



The Silk Road
Kadrey, Richard

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About Kadrey:

Richard Kadrey is a novelist, freelance writer, and photographer based in San Francisco. Kadrey's first novel, *Metrophage*, was published in hardcover in 1988 by Victor Gollancz Ltd., and went on to various other American and foreign printings in paperback. Mac Tonnies' *Cyberpunk/Postmodern Book Reviews* calls *Metrophage* "one of the quintessential 1980s cyberpunk novels," going on to describe "a gritty acid-trip through an ultraviolent L.A. where nothing is what it seems... . Alongside novels such as [William Gibson's] *Neuromancer* and Lewis Shiner's debut novel *Frontera*, *Metrophage* helped establish the cyberpunk aesthetic: relentless, paranoid and playfully cynical." Kadrey's second novel, *Kamikaze L'Amour*, is described by the same source as "mesmerizing... a surreal (and distinctly Ballardian) account of synesthesia and mutant desire set in the jungle-choked ruins of L.A." Kadrey's short story *Carbon Copy: Meet the First Human Clone* was filmed as *After Amy*. The publisher website, Amazon booksellers, and other sources list a July 15, 2007 publication date for Kadrey's next book, *Butcher Bird: A Novel Of The Dominion* (Night Shade Books). Other works include collaborative graphic novels and over 50 published short stories. His non-fiction books as a writer and/or editor include *The Catalog of Tomorrow* (Que/TechTV Publishing, 2002), *From Myst to Riven* (Hyperion, 1997), *The Covert Culture Sourcebook* and its sequel (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1993 and 1994); Kadrey also hosted a live interview show on Hotwired in the 1990s called *Covert Culture*. He was an editor at print magazines *Shift* and *Future Sex*, and at online magazines *Signum* and *Stim*. He has published articles about art, culture and technology in publications including *Wired*, *Omni*, *Mondo 2000*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *SF Weekly*, *Ear*, *Artforum*, *ArtByte*, *Bookforum*, *World Art*, *Whole Earth Review*, *Reflex*, *Science Fiction Eye*, and *Interzone*. Source: Wikipedia

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While it's not technically illegal to visit the planet Taklamakan, it's also not possible to get there by any ordinary route. This is because on the surface are the Siren Stones, which might be natural formations. Or they might not.

The Siren Stones ring the flat coastline and cap the mountains of the central range on Taklamakan's single, arid supercontinent. When the winds blow in from the ocean at just the right speed and at just the right time of day, the stones begin to sing. When the Stones sing, any visitors on Taklamakan go mad. They begin to climb the stones. This isn't easy. The Siren Stones are a form of volcanic glass, as alien and ragged as the peaks in an Ernst landscape. In the right light, the Stones shine like metal and their towering, cylindrical bodies are full of edges and angles like brilliant knife blades. As the maddened visitors clamber to the top of the Siren Stones, they are slashed and maimed horribly. When they reach the top, the visitors start singing in unison with the Stones. Then, the moment the wind drops and the Stones fall silent, the visitors throw themselves over the edge, to their deaths.

Of the three documented research expeditions that have landed on Taklamakan and the two salvage vessels that followed, all have ended in the same tragic way. It should be remembered that the planet was named Taklamakan for a reason. The Taklamakan desert lies in mainland China's far northwest, along the old Silk Road. Among the nomads who scratch out a living in that parched land, none will enter Taklamakan's open waste. In the rough local tongue, Taklamakan is "The place you can enter, but you cannot leave."

There is some speculation that the Siren Stones are not freakish natural formations, but artifacts built by some superior space-faring race. Whether they are a greeting, a weapon or some extraterrestrial practical joke, we have no way of knowing. There are those on Earth who believe that the Siren Stones are something even older and stranger. They claim that the Stones-or objects like them-are mentioned in certain obscure Gnostic and Egyptian magical treatises. Those who claim to know the purpose of the Stones allege that they are a kind of "desire machine." The deaths captured on video and beamed back to Earth are merely the last moments of men and women who've made some Faustian bargain with unseen powers, and that the deaths are simply the price each person pays to have a last, magnificent wish granted. The fact that all who've died on Taklamakan have left behind enormous and often inexplicable fortunes to their heirs is taken by many as a sign of these mystical bargains.

Over the centuries, no one is sure exactly how many people (or other planet-hopping races) have visited the Singing Stones. We do know this: after each climber plunges to his or her death, a flower—no doubt nourished by the moisture and nutrients in each corpse—blossoms. At the moment, there is a miniature Garden of Eden sprouting at the base of the Stones.

When the Singing Stones were discovered, no religious group or government would officially acknowledge that the stones granted wishes, but security patrols became heavy in that region of space. No one spent much time in orbit around Taklamakan without being told to move along by the local gendarmes.

But time passes and memory fades. While Taklamakan was an object of fascination in my youth, a century later, few remember it. These days, most of the security in that area is handled by Sentinel Satellites, and they're so far away from local traffic lanes, that no one wants the expense of maintaining them. There is talk in certain unofficial and rarified circles, that some of the Sentinels have failed completely. If one were so inclined, a brazen pilot could take a small ship past them and down to the surface without any interference. It would have to be someone with no reason to come back. Someone old. Perhaps ill. But with enough strength left to make the climb. These things are tricky to time. Going too early means wasted months of precious life. Waiting too long, might mean you land with a body too weak to finish the job.

Not that I'm ready to make that final climb yet. I can still see and the painkillers make the days pass in a pleasant haze that remains me of warm summers from my boyhood. At night, I watch the stars from my roof and peek out over the city. I used to have a fear of heights. Now I can walk along the edge, clamber on top of the faux-gothic gargoyles and waggle my feet over the urban abyss. Sometimes I think about those traders and nomads on the Silk Road, wandering miserable, bored and frightened through some of the worst land in the world. They bravely went out into the wilderness, hoping to come back with riches, but they usually got bandits. Or swindled for their troubles. They sang long-forgotten songs to pass the time and buck up their courage. They risked everything to cross a broiling nothingness and never knew if good fortune was waiting for them at the end of the line. But I do.

I do.

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