

CHAPTER FOUR

Ups and Downs Of Himal

"It's lovely, Kay," I exclaimed as Kay parked on the street outside the wrought iron gate that stretched across a gap in the red brick wall surrounding her home. Many of the houses I'd seen so far looked like they couldn't stand up to the elements much longer, but the dilapidated buildings along the busy streets we'd traveled were shops or public buildings. Private homes were well-kept secured behind walls of brick and iron on quiet tree-lined side streets like this one.

"I'll put the car inside and bring in your bag after we eat," Kay explained as she stepped out to lock the car. I got out and locked the passenger side, amazed at the tall poinsettia covered bushes that flanked the whitewashed building behind the gate.

We entered the front door and I stood for a moment in the foyer, appreciating the coolness of the high ceilinged room. Kay laid her purse on a narrow table beneath a four-foot oval mirror with leaves ornately carved in a frame of rich mahogany. It reflected the full length tapestry in blues, greens, and magentas that hung on the opposite wall. Kay's sandals made thudding sounds on the muted blue carpet runner as she led me into the living room.

The hardwood floors gleamed where polished grain of the narrow boards shown between the area rugs of cream and magenta. Piles of oversized cushions covered in azure blue and emerald green velour showed signs of lounging. The walls were of whitewashed brick hung with framed posters of lake and forest scenes. Potted philodendrons fringed with fragrant geraniums softened the corners.

"I'd forgotten what unique decorating ideas you have! The colors themselves cool me at least ten degrees," I remarked with envy. The greens and blues were a comfortable touch of my home in the land of ten thousand lakes, doubly appealing after the hours we'd spent viewing the dark reds of the city's brick and the vermilion of the powders on the shrines. Nepal's high altitude sun had warmed me and I felt relieved to be in this cool interior.

"The feeling of coolness is just an illusion. These brick walls keep a fairly constant temperature day and night. The shining cleanness creates the feeling. The credit goes to the wonderful household help here in Kathmandu," Kay confessed. "My housekeeper is meticulous. The furniture, or lack of it, comes from a tight budget." Her gaze followed mine as it swept the room and a wide smile spread across her ample mouth.

"I do have tables and chairs. Let's eat, then I'll show you to your room."

In the center of the kitchen a white rattan table with a glass top was surrounded by four matching chairs that were cushioned in a chintz print of bright yellow cabbage roses entwined with variegated green leaves.

I was speechless in admiration of Kay's home. When she laid napkins ringed in ornate silver filigree on the table I counted three and my thoughts went back to Paul.

"Why did Paul go after the buffalo herder?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Kay replied, opening the refrigerator to remove the salad and sandwiches she prepared earlier.

With a careful limp, I placed the blue and green plaid napkins beside pottery plates. My thoughts didn't stand still just because my mouth did.

Sometimes the simplest events take on an ominous tone in my vivid imagination if I'm not careful to consider all the parts. Here customs were strange and the language beyond my comprehension so I had the tendency to be suspicious. To me that was the most basic form of self-protection.

"Will he come here when..." I didn't quite know how to finish that question, not daring to speculate on what dangers he might encounter because of the chase. Better not go looking for trouble.

"Probably. We're not going to wait."

Kay put her hands on her hips in mock exasperation. "I don't know about you, but I'm hungry and I didn't sweat over a hot stove for nothing."

She put a plate of spiced apples on the table. "Come, let's not stand around and let this food get cold," she laughed, seating herself as she placed the plate of cold sandwiches beside the green glass bowl of chilled salad. She handed me wooden salad tongs and settled back to study my face.

"I want to know what you think of Kathmandu now that you've had my marvelous tour."

"I'm not sure," I answered slowly. "My thoughts are tangled up at the moment. The crowds, the poverty, the colorful people, they're compelling sights." I studied the amber tea as Kay poured it over the ice in my glass.

"The ornate carvings and all the shrines...I never knew there was so much vermilion as I saw splashed on the those deities."

