

A Step Away from Paradise

EXCERPT No. 5

The Opening

From Chapter 20, Opening the Gate

Somewhere over the rainbow
Skies are blue
And the dreams that you dare to dream
Really do come true
~Arlen-Harburg

And so it was, amid tremendous excitement, that Tulshuk Lingpa and twenty of his closest disciples ascended the steep slopes above Tseram in order to find and open the Western Gate to Beyul Demoshong. They took with them bedding, food, and *pechas* [scriptures]. Of the twenty, all were men except for three young women—the *khandro* [Tulshuk Lingpa's consort], her sister Hishey, and one other woman who has since died. The *khandro* had strapped to her back her and Tulshuk Lingpa's eight-month-old daughter, Pema Choekyi. This was in the early spring of 1963. Of the twenty, many have died in the intervening decades; others—like Mipham, who has been in deep retreat for years in a cave in Bhutan—could not be reached. I was able to speak with eight of those who went above Tseram and piece together what happened.

Tulshuk Lingpa had been given directions to Beyul by Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal years before in a vision, so he knew the way. Yet the directions he was given, which he wrote down in his *neyik*, or guidebook, entitled, *The Great Secret Talk of the Dakinis Showing the Way to Demoshong*, demonstrates that the landscape in which the gate was to be found was not purely physical; while it describes the way to a particular place, the landmarks are clearly visionary—as well as cryptic. This *terma* is, after all, a treasure map to a hidden paradise full of unimaginable treasures, both physical and spiritual. It reveals secrets while concealing them.

I was given a copy of this guidebook by the lamas of Tashiding only because I was with Wangchuk, Tulshuk Lingpa's grandson, and only after I made the solemn promise that I would neither let others see it, publish it in its entirety, nor publish excerpts that would in any way divulge its secrets. This I have done in the following excerpts:

Within the fort of the snow mountain there are four treasures packed with tremendous wealth that will fulfill your wishes. There is a pond of nectar, and within that pond are eight *nagas* [serpent gods] protecting a treasure of unimaginable jewels. There is an unthinkable paradise of the owner of the hidden treasures, as well as a paradise of the protector in charge of the whole world. There are countless natural formations, great hidden treasures of *dharma* and wealth, and some small hidden treasures as well.

At the foot of the snow mountain like a lion, which is full of rocks encircled by rainbows, there is a treasure of all the jewels. Within the rock mountain in C there is a treasure of wish-fulfilling gems. In the long cave called L there is another treasure of wish-fulfilling gems. In the East, below Kanchenjunga, are treasures of the three different salts. In the mountain called L there are treasures of life and religion. In the central mountain called T there is a great treasure of immortality. In the northwest, in a great cave at Y there is a copper horse that will conquer all three worlds. And there is a dagger there that will conquer all illusions. In the holy place of the auspicious *dakini* there is a granary of corn.

After describing a dizzying and kaleidoscopic array of treasures and secret places, “paradises of *nagas* and gods and *dakas* and *dakinis*,” which are to be found “on the mountain, in the valley, on the rocks, in trees, as well as in the springs,” it says, “These are the secret places of Padmasambhava, linked like a net.” And least you should think great secrets have been revealed, it then goes on to say, enigmatically, “These are the well-known secret places.”

About the gates of Beyul, it says,

In that place there are four main doors, four secret doors, the four cardinal directions, and the four corners, which are all held tightly. The eastern great gate is blocked by three natural obstructions: narrow ways, mountain doors, and curtains. The three conditions of the southern door are rocky hills, great rivers, and innumerable ravines. The western and northern gates are entirely packed with natural barriers. Therefore this Beyul is superior to other places.

Some of the directions in the book seem almost practical, as if their true meaning were only slightly veiled. “The country between the light and dark is blocked by dense snow and three different curtains, one after the other. From the four corners, if you could catch drops of water, then that secret door will not be blocked by the curtains.” This seems to refer curtains of ice, such as you find blocking high mountains ravines, and which, in the warm season, when you can ‘catch drops of water,’ melt and allow passage.

