

"BEYOND THE REACH OF HUMAN THOUGHT"
The Sheridan Tapes - Season 01, Episode 06
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Written by

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Based on story and characters from
"Homestead on the Corner"
By Trevor Van Winkle

INT. MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

The room is quiet, with only the muffled sound of traffic and a shower running behind the wall. After a moment:

ANNA SHERIDAN

(quiet, voice shaking
slightly)

Reach me down my Tycho Brahé, - I
would know him when we meet,
When I share my later science,
sitting humbly at his feet;
He may know the law of all things,
yet be ignorant of how
We are working to completion,
working on from then till now.

(beat, reading further
down)

You may tell that German college
that their honour comes too late.
But they must not waste repentance
on the grizzly savant's fate;
Though my soul may set in darkness,
it will rise in perfect light;
I have loved the stars too truly to
be fearful of the night.

INT. OSLOW COUNTY PD - DETECTIVE'S OFFICE - DAY

CLICK. A tape begins playing right away, the familiar, crackling noise. The quiet sounds of the office are faintly heard in the background.

SAM BAILEY

(phone voice)

Yes, hello? Are you still there?
Doctor Park?

REN PARK

(a little confused by
Sam's behavior)

Yes, yes -- I'm here.

SAM BAILEY

(flustered)

Sorry, I was trying to get my
recorder working, but it froze up
so I had to find a tape for this
old...

REN PARK
(trying to calm him down)
It's fine Detective Bailey, I
really don't mind.

SAM BAILEY
(confused)
You don't? I just figured you were
short on time and...

REN PARK
(gracious)
My schedule *was* full, but I had
something else fall through at the
last minute. I had your number on
my desk, so I thought I may as well
call.

SAM BAILEY
(a little insulted)
Oh. Right. Well, um... Would you
mind saying your name again? For
the recording?

REN PARK
(practiced precision)
Of course. Doctor Ren Park of the
Institute for Stellar Propulsion,
Heuristics, and Aeronautics in
Ventura, California.

SAM BAILEY
(finally getting his
bearings)
Okay. This is Detective Samuel
Bailey, Oslow County Police
Department -- Homicide Division.
Recording on April Eleventh, 2019
at approximately... 6:25 am.
(beat)
You're up rather early, Doctor
Park.

REN PARK
(a non-answer)
As are you, detective. Now, you
said this was about Anna?

SAM BAILEY
(surprised by his
attitude)
Ah, yes. Regarding her
disappearance.

REN PARK
 (understated sadness)
 Yes. Terrible thing.

SAM BAILEY
 When... How did you first meet Miss
 Sheridan?

REN PARK
 Oh, it must have been 2014 -- yes,
 May the 4th, 2014. I remember half
 the engineers were wearing *Star
 Wars* t-shirts and making the same
 awful pun. I was working at Quentin
 Aerospace then. *Poultice Press* had
 its headquarters less than a mile
 down the road, and Anna was
 requesting a scientific
 consultation for her next book.
 When someone brought it up at the
 morning staff meeting, I
 volunteered to meet with her.

SAM BAILEY
 You were a fan of her work?

REN PARK
 (CHUCKLING)
 Oh god no, I thought most of it was
 tripe. But I was burning out on my
 current projects, so I welcomed the
 distraction.

(beat)
 Given Anna's reputation, I half-
 expected the building to be
 wreathed in shadow and overgrown
 with cobwebs, but it was actually
 really nice. The first floor was
 mostly taken up by a small
 bookstore, and it had a kind of
 dusty, classical feeling without
 being musty or dirty. They'd been
 in business since the late 40's, so
 it felt like history was radiating
 off the walls -- like I could feel
 the imprint of every person who'd
 ever wandered through that
 bookstore. I was looking through
 the old pulp novels and classic
 reprints on one of the shelves when
 someone tapped me on the shoulder.
 I turned around and there, of
 course, stood Anna.