"It's colorful all right," Kay reflected. Before her next thought was expressed, Paul walked in, his artificial indignation marked by the set of his shoulders and tug of his chin.

"Thanks for waiting," he teased. "Just like one pig waits for another, like Grandpa used to say. Don't get up, I'll help myself." He was at the table before I could swallow. Kay made no move to rise. She didn't interrupt her eating.

"Where did you go? Did you catch the man?" I asked, my eyes wide and questioning.

"No, Miss Burrows," he said, rather coldly and with unusual formality, I thought. He glanced from Kay to me and back, then returned to sweep his gaze over my Sherpani dress and necklace. A puzzling frown furrowed his

tanned forehead. "Why did you wear that?"

"It was my idea," Kay inserted before I could explain. "She looked less like a tourist. Anything wrong with that?"

"I guess not," he answered noncommittally. A shield closed over his eyes.

"When do we start our trek?" Kay asked.

"We leave for Lukla tomorrow, if Lohloh has everything ready," Paul answered between bites. He swallowed noticeably and sat back, suddenly fixing me with a concerned expression.

"Your ankle..." he said slowly, "...is it sore? Will you be able to walk for a few hours tomorrow?"

At the moment I didn't think so. I wouldn't want to try. Before I'd admit that to Paul I wanted to know what 'a few hours' of walking would be like. Maybe I could tough it through.

"I hope so," I said, haltingly. "But you'll have to tell me more about the trek."

"Ah, yes. Let's get a cool drink and talk about that," Paul volunteered. He seemed eager to change the subject.

Kay took bottled water from the refrigerator and led us out the back door of the kitchen. I wondered, when Paul carried his chair with him, if I should be bringing one for myself. There were two already on the wide screened veranda. Paul appeared to be familiar with Kay's house. I remembered he hadn't knocked when he came. I pondered the significance of that as I sat down.

"Are you ready?" Paul asked. The twinkle in his eye always warmed me when it unexpectedly appeared like a sunbeam peeking through a crack in a moving window shade. He placed the white rattan chair facing mine and just a little closer to Kay's than necessary, I thought. I was momentarily annoyed with myself for being disappointed he had not moved closer to me.

Kay settled back with a smile, her arms laying comfortably on the armrests of her rattan chair. I cradled my bottle of water in my hands, leaning forward with my wrists against my knees.

"We're going to walk to Namche," Paul said simply, lazily studying his water bottle.

"What about the trek?" I asked, impatiently.

When he held an outstretched palm up to halt my indignation, I understood his theatrics but they didn't please me. I disliked the way he baited me with every word. Why did I take him so seriously?

An edginess surfaced with the thought of having a guide who appeared sinister one moment and blithe the next. I forced myself to relax but I held his gaze coolly, waiting for a further explanation.

"That's it. A trek is a walk, a hike, an expedition. On the trails in the Himal, any walk is an expedition. The Sherpas daily walk the mountainous trails like we walk around the block. But for our sea level lungs the walk in high altitudes becomes a trial of endurance. That's what we're going to

do--endure a walk up and down the trails, cross rivers, and carry a pack.... For the eight going on this trek, Lohloh hired sixteen porters and a cook with three helpers."

"Sixteen," I echoed. "What for?"

"Everything has to be carried on somebody's back." Paul assured me.

"Sunny's yaks will carry the tents and dufflebags," Kay inserted.

"Sunny has yaks?" I questioned.

"The yaks belong to her family, so she'll share her wages."

"She looks so young," I remarked.

"Sherpa children herd animals as soon as they can walk."

Visions of the unruly water buffalo assailed me and I shifted my sore ankle self consciously. I knew yaks were quite different from buffalo and carried loads on the mountain trails. Still the animals worried me. I hoped Sunny could control them. I wanted to know more about the trail.

"The trail's usually wide enough for people to pass," Paul said, "but traffic's light and everybody's friendly." He paused, thoughtfully. I wondered if I'd distracted his original thoughts but he soon continued.

