

"BENEATH AN UNKNOWN SUN"
The Sheridan Tapes - Season 02, Episode 38
Recording Draft - February 28, 2021

by

Virginia Spotts

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

Copyright 2021
Homestead on the Corner

1. INT. ABANDONED CABIN - NIGHT - NOVEMBER 1, 2019

Sam tosses and turns under a scratchy quilt while a storm blows heavy wind and rain against the outside of the cabin. The walls creak and moan, and the windows rattle.

SAM SIGHS as he flips over, adjusts the covers, then flips back. Finally, he SIGHS HEAVILY and gets up, walking into the main room of the cabin.

SAM BAILEY
(muttering, tired)
This storm just won't let up...

HE YAWNS DEEPLY, then clicks on a battery-powered lantern. He walks to a nearby bookcase, running his hand over a small handful of books, then pulls one out.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)
(reading)
"The Classic Lovecraft."
(SIGHS)
Oh, of course.

He opens the book and flips to a page.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)
Let's see... *Shadow over Innsmouth* -
- No. *At the Mountains of Madness* --
Definitely not. Huh. *Celephaïs*...

Sam flips pages until he reaches the story, then begins to read.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)
(reading)
"In a dream Kuranos saw the city in the valley, and the sea-coast beyond, and the snowy peak overlooking the sea, and the gaily painted galleys that sail out of the harbour toward the distant regions where the sea meets the sky. In a dream it was also that he came by his name of Kuranos, for when awake he was called by another name. Perhaps it was natural for him to dream a new name; for he was the last of his family, and alone among the indifferent millions of London, so there were not many to speak to him and remind him who he had been.

(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

His money and lands were gone, and he did not care for the ways of people about him, but preferred to dream and write of his dreams. What he wrote was laughed at by those to whom he shewed it, so that after a time he kept his writings to himself, and finally ceased to write. The more he withdrew from the world about him, the more wonderful became his dreams; and it would have been quite futile to try to describe them on paper. Kuranos was not modern, and did not think like others who wrote. Whilst they strove to strip from life its embroidered robes of myth, and to shew in naked ugliness the foul thing that is reality, Kuranos sought for beauty alone. When truth and experience failed to reveal it, he sought it in fancy and illusion, and found it on his very doorstep, amid the nebulous memories of childhood tales and dreams.

(beat)

There are not many persons who know what wonders are opened to them in the stories and visions of their youth; for when as children we listen and dream, we think but half-formed thoughts, and when as men we try to remember, we are dulled and prosaic with the poison of life. But some of us awake in the night with strange phantasms of enchanted hills and gardens, of fountains that sing in the sun, of golden cliffs overhanging murmuring seas, of plains that stretch down to sleeping cities of bronze and stone, and of shadowy companies of heroes that ride caparisoned white horses along the edges of thick forests; and then we know that we have looked back through the ivory gates into that world of wonder which was ours before we were wise and unhappy."

CLICK.

2. EXT. WOODS - DAY - NOVEMBER 2, 2019

Sam hikes through the woods alone, his footsteps crunching over dirt and dry pine needles.

SAM BAILEY

(slightly winded)

Sam Bailey. Morning of November 2nd, 2019. Barely slept at all last night thanks to that wind storm that tore through here. The weather's been shifting lately. The air's getting a lot colder and harsher, so I'm trying to take as many of these walks as I can before the snow comes. Not looking forward to being trapped inside that cabin for three months straight, that's for sure.

(SIGHS)

Anyway, this might be my last opportunity to explore the area north of the cabin. I've headed out this way before, but there's one area close to the foothills that I never quite made it to.

Sam pauses as he climbs over a large fallen log, then continues walking.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(slightly morose)

I wish I knew how to explain what happened in the basement the other night. With Allen. Hearing him was like -- having a dream. Like going to bed hungry, dreaming about the biggest Thanksgiving dinner you've ever seen, and then -- waking up. Just as hungry as before. More so, actually. Of course, while I was on the phone, listening to his voice time seemed to just -- stop. Every second seemed to hang in the air, just -- waiting. It didn't feel like time was passing for me at all.

(beat)

But of course, the moment passed, and everything went back to normal. maybe the best way to explain it is that it was some kind of -- time hiccup.

(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

Some kind of warping of space/time caused by whatever I did in the basement, like what happened with Ren. It wasn't just my heart latching on to the moment, reliving a time when we were happy -- if it was, then Allen's voice wouldn't have been picked up on the tape recorder. There was a real connection there, even if it doesn't make any sense.

(beat)

I wish I had some idea of what it all means.