(MORE)

REN PARK (CONT'D)

(beat, then shaking his head)

Anna Sheridan, mistress of horror and, from what I'd heard, magnet for all kinds of trouble. She didn't look anything like I expected her to. I guess I was imagining someone with raven hair, gaunt and pale from too many late night dances with the devil -- basically, I was picturing a slightly creepier Morticia Adamms. I couldn't have been more wrong. If I'd seen her anywhere else, I'd think she was an athlete or a backpacker, not a writer. Honestly, she'd spent a lot more time than I had outdoors, and it showed.

(beat)

Truth be told, I was a little intimidated... physicists aren't the most social people, I'll admit. But then she apologized for startling me, saying she was contractually obliged to appear out of a cloud of smoke the first time she met anyone, and I began to feel a bit more at ease. She was good at that: making you feel like you were safe, like you could open up to her. Odd, for someone who wrote the kinds of books she did. I tried reading a few of them later on, but I just couldn't reconcile them with the person I knew.

SAM BAILEY

Would you say you considered her a friend?

REN PARK

I certainly did. I think she did as well. It didn't take long to figure out she wasn't just a fantasist: she was a scientist herself. Of a sort. Maybe not formally, but her way of thinking, her insight, her methods -- they were scientist's qualities. And we were both rather solitary creatures by habit. Perhaps we never knew each other as well as most friends do, but... We cared for one another.

(MORE)

REN PARK (CONT'D)

Though I don't know if we would have grown so close if not for what happened next.

(beat)

We talked for a good few hours in the bookstore, pausing every once in a while when the occasional patron wandered in and recognized her. I told her about my work, my aspirations, where I went to school... Looking back on it, I think I did the lion's share of the talking, which almost never happens. She had a lot of interest in astronomy and cosmology, and she wouldn't let me get away with any oversimplified answers to her questions. I don't know why she needed my help: I think she had a better grasp of it than most science fiction writers. She was especially fascinated with how distant and disconnected everything in the universe is, yet how it all comes from the same fundamental source -- how it's all unified by the same physics and chemistry. She even seemed to know a lot about quantum mechanics, which definitely took me by surprise. I deal mostly with classical physics -- planetary orbits and rocketry, that kind of thing. I knew there were a few experiments at QA that dealt with some pretty high level theoretical concepts, but I wasn't directly involved with any of them.

(beat)

By the time we wrapped up, it was half past 3. She was heading out of town that night, but she gave me her number and asked me to stay in touch. I promised I would, then drove back to the office. When I got back, I caught hell from my supervisor: apparently, no one had told them what I was doing, and I wasn't actually cleared to leave. It was annoying, but I offered to stay late, just to smooth things over. They agreed, and I got back to -- well, I can't really say what I got back to.

(MORE)

REN PARK (CONT'D)

I signed a lot of big, scary NDA's during my time there.

(beat)

Normally I would be exhausted by 4, but I was feeling strangely energized at that point. Something about Anna had fired my imagination. I'd been stuck on a few major design problems for months, but suddenly... everything fell into place. I made more progress on the Mark 4... I mean, I made more progress on the *classified project I was working on at the time* than I had in about half a year.

(beat)

It was exhilarating. Every equation I solved led to the next solution. It was so blindingly obvious now -- why had it taken me so long to figure out before? I downed half a dozen energy drinks at 6 and called it dinner -- I know, I know, it's a nasty habit I picked up in grad school. But still, I was wired at 9 o'clock at night, which was exactly what I was hoping for. I'd made up the lost time by then, so I didn't need to stay any longer... But at the same time, I did. I never put much stock in the idea of inspiration, but for the first time in my life, it felt like I wasn't pushing myself through the muck of miscalculation and guesswork towards a solution -- I was being pulled *towards* an answer that already existed.

Ren pauses, thinking.

REN PARK (CONT'D)

(musing)

Are you familiar with temporal asymmetry, detective Bailey?

SAM BAILEY

(unsure what to make of this)

I... Can't say that I am.