"We'll get sunburned every day and chilled to the bone every night. We'll bivouac in wide, flat places where our porters can get water. The trail is rocky and often narrow, but it won't be lonely."

"And the scenery is always magnificent," Kay added in a hushed, reverent tone.

Paul eyed me speculatively before he tipped his head back and let the water trickle slowly into his mouth.

I found myself staring at his action, distracted by the thought of his lips. He held himself motionless, watchful behind lidded eyes. His gaze was calm and deliberating. His fixed stare reminded me of a predatory animal stalking prey. My heartbeat skittered madly with a touch of apprehension and excitement.

As I squirmed uncomfortably in my armless chair I hoped the heat rising in my body didn't heighten the color of my cheeks.

Paul sat upright and placed the bottle on the floor beside his chair. "Kay tells me you're a hiker," he stated. "You should have no difficulty, at least on tomorrow's short hike." His head bent in reference to my ankle. "The trail to Namche will be tougher. We'll stay there a couple of days to climatize in the thirteen thousand foot altitude."

With that, he left, expressing the urgency to look after tomorrow's preparations.

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"Are you sure you feel well enough to walk?" the old man asked the young Sherpani, as he turned to her from his position at the window.

Tickpay straightened from the bunk and flexed her shoulders. She ran her palm along the side of her head, across her shoulder, and down her arm, reassured that her bruises were healing. Her frightened eyes pleaded for action.

"I'm sure. We can move faster that way. It's a long way and we must keep going. There is no time to spare. Uncle will be ready with a decoy in Namche."

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I woke early the next morning. I cleansed and bandaged my ankle, pleased with the way it was healing. My leg was still sore and I hoped that the walking I did later today wouldn't make it worse. Injuries less than this had been known to flare up into more serious problems but since there was no sign of infection, I had every intention of going on with business as usual. I considered myself an accomplished gymnast, an athlete whose sustained injuries were only minor inconveniences that healed more quickly with continued activity.

Kay chided me fondly at my arrogant remark about being a champion in college. "You only came in fifth, you little dynamo." She handed me a full water bottle. "Still you look quite fit to me."

I put the bottle into its pouch on the side of my backpack. We packed other items we might need before we unpacked our duffelbags. I tucked in a kerchief and extra pair of socks. Kay suggested carrying a hooded shirt for later in the day. The plane would be warm and stuffy so my blue tee shirt with the Hamm's grinning sky blue water stumbling bear was sufficient for the flight. My hiking boots were light and comfortable. I packed red deck shoes for lounging and silk-lined wool pajamas just in case the night time cold of higher altitudes was more penetrating than I imagined. Duffles held our sleeping bags and warm clothes. I understood the need for many porters.

My Swiss army knife, a compass, and lip cream that lay on the table found their way into the pockets of my favorite khaki colored safari shorts. I had chosen the garment because of its many pockets. Convenient loops stuck out to clip any tools I chose to carry. Kay wore similar shorts, but her pockets didn't bulge like mine.

"We'll put only essential personal items in our backpacks. They'll feel heavy enough in the high altitude," Kay said, as she instructed the taxi driver to load our luggage. At the airport Paul had the general camping equipment organized for the mountain porters and yaks.

Harry's stocky frame stood out among the Sherpas. I hadn't looked at him clearly in his shop when concerned with my injured ankle. Now I couldn't help but stare at him. A narrow brimmed cotton hat held his long hair close to his head. His beard was shaggy with light streaks. Beyond his forehead and eyes, hair covered every inch of his exposed skin. Short dark brown hairs coated his arms and the backs of his hands. Longer wiry strands of curly hair

crept up in the neck opening of his red cotton flannel shirt. Shaggy dark hair wildly covered his bulky legs from sock tops to the hems of his army green walking shorts. He appeared to be naturally endowed with his own insulating garment. How fitting was the name, Harry.

Paul's honey brown head was easy to see among the Sherpa's as he stood attentively by Lohloh, who was issuing directions to the porters. Paul motioned to me and introduced the Germans and a younger couple that were in our group.