(beat)

Between the wind and all of these questions racing through my head, I couldn't sleep at all last night. I ended up reading an H.P. Lovecraft story to try and -- well, quiet my thoughts, I guess. Odd choice, I know, but there weren't too many options, and the one I read -- *Celephaïs*... it wasn't about eldritch horrors, surprisingly. The story was actually kind of... Enticing, to be honest.

(beat)

Oh -- hold on for a second.

SAM GRUNTS as he climbs up a small, rocky rise on the hill.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(continuing story)

It's so short, it only took me ten minutes to read the whole thing. The man in the story is called Kuranos -- at least, that's his name in his dreams. He feels a lack of connection to the real world and his family, but then one night, he dreams about a seaside city called *Celephaïs*: a place more beautiful and thriving than anything he's ever seen. And to his delight, he realizes that he's dreamt of it before -- 40 years ago, when he was a little boy.

(beat)

How did it go again?

(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

"There he stayed long, gazing out over the bright harbour where the ripples sparkled beneath an unknown sun, and where rode lightly the galleys from far places over the water. And he gazed also upon Mount Aran rising regally from the shore, its lower slopes green with swaying trees and its white summit touching the sky."

(beat, SCOFFS)

Alright, I might have read it more than once before I fell asleep. Anyway, after this long, glorious night exploring the most beautiful city in the most peaceful dream he's ever had -- he wakes back up. And then for months, he doesn't dream of it again. He still dreams, of course. One time he's flying over mountains at night, and finds an ugly, rough stone wall "too gigantic to have risen by human hands." Another time he dreams of a land with beautiful gardens that he thinks might be Celephaïs, until he realizes that it's so quiet because there are no people left alive there. And then he dreams of climbing an endless spiral staircase all night, only to reach the top at sunrise to see that the land below is full of decay and death.

(beat)

Anyway, after months of being unable to return to Celephaïs in his dreams, Kuranos finally makes a decision. In order to stay asleep for longer and find Celephaïs faster, he'll drug himself. With copious amounts of hashish. But before too long, he's used up all the drugs he could afford and run out of money. And then one day, as he's crossing a bridge... He sees the knights from Celephaïs, coming to take him back to that city. Permanently.

(beat, thoughtful)

I know I shouldn't be jealous of Kuranos. I know the story is still technically horror.

(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

I mean, he ends up ruling over the city in his dream, but his body is found washed up on the shore near his childhood home. But even so -- there's an allure to the story that I just can't shake.

Sam stops walking, glancing around.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(confused)

Huh. That's odd. I didn't notice before, but -- these hills. They almost look like they've been... sculpted, I guess. I've gone over at least three of these big rises on my way up, and the twists and turns are starting to feel really similar.

(beat, dismissive)

I guess even nature repeats itself sometimes.

He begins walking again.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

Things have been pretty quiet out here, at least. I haven't had any issues hiking since my run in with the forest fire. I've actually been thinking about that lately. In light of what happened in the basement, maybe --

Sam stops abruptly, noticing something in the trees.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(slightly confused)

There's a ladder down there.

(pause)

Sorry, I -- There's no one around for miles, but there's a ladder in the woods, about thirty feet off to my right. It's maybe six feet tall, wooden, and... Handmade, by the looks of it. Just leaning against a random tree. That's -- really strange.

Sam hesitates, then continues walking.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

It's probably been here for a while -- it has some pretty heavy weather damage. Maybe it's some kind of memorial? Maybe a marker somebody left out here, years ago? The pine needles under the tree don't look like they've been disturbed, so...

(SIGHS)

I guess I'll just have to chalk that up to someone putting it out there for... Fun. Yeah.

(SCOFFS)

And yet again, coming up on a fourth rise, and it looks exactly the same. At this point, I could probably climb it with my eyes closed.

SAM GRUNTS, climbing over the rocky incline.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

It really is a beautiful day, though. The sky is clear, and it's starting to feel warmer now that my blood's pumping. To be honest... It's been nice to get a break like this. Sure, I don't have any money. Sure, I'm depending on the kindness of a friend for food, which -- well, that's not exactly ideal. He keeps telling me it's not a problem, but... I know better. I hope I can repay him some day. And then of course, there's the fact that my former boss wants to kill me. That's definitely a problem.

(wry)

But other than all that... It's more of a break than I've ever had. I can't explain how nice it's been to wake up each morning, hike in the sun and the fresh air and the silence, and then spend the evenings untangling my own thoughts. God, but I needed it. I've been wound so tight my whole life I was bound to snap eventually.