The guidebook, upon which they relied above Tseram as they neared the western gate, also has many instructions for rituals to be performed to appease the local deities and the deities of Beyul. To enter Beyul is not only a matter of getting yourself to the right place. The timing has to be right. The guidebook says, “When the world is devoid of happiness, the door of the ascetic valley will open. If one delays, troublesome things will occur and the great and small valleys will be shaken by a red wind of fire, and poisonous hailstorms will drop.”

In the guidebook it says that to open the gate you have to perform rituals and burn incense to the “deity owner of the treasures. Rituals should be offered to the important hills.” And so it was when Tulshuk Lingpa and his twenty disciples left Tseram that day in the early spring of 1963. Again, as when they left the nomads above Dzongri, Tulshuk Lingpa announced that from that point forward they would have no contact with the outside world. The only contact would be with the spirit owners of the land and the guardian deities of Beyul.

The directions he had received in the vision years earlier and “brought down into script” in the guidebook were specific enough for Tulshuk Lingpa to know he had to search for the gate above Tseram, but the conscious mind is not a powerful enough tool locate such a gate. So he performed the *trata melong*, the mirror divination, and had Hishey look into the burnished brass. She saw the way ahead of them turning into a green valley of flowers with huge old trees and innumerable waterfalls.

The first night they slept in the area that in Tibetan is known as the *vatsam*, the area above vegetation and below the snow.

The next day they climbed into the snow, and by late afternoon they reached a huge cave surrounded by snow in which they all could fit, and there they made camp. From this cave the land dropped off, then rose again on the other side of a little valley, the snowy slope rising to a little notch in a ridge, a pass, across which Tulshuk Lingpa declared was Beyul Demoshong. They were finally within sight of the gate!

The next day, in the morning, Tulshuk Lingpa took twelve of the twenty disciples in the cave and led them to the slope rising to the pass. Just as they started their ascent, a cloud came low with a whirl of wind that picked up the snow and made the air thick with it. Blinded by the snow and pierced by the wind, they retreated, reaching the cave as a storm came low on the mountain. The storm kept them pinned in the cave for the next two days, during which time they were in the utmost state of concentration upon their *pujas* [rituals] and spiritual practices. They needed to purify themselves to the point where the weather would clear and allow them to ascend the snowy slope to the pass leading into Beyul.

On the third day, they awoke to the sun shining into the mouth of their cave. Again, Tulshuk Lingpa headed out to make the ascent. This time he took with him six of those he had left behind on his first attempt. It would be the collective karma of all those attempting the opening that would determine the success or failure of the enterprise. But this time they didn't even make it to the bottom of the slope below the cave when a cloud came in and made further progress impossible.

And so it went for nineteen days. Some days the weather would look fine when they set out for the slope opposite, but never could they even start the ascent before the weather changed. Obviously the guardian spirits were not ready to allow their passage. Some days they didn't even try. Storms raged on the mountain for days at a time that piled snow outside the cave in huge drifts that dwarfed them. On those days, they remained in the cave performing *pujas* and reciting mantras.

On the twentieth day, they woke up to brilliant sunshine. Again, they set out for the steep snow slope leading to the pass, now even thicker with snow than before.

Namdrul stopped Tulshuk Lingpa. Something had been bothering him.

“Master,” he said, “I am from Lahaul and have lived my whole life trekking in deep snow, ever since I was a child. You are from Tibet. You’ve spent winters in Pangao, where the snow is not so deep. You are not so familiar with deep snow, steep slopes, and their dangers. If we have to reach the top of the ridge, it is too dangerous to just go straight up. We’d be better off to go that way, to the right, where the slope is gentler. When we reach the top, we can cross back over and reach the same place you want to reach. But your way is just too dangerous. It is springtime; the underlying snow is old and crusted in ice. The new snow on it could slip.”

