

the first solar lances pierced the shadows of Mount Mustag. A tribal cohort from the ancient Kunlun Mountains, the region known today as the Caucasus, arrived upon this soil after a three-thousand-year odyssey. Their ancestral legends whispered of a dreamland, a New Kunlun. Though this terrain differed vastly from the cradle of their forefathers, they cast down their roots here.

From the precipice, the eagle observed the newcomers. It knew that the plateau was a crucible of inevitable conflict; the ancient Qiang people, nomadic and fierce, already thrived here. Yet, An did not depart. It wheeled above Mount Mustag, inscribing a mysterious, repetitive circle—a perfect symbol “O”—against the firmament.

Beneath the azure vault, the eagle, a creature of blinding white plumage, stood stark against the frost-rimed peaks. From this dizzying height, it unleashed a cry that resonated through the valley—a primal shriek seemingly torn from the mountain’s molten core. The vocalisation was potent and unambiguous, traversing the vast expanses with terrifying speed. It was a scream both eerie and magnificent, embodying a profound liberation and an untamed wilderness unique to these isolated realms. The piercing lament echoed unhindered, a testament to the eagle’s dominion over its rugged kingdom.



The tribal shaman gazed upward, his eyes boring into the solar brilliance to fixate on the eagle tracing its graceful geometry overhead. In a soft, reverent chant, he uttered a single syllable: *An*.

Thus, the tribe anointed the eagle as their guardian deity. To honour this celestial patron, the shaman commanded a youth and a maiden to mimic the bird's flight. For one hundred days, through storm and sun, they walked in circles, chanting the syllable "O". At the rite's conclusion, the boy cried out, "Odam", and the girl replied, "Ogis". From that moment, in the tapestry of their language, *Odam* came to signify man, and *Ogis*, woman.

This tribe preserves a legend intricately woven with the symbol "O". Their ancestors christened the universe "Olarm", the heavens "Osmon", and the sunrise "Ouhorz". The raiment of both sexes was crowned with hats boasting circular tops, mirroring that enigmatic "O". But why did the ancients bequeath this cipher to their descendants? What does "O" represent? Is it the sun, a planet, the maw of a black hole, or the eternal cycle of life?

The clan held that the "O" symbol contained immense potency, a key to unlocking ancestral wisdom. They posited that "O" was a cartographic guide to a locus of profound power and enlightenment, spurring them ever onward in their quest for gnosis. They bequeathed the tale of their migration and their discoveries to the unborn, ensuring the power of the "O" would resonate eternally within their people.

Three hundred kilometres distant from Mount Mustag, another drama unfolded. The Diqiang, a tribal group that had migrated from the far east over two millennia prior, had erected a stone citadel on the plateau. Physically robust and acclimated to the thin air above three thousand metres, the Diqiang spoke an ancient tongue akin to Old Chinese and Tibetan.

Six millennia ago, a branch of the illustrious Yanhuang tribe, identifying as the Diqiang, journeyed westward from the heart of China. They settled on the Pamir, a landscape as vast and desolate as their nomadic souls. These wanderers held a unique reverence for the sheep, their chosen totem—a choice deeply rooted in their identity.

In their script, the characters for *Qiang*(羌) and *Sheep*(羊) were inextricably intertwined, a testament to the bond between their pastoral existence and their spirit. *Beauty*(美) was not merely an aesthetic concept; it was a *modus vivendi*, a state of being that echoed in every facet of their lives.

Legend whispered that their ancestors once danced with dragons, gleaming secrets from those majestic beasts. This draconian legacy became the spine of the Diqiang identity, embodying a power passed down through aeons. When they finally rested on the Pamir Plateau, they built homes in harmony with the stone and soil, maintaining their reverence for both sheep and dragon. To the Diqiang, these were not mere totems, but guardians of history and keepers of the faith. They were a people who found beauty in simplicity, power in tradition, and hope in the vastness of the void.

The valiant Diqiang observed a matriarchal rhythm. In this society, women were the pillars of strength. Shamans guided pregnant women to a sacred platform known as *Da*(鼈)—depicting two dragons intertwined. The platform featured slides connecting to a carved dragon's head. Here, life was brought forth; women gave birth on the slides, and the infants entered the world through the dragon's mouth. Thus, the children were recognised as the offspring of *Da*, and so *Dada* came to mean father.