Sam stops walking as he reaches the top of the hill, then SIGHS HEAVILY.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(CHUCKLES AWKWARDLY)

Okay, maybe I already have. Not only is that the fifth identical rise in a row, but... The ladder is here again. Maybe it's a different one? But it looks exactly the same: same height, same shape, even the same angle against the tree. Only this time, it's closer. Maybe -- twenty feet away?

Sam pauses, then continues his walk.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(dismissive)

Not dealing with that right now. It's weird, but I'm in no apparent danger. If I turn around now, I won't get another chance to explore this place until next spring. And even though I'm doing slightly better, I don't want that curiosity about what's up here hanging over me all winter. I just know I'll end up risking it, even with the snow.

(LAUGHS)

Can't wait to tell Bill about this one. He'll probably just laugh at how worried I am.

(pause)

Huh. That's... Unexpected. I guess I do actually miss having people to talk to. Never thought I'd say that and mean it. But I guess that's what five months in the woods will do to you. Six months! Right.

(SIGHS)

Yet again, time is losing its meaning up here.

(beat)

I have this feeling that I'm scratching the surface of something... Bigger. Something about time. The lake, the Echo, Allen's voice, even the wildfire... I think there's a connection between them. I don't know if it's possible to explain logically, or if it's really just a gut feeling.

(beat)

I hope it's logical. I don't know how to deal with it otherwise.

(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

I've always needed things to be settled, to be rational -- at least, I have for as long as I can remember. I may have lived more from the gut before mom and dad... Before what happened in the lake. But was that really a -- a truer version of me? Am I finally integrating some part of me that I've buried all this time? Is that why I keep brushing up against different powers like this?

(beat)

And, you know... I was so focused on figuring out what happened to Anna before, on how much of what she recorded on her tapes was real, that I don't think I even think to ask...

(beat)

What was she looking for, exactly?

Sam pauses, then GRUNTS, climbing over a ridge.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(SIGHS)

So that's how it's going to be, huh?

(NERVOUS CHUCKLE)

There's another ladder. Same look, same setup. About ten feet away now. And I'm getting this feeling that -- No, no, that's probably just the altitude getting to me.

(beat, thoughtful)

You know what -- I think I might actually turn around now. I hate going back now, but if this is like last time, then I don't want to get too far in to turn back.

(to recorder)

And I'm going to switch you off too -- try to go a little faster on the way down.

CLICK.

4. EXT. WOODS - LATER

Deeper into the woods, quieter and somehow darker.

SAM BAILEY

(PANTING at the end of a
long run)

I was almost out of there, and then
-- that last hill. There was a
ladder right in front of me.
Directly in front of me, blocking
my way down. And I know it wasn't
here the last time I came through.

Sam slowly walks forward.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(catching his breath,
curious)

It's barely a few steps away.
There's moss growing in some of the
cracks in the wood. Not a lot, but
it's surprising to see, given how
dry it is up here. Maybe if I get
just a little closer, I can see --

Static crackles on the tape, and a slight ringing noise is
heard. Sam stops, then backs away, the static and ringing
fading.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(masking unease)

Huh. There was a strange... Almost
a ringing in my ears, as I got
closer.

(beat)

I should just keep going. Walk
around it and get home. This could
be dangerous, and I have no idea
who or what actually put it here.

(beat)

Or maybe I could just...

Sam steps forward, static and ringing returning, and he grabs
the ladder. The wood creaks slightly, and SAM CRIES OUT IN
JOY, tinged with surprise and horror. He jumps back.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(stunned)

What the hell? I -- I touched the
ladder, and it --

(SWALLOWS, collecting
thoughts)

I felt a -- a rush of euphoria.
What the fuck... What the fuck?

(beat, BREATHE)

I need to get out of here.

(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

There should only be this one hill left, then a big turn to the east, and then it's level ground all the way back to the cabin. All I have to do is walk away.

(beat)

Ready?

(beat)

Just walk away, Bailey.

Sam still hesitates, then runs, BREATHING HARD as he scrambles over rocks, lands, and turns around. Static rises on the tape just before he stops, frozen in step.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(with dread)

Oh my god.

(beat)

No, no... Come on.

(EXASPERATED NOISE)

There's... Every tree has a ladder now. Every single tree in front of me. And they're all the same ladder. The same wood, the same moss, the same freaking angle.

(beat)

Okay. I get it. I'm not getting out of here without dealing with this.

Not unless I...

(pause, realizing)

"So Kuranos sought fruitlessly for the marvellous city of Celephaïs and its galleys that sail to Serannian in the sky..."

(SCOFFS)

Maybe... Maybe if I just touched one of the ladders for a second more. Or maybe climbed it, just a little bit. Maybe then they'd let me go. Something is clearly trying to tell me something. Maybe...

