered here and confirmed. This is a great discovery and might be what is needed to satisfy the Great Yu's desires. Perhaps a tincture can be made from it to extend life. One way or another, the specimens we have brought back with us and the ones you have gathered should be all we need to return with, besides our records and specimens to add to the Libraries of Knowledge on the White Island. We have accomplished our tasks and soon will return home to deliver our findings to the emperor," she said with solemn joy in her voice. She then thanked each of the members of the East group and noted that not

one life had been lost during the expedition and that the Queen Mother would be happy with all that we had accomplished.

The East group that went into the Ancient Wilderness had many wonder tales to tell the group and days were spent talking and sharing the records. A great collection of documentation had been amassed and the group was quite proud of their efforts. Just so, the botanists and explorers who planted the thirty-three groves and created the many hybrid flowers, plants, and trees had their share of stories to tell also. Qui Ye spoke about her endless hours of experimentation, her many trials and failures and the surprising successes that had turned their encampment into a garden paradise. They all celebrated by eating the Nagar fruit Qui Ye and Shenrab had grown. Their hunger ended, their worries and stress dissolved, and they day-dreamed about returning home safe and sound.

Unam made special time to come to the nursery, which by then was also the domicile of the couple who were living together under one roof, to thank them both for all that they had done. Her happiness was more evident than before, and she smiled and laughed and shared the time as a most precious and cherished gift. She knew what the couple was about to tell her, but she didn't let on. She could see in their eyes that both had resolved to stay in the nursery they had created to protect and tend it until the wonder-trees grew strong and old. For only when magic trees get quite old do they hold the properties of longevity, let alone immortality. The couple wanted to spend their lives together in this garden of paradise they had created. They wanted to be married for all times to come, from this life to the next life. They wanted to attain immortality not in one life, but through many lives together as one being sharing two bodies. Unam could understand that the couple had essentially attained immortality by committing to life after life together. This was rare, but Unam had seen it before with the great ones whose love transcends time. This was the true immortality that Yu, Yellow, Wukong and rest had desired insatiably - a living torment that tears life away from the present to grasp that which cannot be held in the distant future. **Qui Ye and Shenrab had become one, now and forever.** Some call it heavenly marriage or the wedding of the immortals. It was the true elixir of life, distilled from love that lives beyond space and time in an eternal realm of immortal gods and goddesses. Unam could see this and much, much more in the holy glance of the spirit that went from Qui Ye's eyes to Shenrab's.

“We wish to stay here and tend our nurseries, both the trees and the children we plan to have together. Unam, will you hand-fast us in marriage and allow us to stay?”, Qui Ye asked her lovingly.

“I know that you are aware that we have been in love from the first moment we met. But until our task was accomplished and recognized by you, we focused on our duties and the vows we took to Queen Mother. You are the most important person in our lives, and we would ask for your blessing, without which it would not be right,” Shenrab said with a quiver in his voice that revealed the profound feelings he was expressing.

“You know already that I have blessed your union since we first met in Gulmit. Watching the love grow between you has been a deep learning lesson for me as well. I have never thought of marriage due to my duties, but if I were to seek love, I expect it would look much like what goes between the two of you. I bless your marriage and your wishes to stay here. I will miss you both and had planned that you might return to Nagar as valuable members of the valley. But someone must tend your wonder-trees and see what comes of them,” Unam said with tears in her eyes.

They all were deeply grateful to each other and rejoiced in their mutual happiness, hugging each other with tenderness and love. “Give me your hands,” Unam said as she pulled the scarf from around her neck. “I bind you today before Fond Care and Foremost, the gods of the sky who look down on this union with blessings for prosperity and many children. May the Queen Mother smile upon you both and make all your paths smooth to the summit of the eternal mountain where the One Pillar grows tall and strong,” she pronounced with a great smile upon her face. The couple just wondered what else she knew that she was not saying to have such a brilliant ray of sunshine beam at them from her lovely face.

It was a sad day when the East group set out from the mountain nursery, leaving the couple behind. A deep sense of satisfaction rolled through the hearts of the explorers and the anticipation of returning home broke open like a new dawn. Qui Ye stood long after watching them slowly ramble down the mountain and out of sight. The memories kept swelling their hearts, but for all they knew, they might see

them again at some distant time in the future, or surely in a future life. For friends like the Twelve and Unam are eternally bound to the good and will undoubtedly join with them to work together on future deeds of glory and wisdom. Love was their unbreakable bond that was forever anew, like the evergreens that grew in the groves all around the couple.

Qui Ye looked deep into Shenrab's eyes and found there all she needed, even though they were now alone in the nursery. She knew that soon they would have many children to help them tend the garden paradise that had been created out of love for the Queen Mother and the blessed dreams of her children. At that moment, something in them united in the eternal realms and their pledge to each other of 'forever love' could not be broken by any force on earth or in heaven.

- End of Chapter 2 -