Their lore spoke of a primordial deluge. When waters swallowed the earth, and life teetered on the brink of extinction, the great gods dispatched dragons to bridge the abyss with their very bodies, allowing humanity to flee. In gratitude, the Diqiang revered the dragon as their saviour.

One day, Diqiang shamans observed an eagle circling the heavens. Interpreting it as a divine omen, they dispatched a vanguard to investigate. They encountered the weary travelers from the west, and after a lightning-fast skirmish, successfully integrated them into the Diqiang fold. Over time, these tribes merged and multiplied, branching into various ethnic groups, with those remaining on the plateau forming the Sarikoli.



Yak, the indomitable chieftain of the Diqiang, was a warrior of renown. Seeking to prove his mettle, he ventured into the icy heights of Mustag for a hunt. Yet, fate is capricious. Deep within the glacial silence, Yak encountered a feral snow bear. A titanic struggle ensued; claws savaged Yak and fell unconscious upon the slopes.

As his lifeblood stained the snow, the majestic eagle An descended from the firmament. Grasping Yak in powerful talons, An bore him to a secret cave perched on the peak of Mustag—a sanctuary accessible only to the chosen. Etched upon the cave walls were petroglyphs of hunting and war, centred around the mysterious shape of “O”.

The eagle spoke to Yak, revealing that the snow-capped peak was once a vibrant paradise. It told of Rustam, a brave soul who sought to win his beloved by retrieving a fabled flower from the summit. Rustam endured treacherous cliffs and storms for nine days. Upon reaching the peak, he plucked a red and a white bloom while the guardian fairy slept. Halfway down the mountain, the fairy awoke. She sent her eagle and bear servants to retrieve the treasures, but Rustam fought them off. Moved by his ferocity and love, the fairy allowed him to keep the flowers, but her mercy angered the gods.

Rustam, unable to save the fairy from divine wrath, begged for

passage. She blessed his love, and for this transgression, she was cursed with immortality, condemned to eternal suffering on the summit. Her tears became the rivers that irrigated the land below; her hair, whitened by sorrow, froze into the perpetual snows. Only true love and harmony could break this curse.

The eagle revealed to Yak that the symbol “O” was a celestial gateway, accessed by time-travellers of antiquity. Those who beheld these glyphs were granted the gift of prophecy—the ability to peer into the past and future whenever the eagle appeared.

Yak awoke from the abyss of unconsciousness to find himself in a felt tent, his wounds miraculously knit together. As the sun dipped below the horizon, he stepped outside. He beheld a vision: a Diqiang warrior leading a horse bearing a beautiful Aryan woman, a recent addition to their tribe. They were radiant with love, outshining the sunset.

The Aryans believed love was distilled from the sun’s warmth. The Diqiang, conversely, held that love was born of the bonfire’s nocturnal glow. At that moment, the haunting melody of a wolf-hide harp drifted on the wind, as if the universe itself were witnessing the birth of this composite tribe.



Moved by the ethereal melody, Yak began to dance, his movements as fluid as an eagle riding the thermals. Soon, the tribe encircled him, swaying and spinning. The Aryans wove their own steps into the rhythm, creating the Eagle Dance—a celebration of union.

In time, the Diqiang and Aryans fused into the Sarikoli people. They established an annual Eagle Dance Festival to celebrate the earth's rejuvenation—the thaw, the sprouting grass, the birthing of livestock—and to channel the divine power of prophecy.

With the arrival of the following spring, the tribe welcomed the cries of the newborn—a generation of warriors and maidens who would inherit the divine gifts and guard the flourishing land.

The Sarikoli, insulated by walls of ice, preserved a language and culture sealed in time. Meanwhile, another group migrated westward, becoming the nomadic Wakhan. As messengers between East and West, their tongue absorbed the lilt of ancient Persian and the rhythms of Sanskrit.

The Wakhan and Sarikoli languages act as bridges across the abyss of time, connecting Eastern and Western civilisations. Their grammars and lexicons are tapestries woven from the threads of the Silk Road—Scythian, Tokharian, Sogdian, Prakrit, Old Chinese, and Hun.