With this, Tulshuk Lingpa became furious. It was prophesized back in Kahm that the one to open Beyul would have eyes like a tiger; now he had the disposition as well.

“Who’s the *lingpa* here,” he boomed, his breath condensing into clouds of steam in the frozen air. “If you’re a *lingpa*, if you know the way, then why are you following me? Why aren’t you in Beyul already?”

The slope Tulshuk Lingpa wanted to ascend *was* impossibly steep, but when they were leaving Tseram, hadn’t the others warned them not to contradict him, no matter how illogical he became? Now they had the full fury of Tulshuk Lingpa upon them. To contradict him or to bring in logical thinking or any kind of prudence at the very moment he was finding and preparing to pass through a crack in the very logic that keeps the world in a seamless web is the greatest sin a disciple can make.

A moment of doubt can crush a lifetime of faith.

As William Blake said, “If the sun had but a doubt, it would immediately go out.”

It is rare that conditions are right for the opening of a *beyul*, rarer still that a *lingpa* takes incarnation at that time. Conditions must be perfect. You need the help and guidance of any number of spirit gatekeepers and mountain deities, who control the weather and the subtle forces that allow the *lingpa* to discern the way. And those with the *lingpa* must be as one heart in their single-pointed and clear-hearted intention to give up everything, all material possessions, home, family, and the very notion of logic that would prevent them from leaping into a realm beyond the constraints of logic that holds us to this world. They must all jump, as a single being, into another dimension. And if at that vital moment—when all those conditions have come together into a single point in time at the prophesized place where a possibility exists for a crack form—if just as they are to achieve this wondrous step, a doubt arises and is voiced, the whole enterprise can be lost.

A very similar event occurred at the decisive moment for Dorje Dechen Lingpa when he came to Sikkim to open Beyul Demoshong in the 1920s. They were nearing this same gate, climbing a snowy slope towards a ridge, probably the very same one, when he suddenly turned to his disciples and said, “Bring me a white *dzo*.” A *dzo* is a cross between a yak and a cow.

“But Master,” they replied, “we are high in the snow peaks, days from any settlement. Where are we to find a *dzo*, let alone a white one? It is impossible.”

This raised the ire of Dorje Dechen Lingpa. “Don’t you understand? Nothing is impossible,” he boomed. “What we need is a white *dzo*. Make one, then, out of butter!”

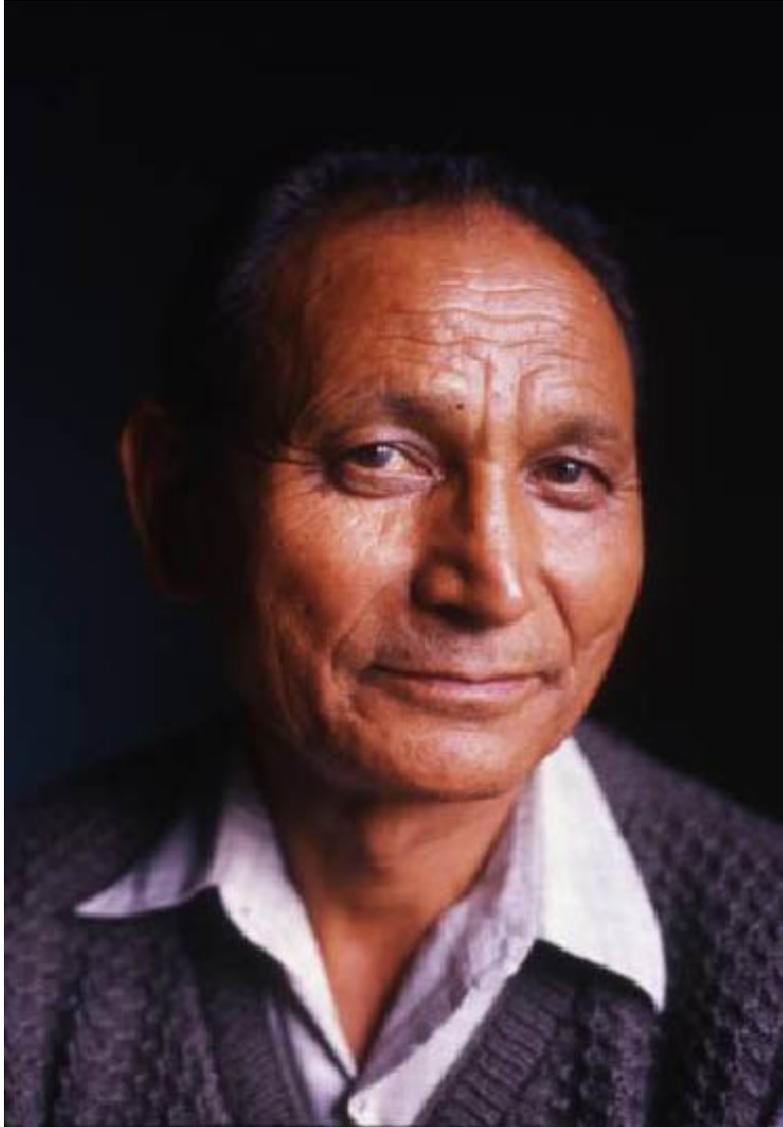
“But Master,” they complained, “we have no butter. We used the last of it in the tea.”