Sunny hurried up to Paul and announced, "Yaks ready in Lukla." Her round face was pleasant and her sunny disposition seemed to radiate from her entire body. She smiled a happy nod of recognition in my direction and went on to mingle with the porters.

Paul guided me to the rear bench seat of the twin-engine plane, gesturing to the window on the left side. He seated me behind the wing to get an unobstructed view of Kathmandu valley after takeoff and a glimpse of Everest when we got above the clouds.

Mentally, I checked off the items I was carrying, both in my pockets and in my backpack, certain I had what was necessary for this "walk" to the village of Namche, at the crossroads of the Khumbu region. My lips pursed in a tight smile at the memory of Paul's description of our trek as I fastened my seatbelt, anxious to get underway.

The plane was a twin otter with nineteen seats, filling quickly with ticketed passengers. Our small group of trekkers was aboard with the cooks and a few of the porters. Other porters would join us in Lukla. They walked ten kilometers on the rugged trails as easily as I walked the ten blocks from my apartment to the park.

Everyone was settling down, the tallest vying for seats with the most leg room, Kay taking the aisle bench seat near me. Seats were not reserved. It was first come, first served. In the front seats, Lohloh rapidly exchanged clipped sentences with the cooks and porters, whose laughing retorts were laced with excitement to cover the apprehension that accompanied every flight over the rugged region to the trailhead.

Paul had yet to sit down, his hunched form focussed on checking crucial details with Lohloh and finally the pilot, his eyes flicking to the passengers, silently matching people to the limited seats. I stretched around to identify the other members of our group in the crowded plane. The Sherpas I danced with grinned at me and waved before taking their seats.

At some unseen signal, the door closed and with an unceremonious thud, locked in place for takeoff. Paul's hunched figure glided to the back and squeezed beside me, his long legs sharing the aisle space with Kay's.

I smiled broadly at my seatmates. My raised eyebrows had to substitute for the spoken words of excitement that couldn't be heard over the roar of the gasoline engines.

The outer surface of the window was scratched from hours of exposure to the elements, giving my view an occasional unwanted glint in the sharp morning sun. Below, the bluffs, benches and valleys were emphasized by the deep shadows that defined the precipitous terrain. I couldn't take my eyes away, reluctant to miss new vistas that kept coming into view under the slowly rising plane.

"Don't let your nose grow to that window," Paul mocked, leaning close to be heard over the roar of the twin propellers. His breath tickled my ear. The tingling ran through my senses with a pleasurable surge and I closed my eyes, briefly, to let the pleasure run its course. Then breathing deeply I tried to concentrate on the unique sights.

This was the flight to Lukla, the trekkers' gateway to the Everest region. It was the Lukla airstrip that Sir Edmund Hillary helped build to bring medical and building supplies to the Sherpas. Building the Lukla airstrip on this bench of land high on the side of the Dudh Kosi gorge was a daring feat.

"It's a grass strip, tilted about fifteen degrees from horizontal," Paul explained, his breath warm and moist against my cheek, "only two hundred yards long, aiming straight into the side of the valley wall."

I read that only experienced pilots landed there, and solely when weather conditions were more or less stable. I wished I could stabilize my emotions. I couldn't control my bodily response to Paul's closeness.

In the gradual ascent through a blanket of wispy clouds, I recalled reading the reactions of others who had landed on that short steep airstrip. An involuntary trembling stiffened me when I remembered Sir Edmund Hillary's wife and daughter died in a crash off-course some long-ago year on this route to a holiday trek of the Hillary family.

I shuddered and hardly noticed Paul's concerned glance and the subsequent shifting of his shoulders allowing me more room. He laid his arm along the back of my seat to ease his wide shoulders.

The sudden view of the Himalayas piqued my imagination the moment the plane broke through the clouds to reach its cruising altitude. Less than a hundred miles away Everest was not prominent among the jagged pinnacles.