Following Alexander the Great's conquests, the Greco-Bactrian kingdom settled near the Wakhan Corridor. Simultaneously, the Han Empire reached the borders of modern Tajikistan. Later, the Yuezhi's migration and Zhang Qian's journeys opened the Silk Roads, ushering in an era of unprecedented exchange. Yet, the secrets of Wakhan and Sarikoli remain largely undeciphered, challenging scholars to piece together this lost chapter of human history.

The temporal wheel turns to the present.

John Wang, a forty-two-year-old linguist with a voracious appetite for antiquity, found himself on a pilgrimage to Xinjiang, China. Dedicated to decoding the whispers of fallen civilisations, he shunned the aeroplane for the romance of the rails.

The iron horse clattered and squeaked as it chugged southward from Turpan, cutting through the vast Taklimakan Desert. John's heart

pounded in rhythm with the wheels as he surveyed the unyielding desolation. He envisioned the ancients who had dared to traverse this forbidding expanse. During his journey, the language barrier dissolved into smiles and gestures as he engaged with the locals, eager to absorb the living history of the region.

第三章 慕士塔格峰的雄鹰

在古老的帕米尔高原上，巍然屹立着一座雄伟的巅峰——慕士塔格峰。在当地语言中，“慕士塔格”意为“冰山之父”，这一称谓不仅勾勒出它那冷峻的自然轮廓，更赋予了它一种神圣不可侵犯的庄严。在世界名山之中，纵有喜马拉雅之壮阔、冈仁波齐之神圣，慕士塔格峰依然在帕米尔的寂静中独树一帜，守护着那些深藏于冰川之下的神秘传说。

在这座巅峰之上，栖息着一只名为“安”（An）的古老雄鹰。它是高原的守望者，拥有洞察古今的智慧。无人知晓它已存在了多久，但它无疑亲眼见证了地球的沧海桑田与人类文明的瞬息万变。它那双如历史记录者般的眼睛，默默注视着高原上那变幻莫测的流沙与岁月。

时光拨回到一万年前的一个清晨，当第一缕阳光刺破晨曦，照亮了慕士塔格峰。一支来自古昆仑山脉（即今日的高加索地区）的部族，在历经了三千年的漫长迁徙后，终于踏上了这片土地。根据祖辈流传的传说，他们找到了梦寐以求的家园：新昆仑山。尽管这里的景象与祖先的故土大相径庭，他们仍决定在此繁衍生息。

雄鹰“安”在峭壁上静静地观望着这群远道而来的人。它预见到，冲突与战争在这片高原上在所难免，因为骁勇善战的游牧民族——古羌人，早已在此扎根。然而，雄鹰并未离去，它在慕士塔格峰上空盘旋，似乎在苍穹之中描绘着一个神秘的圆圈——一个完美的符号“O”。

在蔚蓝如洗的天幕下，这只通体洁白的雄鹰在霜雪皑皑的山色衬托下显得分外夺目。它从云端发出一声长鸣，那声音在山谷间激荡，仿佛从大山深处的熔岩核心迸发出的原始呐喊。鹰唳苍劲而清晰，瞬间穿透了广袤的荒野。那叫声既凄厉又壮美，蕴含着一种唯

有在如此孤绝之境才能领略的自由与狂野。这穿云裂石的鸣叫在群山万壑间回响，宣告着雄鹰对其严酷领地的绝对统治。

部族的萨满以敏锐的目光注视着这一异象。他迎着刺眼的日光仰望，紧紧追随着在那苍穹上空优雅盘旋的雄鹰。他用轻柔而虔诚的语调，吟诵出了一个名字：An。

于是，部族相信这只雄鹰便是他们的守护神。为了表达敬意，萨满命令一对少男少女模仿雄鹰在空中的飞行姿态。无论风雨晴雪，他们连续一百天环绕而行，口中不断呼唤着“O”这个音节。最终，男孩大喊一声：“奥达木”（Odam），女孩回应道：“奥吉丝”（Ogis）。从此，在他们的语言中，“奥达木”代表男性，而“奥吉丝”则代表女性，代代相传。

这个部族流传着一个与符号“O”紧密相连的古老传说。他们的先祖将宇宙命名为“Olarm”，将天空称为“Osmon”，将日出唤作“Ouhorz”。无论男女，他们的帽顶都饰以圆形的图案，象征着那个神秘的“O”。然而，先祖为何要将这一符号遗赠给后人？