This was the ‘bad omen’ that marked the end of Dorje Dechen Lingpa’s attempt to open Beyul Demoshong. They headed back down the mountain that day and returned to Tibet.

Now, forty years later, Namdrul voiced doubt of Tulshuk Lingpa’s judgment and the very sky itself responded. Suddenly they were engulfed in thick cloud. Freezing winds lashed at them with biting snow. Having spent three weeks above Tseram living in the cave, they would have been unrecognizable to those below. Their faces were thickened like leather by the elements, and the skin was almost black. The snow stuck to their faces and turned to ice. Wrapping themselves in their long sheep’s wool coats and shawls, they returned to the cave.

That afternoon, Namdrul set out without anyone knowing to try his route and see if it were possible. He didn’t make it very far. He slipped on the ice, gashed his forearm, and returned to the cave with his arm bleeding.

The next morning the weather was good. Tulshuk Lingpa performed the *trata melong*, the mirror divination. He announced that the divination bode well. He told some to stay at the cave, while he went with the others to make a reconnaissance of the route they had been trying each day in order to see how the weather was developing. On the way he pulled one of his disciples aside. His name was Wangyal Bodh, a powerfully built young man from Shrimoling in his mid twenties. Now a retired civil engineer in his late sixties, Wangyal himself told me what happened next.



Wangyal Bodh

Shrimoling, 2006

“Tulshuk Lingpa pulled me aside. ‘Today we’ll let them go by themselves,’ he said. ‘You and I will try another route, alone—just the two of us. It is difficult to make progress with so many people. It is good that you have with you a warm coat—and excellent, you have a climbing axe.’

“He sent the others ahead. ‘We’ll go left, up that way,’ he said to me confidently, indicating a little side valley that angled up to the sky. ‘That is what I saw in the mirror.’

“I followed Tulshuk Lingpa up the valley,” Wangyal said, his voice betraying the excitement he must have felt at the time. “The way was steep and icy and dangerous. Water was gushing

down innumerable rivulets from a glacier that loomed above us, the ice hard and green. It was a raw and dangerous place of loose scree and precariously perched boulders that until recently had been embedded in the ice. Above the glacier the bare rock was covered with snow and ice rising to a windswept peak with a plume of snow blowing from its summit. The sky at that altitude was so deeply blue it was almost black. My heart was pounding—from more than just the altitude. I had the sense that with only the two of us, the way would open.