Paul reminded me that the surrounding mountains were only a few thousand feet lower than Everest, shielding a spectacular view of the world's highest peak. It was not at all like Mount Rainier that towered more than eight thousand feet above surrounding foothills. I couldn't see any peak rising majestically above the others.

At my mouthed request for an identification of Mount Everest, Paul found it necessary to lean over and curl his arm around my shoulder. He pressed his temple against mine to line my vision with his pointing finger. I didn't immediately identify the correct peak, the closer ones appeared deceptively higher.

When at last I was certain of the upthrust granite Paul referred to, I

nodded affirmatively, and the action moved my cheek against his rugged jaw. It was a most pleasant sensation.

His movement was slight, caused only by the plane's irregular flight. His skin was warm and his scent wafted into my senses. He wasn't quick to stop pointing out the mountain. His jaw was strong and the firm touch made me feel, oh, so good.

"You've got the weather on your side," he spoke against my temple. He bent down to peer closer to the window for a wider view of the sky. His cheek returned to mine, pressing carefully to maintain a constant contact in the sway and dipping of the plane. The touch was intimate and not required for the interpretation of the scenery. His firm skin was smooth and exciting against my own. I accepted the touch as the caress it was, knowing I could refuse it, not wanting to. Warmth flooded up from my nethermost parts. I was nearly breathless, pretending to await an explanation that was sure to come.

"Often the peaks create their own snow clouds, obscuring them from view. Everest especially does that. Today, Sagarmatha stands out beautifully against the sky." I heard his words more through my jawbone than through my ears.

"Sagarmatha...?" I asked, turning slightly. The movement placed the corner of my mouth against his cheek. Everything about him took on a stillness which I intuitively considered his acceptance of an intimacy we both desired. The awareness of my desire was electric and I pulled back, as if recoiling from the spark. I couldn't let him know how much I enjoyed touching his sun hardened features. His effect on me was exciting but it scared me, too. I didn't feel much in control and I didn't like that.

Paul sent me a mocking glance and explained in a hard voice, "Sagarmatha is the Nepalese word for Mother of the Universe."

I felt his detachment at once with simultaneous relief and regret. Cool arrogance replaced his solicitous manner. I had withdrawn so abruptly he considered it rejection that brought on his brusque transformation. He placed his arm far back of my seat, indicating a sudden regret of the intimacy we had shared.

To cover my disordered thoughts I leaned into the window to get a sense of where the plane was heading. Very little of the front view was visible through this side window and all I could see was a valley wall straight ahead.

"We're heading into that mountain!" I straightened in alarm. Paul's left arm dropped from the seat down to my shoulders and his strong right hand clutched mine tightly as his mouth came close to my ear.

"It's O.K." His chin came against me and his deep toned voice soothed more than my fright.

I closed my eyes knowing that the plane was aimed in the right direction and the pilot would land on the grass of the stony mountain side. The chattering of the other passengers stopped, as if they held their breath in

anticipation of touchdown. I steeled myself for the landing and the inevitable bounces that felt like I was suddenly cantering on horseback.

Rolling up the steep grade slowed the plane quickly. When the plane rolled to a wide flat area, it turned and came to a stop. The feat the pilot just accomplished seemed monumental. I looked at Paul and found him intently studying me, a strange indescribable look in his eyes. I was so relieved to be safely on the ground, its meaning slipped past me. I let go of my breath with a gust of triumph.

"We landed safely," I announced, unnecessarily.

Paul's arm squeezed my shoulders in response and he patted my hand with intimate affection. I wondered what brought that on.

He flowed to the door of the plane before a single seat belt was released. Supervising and organizing were skills he demonstrated swiftly, with authority and ease.

I was last to leave the plane, scarcely stepping on the wobbly stairs as I fell into Paul's supporting hands. Chaos was everywhere while the baggage was pulled out and piled a safe distance from the plane against the bank where National Park police overlooked the scene.

Kay beckoned to me and we walked toward steep wooden stairs that led to an overview of the village of Lukla. I idly scanned the faces of the people along the fence enjoying the sea of pleasant foreign faces. My gaze was drawn to a swarthy faced man watching me with anticipation. When he caught my look of recognition, he turned and hurried away.