“O”究竟代表着什么？是太阳、星体、黑洞，还是生生不息的生命轮回？

族人们坚信，“O”符号蕴含着巨大的力量，是开启祖先智慧的钥匙。他们认为“O”是一张指引他们前往感悟与启蒙之地的地图，激励着他们不断追求知识。他们将迁徙的故事与发现的秘密传给子孙，确保“O”的力量永远铭刻在民族的记忆中。

在距离慕士塔格峰三百多公里外，生活着另一支名为“氐羌”的部族。他们在两千多年前从遥远的东方迁徙至此，在帕米尔高原上筑起了一座石头城。氐羌人身形魁梧，能在海拔三千多米的高原上顽强生存。他们所操的古老语言，与古汉语和藏语有着千丝万缕的联系。

约六千年前，华夏炎黄部族的一个分支——氐羌，从中国腹地一路西迁，寻找新的栖身之所。他们定居在辽阔的帕米尔，那里如他们游牧的心灵一样苍茫而荒凉。这些流浪者对羊有着独特的崇

拜，将其奉为图腾，这一抉择深深根植于他们的身份与文化之中。

在他们的文字中，“羌”与“羊”二字密不可分，印证了牧羊生活与民族认同的血肉联系。对于他们而言，“美”不仅是一个概念，更是一种生活方式，一种回荡在生命每一个角落的存在状态。

传说他们的先祖曾与龙共舞，从这些神圣的生物身上领悟了自然的奥秘。龙的血脉成为氐羌身份的核心，承载着跨越岁月的力量与智慧。当氐羌人在帕米尔高原定居后，他们依山就势而居，保持着对羊与龙的深切敬畏。在氐羌人的心中，羊与龙不仅是图腾，更是历史的守望者、文化的传承者和信仰的象征。这是一个在简约中发现美、在传统中汲取力量、在荒原中寄托希望的民族。



骁勇的氐羌人遵循着古老而神秘的母系社会习俗。在这个部族中，女性是力量的象征。萨满会引领孕妇前往名为“𪛗”（Da，意为双龙交尾）的祭坛。这个祭坛由两个滑道组成，连接着雕刻精美的龙首。孕妇在滑道上分娩，孩子顺着滑道从龙口中滑出，以此宣告降临人世。因此，这些孩子被视为“𪛗”之子，而“达达”（Dada）也因此成为父亲的代称。

他们的传说中提到了一场上古洪荒。据说当洪水淹没大地、生

命几近灭绝之时，伟大的神灵派遣巨龙拯救苍生。巨龙用身体搭起桥梁，让人们得以逃生。为了报答救命之恩，氏羌人将龙视为守护神和图腾。

一日，氏羌的萨满观测到一只雄鹰在空中盘旋，认定这是神启，遂派遣勇士前往探寻。他们遇到了一支长途跋涉而来的部族，在经历了一场迅疾的交锋后，将其吸纳进氏羌部族。随着岁月的流逝，这两个部族逐渐融合、繁衍，形成了帕米尔高原上的多个族群，其中留在高原上的便演变成了萨里库尔人（色勒库人）。

氏羌的首领雅克（Yak）是一位以英勇著称的无畏战士。某日，他决定前往慕士塔格的冰峰狩猎，以彰显自己的勇气。然而命运莫测，在冰山深处，雅克遭遇了一只凶猛的雪熊。经过一番惨烈的搏斗，他被利爪重创，昏迷在慕士塔格的斜坡上。

就在生命垂危之际，雄鹰“安”从天而降，用有力的利爪抓起他，飞向慕士塔格顶峰一处神秘的山洞。那里是人类罕至的秘境，唯有被雄鹰选中的人方能进入。洞穴的岩壁上刻满了古老的岩画，描绘着狩猎、采集与战争的场景，而画面中心正是那个神秘的“O”形符号。



雄鹰告诉雅克，慕士塔格的雪峰曾是一片生机盎然的乐土。它讲述了勇士鲁斯塔姆的故事：为了赢得心爱姑娘的芳心，鲁斯塔姆不惧艰险攀登巅峰，去采摘那朵只在山顶绽放的传说之花。

鲁斯塔姆在悬崖峭壁与狂风暴雨中搏斗了九天九夜。当他终于抵达顶峰时，发现守护花朵的仙女正在一旁沉睡。他迅速摘下一朵红花和一朵白花，匆匆下山。行至半途，仙女惊醒，发现花朵被盗，遂派出手下的雄鹰与雪熊追击。鲁斯塔姆英勇还击，仙女感其赤诚与爱意，默许他带走花朵。然而，此举触怒了众神。