“With a tremendous crack, followed by a resounding roar, a piece of the glacier the size of a house broke off. Scattering boulders and crushing others in its path, it was sliding down the valley and we were directly in its way. I grabbed onto Tulshuk Lingpa to pull him aside, but quickly realized it wasn’t even worth running: there was no way out of the glacier’s path. I was terrified and knew this was the end. Though I had first grabbed onto Tulshuk Lingpa to save him, when he yelled at me to let go I realized I was now hanging onto him out of raw fear. I released him from my iron grip.

He reached under his sheepskin coat, and with the flourish of a knight presenting his sword to a foe whipped out his *purba* [ritual dagger] and held it at arms length before him as the glacier crashed towards us with a deafening roar.

“Holding the *purba* steady, his arm outstretched, his other arm extended with the index and small fingers pointing towards the onrushing wall of ice, his voice resonated such a profoundly deep note that the rumble of the oncoming glacier reverberated back on itself. His voice was elemental, pre-human. ‘Ha-ha-haaa...,’ and the glacier broke into two pieces and slid by us left and right, leaving us unharmed.

“He tucked the *purba* back into his robe, seemingly unruffled. I was frozen with fright and awed by what I had just experienced, shaken to the core.”

Wangyal told me this story from when he was young while we sat drinking tea in his substantial home in Shrimoling. Now in his mid sixties, he is a retired civil engineer. A more sedate, open, and honest man cannot be imagined. I had just been traveling some days with him, visiting people and places connected with Tulshuk Lingpa. I had found him sober, level headed, and very exact in what he said. Exaggeration was not in his character. The way he told the story, I felt it was true. Even though it was embarrassing to do so, I had to ask. I tried to be diplomatic.

“People make up stories and exaggerate,” I said, “especially when it comes to things religious. Did this really happen how you tell it? The glacier split in two and passed by you?”

“Absolutely. I am as amazed today as I was then,” he said, staring me openly in the eye. “I also probably would not believe it if I hadn’t experienced it myself. But it happened, exactly as I say.”

Both the man’s honesty and his integrity told me it was true.

“The human mind is susceptible to all sorts of things,” Wangyal continued, “especially doubt. I realized that until this point I had still harbored doubts; now that I had experienced Tulshuk Lingpa’s powers, doubt was no longer possible. Beyul Demoshong was now a certainty.

“When the crashing glacier’s echoes faded down the valley, Tulshuk Lingpa turned to me and asked whether I wanted to continue. ‘Yes,’ I said, without hesitation. He was happy. ‘Finally,’ he said, ‘a disciple with enough faith.’

“Tulshuk Lingpa took a confident step forward and continued climbing the steep valley. I followed in a state of awe. Though my mind was calm and confident, my body quaked with animal fear.

“Ahead of us was the glacier. And beyond the glacier, above it, where earlier had been a steep slope of snow and ice, the ground now appeared bare. And impossible as it might sound, above the bare ground was vegetation and it got greener the higher it went towards what now appeared to be a pass. And more incredible than that, the way was marked by rainbows, the most incredible rainbows I’d ever seen, rainbows whose light and arcs were in the patterns of flowers. They looked strangely close—as if I could reach out my hand and touch them. The air was so thin, the rainbows could only be seen where they lay upon the mountains, as if the mountains at these altitudes had the density of air, the air being entirely too imbued with the Celestial to contain them.

“We reached the edge of the glacier, slick with melting ice and flowing everywhere with water. Tulshuk Lingpa confidently climbed onto it next to where the piece had broken off. He reached down his hand and lifted me up.”

Wangyal took a sip of tea and looked out the window at the surrounding mountains. Though it was June, their peaks were still covered in snow.

“When I was young man here in Lahaul,” he said pensively, “I used to cross the Rohtang Pass in winter. It was dangerous, but sometimes we had to do it. Just walking to the next

village often meant negotiating snow so deep houses would be buried. Our trails were often swept away by avalanches. Since I used to go for treks in the high mountains and walk among the glaciers, I understood well how treacherous glaciers could be, especially in springtime when the ice melts on the surface and the resulting water opens deep crevasses. When the changing spring weather brings fresh snow, the fissures get covered. Like Namdrul, I knew about navigating snowy peaks and glaciers, and I knew the dangers. Under any other circumstance, I would not have ventured up that glacier. Now I did not hesitate. My awareness was as taut and sharp as the glacier was steep.