REN PARK

(almost teacher-like tone)

Sometimes it's called time's arrow, or the arrow of time. I'll give you the abbreviated version: on a microscopic level, time doesn't exist -- at least, not in a way we can understand or calculate. Time, in physics, is a measure of consistent, one-directional change. Entropy. But protons, neutrons, and electrons -- any microscopic particle, really -- move exactly the same way backwards and forwards. At that scale, all processes are time-symmetric -- they could run backwards, from future to past, and no one would be able to tell the difference. But when you look at the macroscopic world -- at rocks and planets and human beings -- that symmetry breaks down. If you throw a ball in the air it looks mostly the same both ways, but leave that ball on the ground for a few hundred years, and it starts to disintegrate. Given enough time, it will rot away to its elementary components, and that, you can't reverse.

SAM BAILEY

What does this have to do with...

REN PARK

(cutting him off with his point)

Time.

(beat)

All our working theories say it's just another dimension of our universe. Maybe one of 4, or 11, or even 26... Depends which physicist you ask. But it's just a dimension. It can be warped and stretched and maybe even completely broken by gravity. But if that's the case, then why does it only run forward? Why does time's arrow only fly one way? Why does cause need to precede effect? There's no real reason it's that way -- it just is. But why?

(beat)

(MORE)

REN PARK (CONT'D)

Don't bother answering that, nobody knows. Better scientists than me have been bashing their heads into that particular wall since 1927. But even so... When I was in the lab that night, it felt like the solution was coming to me from somewhere -- from some *when* -- else.

(beat)

You might think I'm crazy, but I swear to you, I *knew* the solutions I was going to get before the computer finished calculating them. As far as I can tell, there are two possible explanations: One, I was overdosing on caffeine and having a manic episode -- Or two, that information was somehow traveling to my mind backwards through time. I know it sounds ridiculous... Trust me, I've done everything I can think of to make that conclusion go away. But I've never had a manic episode before, and I was well below the level of caffeine needed to cause intoxication. As far as I can tell, there isn't a medical explanation for what happened.

(beat)

By midnight, I was barely conscious of what I was doing. I was only using the computer to confirm answers I was already plugging into the next equation. I felt close to something, something far bigger than just the -- well, *the project I was working on*. It felt like I was a few steps from finding out something fundamental -- some truth about our universe that no other scientist had ever dared to dream of. No, more than finding it -- proving it. Making it real.

(beat)

The numbers started to run together on the screen. I worked faster and faster until my fingers began to ache from typing. The computer fan was so loud I began to get a headache as it screamed, struggling with calculations it was never built to process.

(MORE)

REN PARK (CONT'D)

I crashed programs when they stopped working and, I swear this is true -- I started building my own.

(beat)

I didn't know what I was making, not at any conscious level. But one step seemed to lead to another, then the next, and then the next. And it's not like I felt out of control: it felt more natural than breathing, which I'm not sure if I was actually doing at that point. All I was getting out of each step was a string of numbers or a bit of code, but it seemed like there was something hidden behind the data: something telling me what I had to do next, giving me the next step in this process, and before I knew it...

(beat)

The computer crashed. No, not just the computer: the whole lab crashed. Somehow, the program I'd been running -- the one I built from scratch despite barely knowing how to code anything -- blew every fuse in the lab. Including the lights.

(beat)

I swore at my own stupidity, then stood up to check the breakers. Unfortunately my legs had cramped after sitting for so long, and I collapsed the moment I put weight on them. I tried to catch myself, but instead just slipped and hit my head on the lab floor. I must have blacked out, but I couldn't really tell with all the lights out and my mind as hazy as it was. I only realized later that it shouldn't have been so dark in there. The lab had emergency lights on a separate circuit, but somehow, they were dead too.

(beat)

When I came to, the lab was still pitch black. My watch said it was past three in the morning, but I had no idea how long I'd been out.