鲁斯塔姆深知自己无法从神罚中救出仙女，泪流满面地乞求宽恕。仙女被他的深情所动，祝福了他们的爱情。但也因此，她遭受了更严酷的诅咒——获得永生，却被锁在巅峰永远受苦。她悲伤的泪水化作了灌溉大地的河流，她哀愁的白发凝结成了永不消融的积雪。唯有真挚的爱与和谐的生活，方能打破这道诅咒。

雄鹰启示雅克，这个“O”符号是一道通往上苍的门户，曾由远古时代的穿越者所开启。凡目睹这些岩画的人，都将被赋予一种奇妙的力量：每当雄鹰出现，他们便能预知未来，洞察过去。这份神赐的天赋代代相传，却也随岁月的流逝而逐渐淡去。

听完雄鹰的述说，雅克猛然从昏迷中惊醒，发现自己躺在毡房内，伤口已奇迹般愈合。夕阳西下，他伫立在帐外沉思。恍惚间，一幅画面浮现眼前：一位氐羌勇士牵着马，马上坐着一位刚刚加入部族的优美雅利安女性。两人情深义重，他们的幸福比晚霞还要灿烂。

雅利安人相信爱源于太阳的温暖，而这种热量赋予了人们爱的力量；氐羌人则认为爱诞生于篝火的光芒。当夜色中篝火熊熊燃起时，爱才真正绽放。那一刻，狼皮琴悠扬的旋律随风飘荡，仿佛整个宇宙都在见证这个新融合部族的诞生。

在迷人的乐声感召下，雅克情不自禁地起舞，动作如雄鹰展翅般轻盈优雅。族人们也纷纷加入，围成一个圆圈，随着节奏旋转摆动。雅利安人将他们的舞步融入其中，创造出了独特的“鹰舞”，

以此庆祝部族的联合。

随着时间推移，氐羌人与雅利安人融合成为新的塔吉克萨里库尔（色勒库）民族。他们每年都会举办鹰舞节，庆祝大地回春——冰雪消融、草木萌发、羔羊降生。这一节日也成了他们沟通神力、预见未来的时刻。

次年春天，部族迎来了新生儿的第一声啼哭。新一代的勇士与少女诞生了，他们将继承先祖的神力，守护这片土地与繁荣的人民。

萨里库尔人（也称色勒库人）由于受到雪山的天然屏障保护，其语言与文化在数千年来未曾发生巨变。与此同时，另一支族群向西迁徙，成为游牧的瓦罕人。作为穿梭东西方的使者，他们的语言受到了西方古波斯语的影响，亦留有印度梵语的印记。

瓦罕语与萨里库尔语，深藏于各自的文化遗产之中，承载着早于现代语言的故事。这些语言作为东西方文明的桥梁，勾勒出人类共有历史的脉络。

这两门语言同源而生，其词汇与语法犹如一幅由丝绸之路编织而成的挂毯，交织着塞种语、吐火罗语、粟特语、普拉克利特语、古汉语及匈奴语等多种语言的丝线。

随着亚历山大大帝的东征，他的希腊·巴克特里亚王国在瓦罕走廊的阴影下扎根。与此同时，大汉帝国的疆域延伸至今日塔吉克斯坦与阿富汗的边境，萨里库尔人（色勒库）便在此安家。

几个世纪后，随着月氏人从中国甘肃地区迁徙并建立贵霜帝国，加之张骞出使西域，正式开启了中西贸易。古丝绸之路诞生，随之而来的是一个文化交流与互鉴的新时代。然而，时至今日，瓦罕语与萨里库尔语的许多秘密仍未被完全揭开。这些语言依然难以被简单归类，挑战着语言学界的既有定义。学者仍在拼凑这些语言的碎片，渴望解锁古老的谜团，照亮那段散佚的人类历史。

时光流转回今日。

一位名为 John Wang 的年轻语言学家踏上了前往中国新疆的旅

程。现年四十二岁的他，对古代历史与语言怀有极高的热诚，致力于解读古代文明留下的讯息。为了更真实地感受这片土地，他放弃了快捷的飞行，选择了缓慢而充满诗意的铁路线，沿着古老的丝绸之路缓缓前行。