“I followed Tulshuk Lingpa a few hundred yards up the glacier. The rainbows ahead of us seemed so close I could now practically scoop them up in my hands. The wind swept down the cold surface from the heights and the sky beyond, and suddenly the breeze turned warm and fragrant. The thin crystalline mountain air was bringing with it the scent of the most glorious herbs and flowers. I breathed deeply the fragrant air, and the smell of saffron filled my lungs. Tulshuk Lingpa was walking just ahead of me, but my sight was set on the rising greenery beyond the glacier from whence issued this beautiful smell.

“Suddenly the ground gave way beneath my master’s feet and he was sliding headlong into a crevasse wide enough to swallow a body whole. I lunged forward and grabbed onto his ankle and tried to dig the tip of my boots into the edge of the crevasse prevent us both from sliding into the dark chasm of ice. Could this be the crack to which we had been traveling so long?

“‘The ice axe,’ Tulshuk Lingpa yelled.

“In my panic I’d forgotten that I had one on my belt. I swung it hard and dug its tip deep into the ice and stopped our deathly slide. There I was, lying on my belly, my face hard against the ice, watching my hand slowly slip down the ice axe’s handle; my other hand was stretched behind my back holding onto Tulshuk Lingpa’s ankle. For the second time that day death seemed unavoidable. How could I ever get my guru out of that crevasse? I turned my head to look at him, and to my amazement he was standing up! Yes, I was hanging onto his ankle, but he was standing.

“‘Hey,’ Tulshuk Lingpa said in a jocular voice, ‘what are you doing with your face on the ice. Get up!’

“I got up, amazed at my guru’s strength. I wanted to bow down and touch his feet, but I realized if I did so I’d probably slide right into the crack from which we’d just saved ourselves.

“‘Let us carry on,’ I said. Without hesitation I was ready to follow him up the slope of treacherous ice. We were almost there. Just ten steps more, I told myself, just ten steps, and we will be in Beyul. It seemed that close. I heard a sound from above us and it took me a moment to realize I was listening to a *geling*, the clarinet-like instrument the lamas use. At first I thought I was hallucinating from the altitude. But I heard it, and Tulshuk Lingpa heard it too. ‘It is the *dharmapala* and the *dakinis* coming to greet us,’ he said.

“I started forward, but Tulshuk Lingpa stopped me.

“‘We can’t just go, the two of us,’ Tulshuk Lingpa said. ‘The two of us can’t just disappear. How can we go without the others? There is room for over 2,000 in Beyul—this I know. We must turn back.’

“Never did I feel disappointment so acutely in my life. We were so close. We were standing in the snow, but above us, beyond the glacier, there was no snow. It was so beautiful on the other side, green, and we were almost there. I kept thinking I was hallucinating. I even put my fingers in my ears to see if the sound of the *gelings* came from inside my own head. But it didn’t. The sound was real. The rainbows were real. And so was Beyul.

“We carefully picked our way down the glacier and descended the valley. By the time we reached the cave where the others were waiting, dark clouds had once again descended on the mountain.

The others eagerly asked us what happened. Tulshuk Lingpa said not a word. He sat a short way off on a large stone, and the others surrounded me. ‘What happened up there?’ they asked me. ‘Your eyes are glowing. What did you see?’

“I related all I had seen and how close we were.

“‘I know why we couldn’t see it earlier,’ I told them. ‘There were too many doubts in all of our minds. That’s why we have been unable to see the Hidden Valley, even though it’s right *there*.’ I pointed up the snowy slope. ‘This time we really saw it, for real. And twice we almost lost our lives. It is really there. I saw it with my own eyes.’