(MORE)

REN PARK (CONT'D)

I was still a little light-headed and bleeding from a small cut on my forehead, but other than that, I felt normal. Whatever had taken hold of me before, whether it was actual precognition or just plain mania, seemed to be over. I stood up slowly, stumbling around before I managed to find a flashlight in one of the desk drawers. Besides the power outage, everything else in the lab seemed fine... Except the heat. It took a while for me to notice, but the lab was much warmer than usual. I thought the HVAC system might have gone haywire when the power went out, so I began looking for the climate controls. The flashlight wasn't great, so I bruised my shins a couple of times as I crossed and recrossed the lab. I began to notice that it was considerably warmer in the center of the lab than it was at the edges, which didn't make any sense because the heating ducts were all on the perimeter of the room. I pointed the flashlight towards the source of the heat to try and find an explanation when... I saw it.

(beat, looking for the words)

It was... Darkness. No, that doesn't do it credit, the whole lab was dark. This was just -- void. A circle of utterly empty, black space floating in the center of the lab a few feet above my head. Compared to the circle, there was something tangible about the darkness in the rest of the lab. It looked almost like faint static when I stared at it, as if my brain was trying to interpret what it already knew was there. But this...

(beat)

Even if I took my flashlight off of it, I could still see the hole it made: an absolute blank, like a circle had been cut out of the back of my eyes and I was getting no information at all. And the *heat* radiating from it...

(MORE)

REN PARK (CONT'D)

I was nearly ten feet away, and I could still feel my face starting to dry out and crack. I stepped back, but then my flashlight caught the outer edge of the circle and... Well, there's no other way to say it. The light *curved*. It circled around it and shone back into my eyes from the opposite side. I knew what it was at that moment, but it still took a few seconds to accept the reality that I was looking at a gravitational singularity.

SAM BAILEY

A what?

REN PARK

(SIGHS)

In common parlance: a black hole. The kind that usually only forms when a massive star collapses past it's Schwarzschild radius -- about a few kilometers, generally. Only this one had an event horizon about the size of a bowling ball, and was floating right in the middle of the lab.

(beat)

I froze, and pretty much stopped breathing at that point. I thought the heat emanating from it must have been some kind of Hawking radiation: the kind of energy slowly released by a black hole as it decays over a vigintillion years. But if that was what it was, and this singularity was kicking off that much thermal radiation, then either it was evaporating way too fast or it had an impossible amount of energy at its core. In either case, I should have felt *some* gravitational pull from it -- or rather, it should have sucked all the air out of the room then swallowed me, the room, the building, and the entire planet whole. Whatever it was, it wasn't a naturally occurring singularity. I mean that much should have been obvious.

(MORE)

REN PARK (CONT'D)

But if that was true, then there was something -- and as a scientist, I hate to say this -- *supernatural* going on in that lab.

(beat)

Then the area around the event horizon started to glow a dull red, as the radiation shifted from infrared to visible light. It was fascinating to watch, but I could feel the soles of my shoes starting to melt into the floor by then, so I ran for the door. For a moment I was terrified that I wouldn't be able to find it. Something about the heat and the red glow and the impossibly dark thing floating behind me -- I've never been very religious, but for some reason it made me think of Hell.

(beat)

Of course the door was where it had always been, and still unlocked. As soon as I shut it behind me, the world seemed to snap back to normal. The lights in the hall came on, the AC started to blow cool air on my face, and the whole thing immediately began to feel like some kind of bad dream -- like it didn't actually happen.

(beat)

Just as I was about to chalk it up to caffeine intoxication, I heard a noise through the lab door. It was a long, drawn out hiss, almost like an air tank slowly depressurizing -- or...

(beat, then shakes head)

No, you'll think I'm crazy.

SAM BAILEY

(trying to draw out the rest of his story)

Please, go on.

REN PARK

(hesitant, still disturbed by the experience)

It sounded almost... Human. Like a long, drawn out sigh, but getting lower and lower in pitch until it made my teeth rattle.

(MORE)

REN PARK (CONT'D)

I started seeing spots flash across my vision and then suddenly... It stopped.

(beat)

I waited at least five minutes before I opened the door again. The lights were on in the lab, and the air was cool and clean again. Besides a few faint scorch marks on one of the lab tables, there was nothing to show that any of it had actually happened.