Apprehension turned to fear and I froze in my steps, my eyes riveted on him to verify his identity. Was he the man who had bumped me in the airport? Something about him seemed familiar. Too soon I lost sight of him in the crowd.

Kay, too, had seen someone that made her uneasy but she pulled me back toward Paul before I could question her. This time I was content to be unable to see over my tall companions. Huddled between them I almost felt secure.

Paul gave some parting information to Lohloh and led us across the airstrip. We went up and over the fence on a series of steps, reminding me of an old English nursery rhyme where the old woman frantically searched for someone to get her animal to cross the stile so she could get home that night. I wanted to stop and survey the village from the topmost step but as I looked around I felt suddenly vulnerable and scurried down the other side to the protection of my friends.

Through a garden and over a stream, we arrived at a narrow street lined with stone houses. A woman bent over a shallow pan washing clothes, dumping the water into a nearby ditch where it dribbled into the rows of vegetables. On the roof above her a television antenna poked into the sky with a sleek arrogance, leaning slightly as if to leer at the flapping clothes on the

balcony across a narrow passage that masqueraded as a street.

My eyes took a moment to adjust to the gloom inside the room we entered. When I climbed two flights of stairs in the Lukla Inn, I remembered the stairs at the Sherpa dance but here I entered a large room with many windows on three sides. We sat at benches around the perimeter of the room and ate noodle soup reconstituted from a package marked 'Product of China.'

"Have another bowl," Paul urged. "It will give you walking energy."

That was a good idea. I was hungrier than I thought. It provided the liquid, as well as carbohydrates, needed for the exertion of the strenuous walk ahead.

When I finished, I looked over the village roofs and watched our plane depart for Kathmandu down the slanted airstrip with returning trekkers.

I listened while Kay chatted amiably with the owner of the Inn. I admired the painted scrolls on the narrow strips of wall between the many windows.

"Those are tankas," the owner said, "my brother who is in the monastery painted them for me." They were brilliantly colored primitives of mountain peaks, forests, and yaks with cheeky little men cavorting around them.

The room was arranged for viewing the surrounding terrain. On the downslope side, I could see corrugated metal roofs of other buildings. Off to the left the lower end of the slanted air strip disappeared behind buildings. A few hundred yards down, the scene shifted suddenly to clear sky, indicating the edge of the promitory on which the village of Lukla perched. Beyond the roofs to the right were distant mountainsides, all so vivid and breathtaking in my sight.

On the uphill side beyond several rows of small houses, a school building was easily identified by the variety of youngsters playing around it. Several children ran on paths away from the building, home to have lunch, I was told.

The altitude at Lukla is over nine thousand feet and adjusting slowly is necessary to prevent headaches or more serious difficulties later on. Today's short hike would take us down to a lower elevation where we would rest overnight and adjust to the altitude. Paul allowed a brief rest after lunch and then we shouldered our packs and began the trek.

We started slowly on a narrow trail that went downward, opening to a panorama spread out on the terraced moraine below. I could see the trail winding out far ahead where porters and cooks were moving surefootedly in single file. They would prepare the night's encampment.

Below the trail stone walls outlined irregular shaped fields that followed the lines of the slope. Terraces fell one after another down the slope, forming flat surfaces to hold the moisture as well as the soil on the precarious mountain side. It was a graphic study in land management developed over ages of cultivation by patient people.

We began climbing over jutting rocks and threading our way between

stubborn bushes clinging to the stony slope. With each step I looked forward to an easier gradient but very few steps were on the level. Where the trail was wide I could enjoy the scenery but when the trail narrowed between a precipitous drop and a steep wall of rock, I had to concentrate on where to place each step. The deep chasm didn't frighten me but the vision of my body hurdling over the stones did.

I stubbed my toe on a protruding rock in the path. Pain stabbed my ankle and I was jolted out of imagining unnecessary harm. After all, tourists didn't fall off the trail with any regularity.