“The people thought, ‘We’ve traveled so far, from Himachal Pradesh and Bhutan and Tibet, and we’ve come to Sikkim, and now to Kanchenjunga, and we still have doubts. We have too many doubts in our minds; that’s why we haven’t seen it.’

“Tulshuk Lingpa had advised us all along, ever since before we left Lahaul, that if we had the slightest atom of doubt in our minds we would never see the Hidden Valley.

“The others were really excited now. ‘We also want to see what you saw,’ they said. ‘Even if we cannot enter, we want go to the point where we can see what you saw.’

“I told them that if I hadn’t been nervous, if I hadn’t been shivering with fear because of nearly dying twice, I would have been able to reach out and touch the rainbows.

“That afternoon, Tulshuk Lingpa performed the *trata melong*.

Hishey looked into the mirror.

“She saw a long pipe coming out of the sky. It was as wide as your outstretched arms, glowing with a golden yellow light, like the sun, but it was also very white. It was coming straight down out of the sky.

“Though we asked Tulshuk Lingpa what it meant, he grew silent and again sat a short way off on a stone. The moment he sat, four white doves—what they were doing up there amongst the glaciers is anybody’s guess—flew low over Tulshuk Lingpa. They circled him three times before cooing as if in salute and flying off into a low-hanging cloud. The cloud came lower and engulfed us, and though it was the middle of the afternoon, a red light glowed through the thick fog we were suddenly immersed in as if it were sunset. Then the color changed, and there were flashes and pulsing glows of colored light. Those in the cave came out and we were all staring into the changing-colored light of a fog so dense we couldn’t even see Tulshuk Lingpa. Then the wind blew; the cloud moved up the valley, and we were bathed again in sunshine.”

These two events, the circling doves and the multicolored cloud, were corroborated by everyone I spoke with that was there. When telling me the story, each independently recalled these events and led me to believe these strange phenomena occurred.

The next morning, Tulshuk Lingpa again did the *trata melong* and had Hishey gaze into the mirror.

This time she saw Beyul, a beautiful place of natural wonder. Huge trees surrounded a field through which water flowed. Waterfalls cascaded through the thick jungle that covered the surrounding mountains, and the field was filled with huge white mushrooms.

The sky was clear over the slope leading to the pass.

Tulshuk Lingpa smiled.

“Today is the day,” he said. “Today is not like the other days. Today we must be especially careful.”

He chose among his disciples twelve he wanted to take. They wore heavy jackets and scarves wrapped round their heads. Tulshuk Lingpa brought the *pechas* needed to open the gate and those he'd need once they entered. Wrapped in cloth, he strapped the *pechas* to his back.

When they were leaving the cave, one of those being left behind said to Wangyal, who was amongst the twelve, 'Why don't you stay behind and let someone else go. You've already seen it.'

"That, I thought, was extremely unjust," Wangyal told me. "I told the fellow, 'That wouldn't be fair, it was only because of all of you that we turned back!'"

Tulshuk Lingpa led the twelve towards the snow slope that rose to the pass.

At the base of the final slope, they stopped on a large flat rock for a final meal of tea and *tsampa*, after which their food was finished. After this, they would have no food until they entered Beyul.

Tulshuk Lingpa chose three to go with him further: Hishey and Lama Tashi, both from Lahaul, and a Tibetan lama known as the Lachung Lama. "If we make it," he told those he left behind, "we'll signal."

The four started pushing their way up through the waist-deep, newly fallen snow towards the pass. Lama Tashi was the *umzay*, the head of rituals, at the Shrimoling monastery. In his late thirties, he was a mature man, solidly built, with years of experience of high mountain snow. He went first to break the trail. Tulshuk Lingpa came second, holding a page from a *pecha* and chanting aloud certain sacred syllables. Behind him was Hishey, and taking up the rear was the Lachung Lama.

From a distance, they looked like four little dots moving slowly up the vast white slope.