(beat)

I called Anna, of course. I still had her number in my pocket. She listened, but couldn't make any sense of it either. She did say something that I still haven't forgotten, though. "When we look into the void for too long, we find the monsters instead."

(beat)

I never figured out what really happened. It took a few long, nerve-racking days to work up my courage and visit the lab again. Everything seemed perfectly normal. The computer I'd been using that night was gone though, and one of the scientist said it had been fried. He mean that literally: when I asked IT, they told me that the CPU and motherboard had somehow been melted into a solid lump of plastic and silicon. They were able to recover most of the data from the hard drive, but said whatever program had caused the meltdown had been stored on a virtual RAM drive, and was gone forever. I left them alone after that, only able to hope that they destroyed the computer when they were finished with it.

(beat, then, almost to himself)

Time.

SAM BAILEY

Excuse me?

REN PARK

(trying to phrase this right)

(MORE)

REN PARK (CONT'D)

Like I said -- I've been thinking a lot about time since that night. I talked about it with Anna more than once. She had her own ideas about it, but as far as science is concerned, it goes one way. Cause always precedes effect. It's an invariable law of the universe, even if we don't understand why. We call paradoxes *paradoxes* for a reason: no matter how plausible they seem, they can never really happen. But even so -- I think I had a glimpse of one that night.

(beat)

I mean, what are computers, anyway? Ultimately, I mean? Just electrons moving through wires, semi-conductors storing 1s and 0s on oxidized silicon, pure information stored at the lowest, microscopic levels. Time-symmetric.

(beat)

I don't know what happened to me that night. I still don't even know if what I saw was real. But if it was -- I don't know if I somehow created it, or if it was feeding me information about itself *before* it appeared.

(beat, then SIGH)

Honestly, I just can't get it out of my head.

SAM BAILEY

Have you told anyone else about this?

REN PARK

No -- just you and Anna.

SAM BAILEY

(hiding his real thoughts)

Good. I suggest you keep it that way. Whatever this... *Thing* was, it sounds pretty dangerous.

(beat)

Did you and Anna discuss this the last time you spoke?

REN PARK

(thrown by the change of subject)

What?

(MORE)

REN PARK (CONT'D)

Oh, no, she just had some questions she wanted me to answer for her next book. Apparently it was going to be a sci-fi novel, which got me really excited until she said there were going to be ghosts in it. But we were both in Nevada at the time anyways, so we met for lunch up in Arrowhead. I'm afraid I wasn't much help: most of her questions were a bit above my pay grade: mostly about quantum fields and high-level string theory.

SAM BAILEY

Did you talk about anything else?

REN PARK

(a little distraught)

I'm afraid not. We both had places to be afterwards, so we kind of rushed. I really wish I'd taken the time to say goodbye.

(beat)

Is that it?

SAM BAILEY

Did she mention where she was going next?

REN PARK

(trying to remember details)

Uh... No, I don't think so. Not specifically. South, was all she said. That was October 15th at around 11am, if that helps.

SAM BAILEY

(frustrated, trying to be civil)

Of course it does. Thank you for your time, Doctor Park, this has been a great help.

REN PARK

Of course. Please, let me know if you need anything else.

BEEP. The phone call ends. Then -- CLACK. The player spits out the tape. Sam's in his office later in the day, and SIGHS HEAVILY.

SAM BAILEY

(exhausted)

I had to go home for a few hours after he hung up. I'm already on thin ice around here, and I didn't want to get in more trouble for screaming obscenities up and down the wall. Another dead end in a case that seems to be nothing else. Doctor Park was absolutely no help - more interested in remembering "the good old days" than recalling any usable information on Sheridan - if he actually had any to give.

(beat)

I can't listen to another tape today -- especially not one with my own voice on it. God, if that's really how I sound...

(beat, then SIGH)

It's strange, though... I don't know why I used one of Sheridan's blank tapes instead of just restarting the recording program. It just felt... Right, somehow.

(beat)

God, I need to get some sleep.

BEEP. The recording ends.

END THEME AND
CREDITS