Paul took my arm and pulled me against the hillside. His touch was curiously reassuring.

"Hold still against the rock," he ordered, "zums are coming."

Before I could ask the obvious question, cattle lumbered toward us. The black and white bodies were untidy and smaller than dairy Holsteins, dotting farmlands I was familiar with. Sharp straight horns bobbed close to my belly and I made myself six inches thinner as I pressed against the hillside, slithering in search of a foothold a few inches above the trail.

Large luminous eyes watched as they passed me, with a knowing contentment about their destination and only a slight passing interest in the human creature plastered against the hillside. I watched as they went lazily on their way, swishing their shaggy long tails. Paul chuckled at my observations.

"Those twenty-four inch tails are highly prized by trekkers as fly swatters," he said.

"My grandmother would hate that. She would skin it and use that extension of the spine as the base for a delicious pot of soup," I said, remembering some of the best beef soups I ever tasted were at my grandmother's table.

Even so I was amazed at seeing the animals using the same trail as we were. More amazing than the animals themselves was the miniature Sherpa that drove them. The child was shorter than the animals, yet he moved among them pounding on their sides and calling to them with short sharp words. A man followed with measured footsteps that resembled the animals' lumbering gait, but with a surreptitious look of pride and satisfaction in the child's ability. I wondered if Sunny was working with yaks at a similar age. I watched the animals' backsides disappearing up and down the trail over which we recently came.

"Those are zums?" I asked when their passing dust had settled and I could stand on the trail once more.

"They're a cross between a tough hairy Himalayan female yak and Indian cattle," Paul explained, his hand still resting lightly around my waist.

"They can carry heavy loads in this altitude and eventually they are made into tasty stew," he grinned, remembering my remark about grandmother's soup.

I looked at the receding animals. Their horns were sharp and curved slightly forward, bobbing from side to side in unison with their shoulder humps as they ambled along.

I shifted my backpack, beginning to feel my personal items weighing more heavily than they did when I first lifted them on my back. My ankle was beginning to throb. I clenched my teeth and I hurried on not wanting Paul to see the longing with which I viewed the beasts of burden.

He chuckled as if he understood when he strode past me, swiftly catching and passing the others on the trail. He moved among us often and it was the pattern he established throughout the trek.

I straightened up. Paul wasn't going to see me faltering. I might go slowly but I didn't have to show the toll this unusual exercise was taking on my heaving lungs and throbbing ankle.

Sunny overtook us with four plodding yaks. Long black shaggy hair on their sides hung to their knees. I could see no lead ropes or any other method of command.

"They don't look much different than zums," I said.

Kay agreed, "True, just the direction of the horns are different. Sunny tells me zums can't tolerate higher elevations. Yaks are much more durable and reliable.

Moving steadily onward, I soon developed a rhythm that preserved some air in my lungs for the next labored breath.

A snow covered peak appeared starkly framed by overhanging pine branches as the trail wound around the mountain. It was a breath taking view I wanted to hold forever, but we moved steadily on.

"Nupta is only eighteen thousand feet high, Tina." Paul reminded me, as if it wasn't worth looking at.

"But that's four thousand feet higher than any mountain in the United States," I countered. I could visualize four thousand feet when it laid flat along a highway because one could often see that far ahead but when I tried to stand that distance on end and compare mountains, I failed.

An hour of brisk walking brought us to a little stream with a grove of tall trees hovering over parched earth, dotted with remains of many cooking fires. The cooks had tea set up on a blanket.

I was heartened we could stop at last. I had to admit I was not as fit as I thought I was, for my feet were hot and my breath came in short gasps.

Every muscle in my body ached and I heard a moan--it must have been my own because Paul sent a sharp concerned look at me. I grinned with immense satisfaction and dropped to the ground in relief.

The next thing I knew, Paul settled down beside me with two cups of hot tea. He handed one to Kay and one to me.

"Drink that and lie back and relax," he demanded, "I'm going to have a look at that ankle."