火车从吐鲁番向南轰鸣而去，穿过广袤无垠的塔克拉玛干沙漠，发出咣当咣当的节奏声。John 望着窗外那永恒的荒凉，心潮澎湃。他想象着古代旅人在跨越这片禁忌之地时所面临的重重挑战。旅途中，John 热切地观察并与当地人交流，从他们的日常谈话中学习词汇。随着笑容、手势与文化热忱的交融，语言的藩篱悄然瓦解。



Chapter 4 Kashgar

Kashgar, a city whose name echoes through the corridors of history, stood for millennia as a vital artery of the ancient Silk Road. It was the threshold of the Middle Kingdom—the first significant sanctuary for weary travellers emerging from the rugged terrains of Persia, India, Central Asia, and Arabia. Here, the world's cultures did not merely meet; they collided and fused, creating a vibrant tapestry woven with the threads of diverse commerce and the hum of bustling bazaars.



The ancient city of Kashgar is a sensory symphony, permeated by the tantalizing aroma of *kawap* smoke drifting through the narrow alleys. The scent of *ziran*(cumin) dominates the air, a sharp and earthy herald of the feast to come. As the charcoal flames lick the succulent, fresh mutton, the melting juices of onions trickle down, glazing each

morsel in a shimmering coat of flavor. In the local Uyghur tongue, these kebabs are known as *kawap*—barbecue in its most primal, perfected form. John found he could effortlessly dispatch twenty such skewers in a single sitting, cut by the crisp acidity of pickled cucumbers and tomatoes.

The variety of *kawap* here is staggering, a testament to a culture that can transform any meat offering into a masterpiece: *Bilek*(fish), *tuhu*(chicken), *basca*(pigeon), and even *tuhum*(egg). To John, this was more than mere sustenance; it was a preservation of the ancient *Dao* of cooking. Unlike the sterile, controlled blue flames of a modern gas stove, the charcoal fire dances to the whims of the wind. The art of the barbecue relies on a silent dialogue between the burning embers and the breath of the atmosphere. It embodies the Chinese philosophy of “to follow the naturalness of nature”. As humans, we are but threads in the fabric of the environment, sustained by the earth’s bounty—this is the true *Dao* of life.

John moved through the city with an open heart, greeting the locals with the warmth of a long-lost relative, calling the maidens *Singlim*(Sister) and the elders *Aka*(Brother). In this vibrant confluence of history and hospitality, he felt an unexpected sense of belonging.

One lazy afternoon, John sought the sanctuary of an ancient teahouse. He sat beneath the sprawling canopy of a courtyard tree, savouring the ritual of tea. His table was a mosaic of local life: soft, oven-fresh naan, *ketek*(yoghurt shaved ice), translucent grapes, sun-ripened watermelon, and golden samosas. The afternoon sun cast a gilded radiance over the courtyard, bathing the patrons in a warm, inviting glow. John was deeply immersed in his volume of *Ancient Myths* when a soft, melodic voice broke his reverie.

Looking up, he saw a woman whose smile seemed to rival the brilliance of the sun itself.

“Hello.” she said, extending a hand with grace. “My name is Amyna. I own this teahouse. I’ve noticed you here quite often, lost in that fascinating book. May I join you?”



Taken aback by the sudden grace of her presence, John recovered his composure with a smile. “Of course. I’m John. This is perhaps the finest place I’ve found to lose oneself in a story.”

As Amyna sat, her gaze lingered on the book. “I studied mythology at university,” she remarked. “Seeing that cover brings back a flood of memories.”

John’s interest was piqued. “Truly? Where did you study?”

“Xinjiang University,” she replied. “I specialized in Central Asian mythology, though I spent a great deal of time wandering through the legends of China and Persia as well.”

John’s eyes widened with professional respect. “That is a vast and daunting landscape of study.”

Amyna nodded. “An adventure, really. It has always fascinated me how different cultures, separated by thousands of miles, can birth such unique yet echoing legends.”

The afternoon dissolved into a deep conversation that spanned John’s travels across the Middle Kingdom to Amyna’s academic journeys abroad. They found a shared soul in their mutual love for the world’s hidden traditions. As twilight descended, the streets of Kashgar transformed. Brightly lit lanterns flickered to life, and the city hummed