Sam stops, then takes A DEEP BREATH.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(resigned)

It's another test. Like the wildfire. "Not by sight... Not by sight..."

ANNA SHERIDAN (FAINT)

(RECORDED)

"Not by sight..."

Sam steps forward.

SAM BAILEY

There's a way out of here. I know there is. I just need to close my eyes and trust that it's there.

Sam feels his way forward with his eyes closed, walking carefully. As he passes the trees, the static and ringing on the tape fades in and out.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(hopeful)

It's... It's working. I'm making it. One foot in front of the other, just... Keep calm, and keep your eyes closed. You'll be out of here in no time, you can --

Sam stops, then sinks to his knees.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(awed reverence)

What the hell is happening? I can see them now -- the way the sunlight hits them all is...

(beat, quoting)

"...a golden glare came somewhere out of the east and hid all the landscape in its effulgent draperies..."

(LAUGHS)

Whoever's doing this, you could try being a little more subtle.

(beat)

Or -- is this me, somehow? Making this happen, subconsciously? Celephaïs and Allen and...

(beat)

Is this all inside my head?

After a moment, SAM SIGHS, then slowly stands again.

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

(slightly out of it)

I'm okay. I'm okay. I can see the edge of the trees now, so I'm almost out. Everything's going to be okay.

CLICK.

5. INT. ABANDONED CABIN - EVENING

A small fire crackles in the hearth, and a light wind blows outside the cabin. SAM TAKES A SIP OF TEA, then begins.

SAM BAILEY

(long pause, humbled)

Everything was not okay. Turns out, I stopped the recorder right when I was in the most danger. Of course I'm back in the cabin now, safe and settling in for the night, but...

(beat)

I've never felt anything like what I felt then, looking at the ladders surrounding me. I knew they were dangerous. Enough of my conscious mind was still awake to realize that. But even so -- I was completely calm. That euphoric feeling I had when I touched the first ladder covered everything, and it was almost like I was dreaming.

(beat)

I walked slowly through the ladders, towards a break in the tree line a few yards away. It was harder than I thought it would be. Each of the ladders pulled on my mind as I passed it, the euphoria growing stronger every time I came close. It took every ounce of willpower not to go to them -- but I kept walking. And then, right at the edge of the tree line... I saw a different ladder.

(beat)

It was larger. Heftier, more strongly made, and at least nine feet tall, disappearing into the lower branches of the pine it was leaning against. I finally stopped when I saw it. I knew that the other ladders were dangerous, but this one -- it felt safe. The blinding euphoria fell away as I came closer too, and somehow I knew that I had to climb. That this was the only way out. It was like I had no other choice, but -- even so, I wasn't afraid.

(beat)

(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

I hesitated for a moment before I reached out and touched it. And as soon as I did...

(DEEP BREATH, feeling it again)

I was filled with a kind of joy I've only rarely felt in my life. A joy that made the euphoria feel cloying and artificial, somehow too strong and too weak at the same time. It reminded me of being a little kid, resting on the couch after a long day of adventures with my parents. It reminded me of how it felt to get lost in the stories they used to tell me, swept up in the currents of another life. And it reminded me of being in Allen's arms at night. That feeling of contented safety just before we drifted off to sleep.

(beat)

And for once, I didn't have to do anything to sustain that feeling. I didn't have to grasp at that contentment and gratitude and try to hold on to it -- it was coming at me. Filling me.

(beat)

I reached out with my other hand and started climbing, one rung at a time. As I climbed higher and passed the first set of branches, the world around me began to change. Like a veil thinning and falling away to reveal something new. I found myself climbing a ladder on the side of a small, stuccoed building, like the kind you see in Greece or with ancient Pueblo houses. I was climbing up to the flat, wide roof of some kind of home.

(beat)

I looked around. I wasn't too high up, but I could still see the alleyways and promenades below the house. It was a city -- a genuinely good city.

(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

I know that sounds strange, but what I mean is -- when I looked around, I didn't just see the sunset filling the sky with purple, pink, and shimmering gold, or the canals glittering below the wide streets, or even the colorful rooftops and lush gardens of the city around me. I could tell that people were happy here. Far away, I saw them smiling, laughing, and sharing meals with one another on their roofs and down in the streets. I just knew that their lives and their happiness were what mattered most in this place. I could feel it in the air, the same way I felt the guardian, and the fire, and the lake -- even if the emotions I felt couldn't have been more different. It was real. And I was really there. And when I reached the top of the ladder...

(DEEP BREATH)

I saw Allen. He was sitting there on the rooftop, silhouetted against the sky.

(beat)

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. One moment I felt shock, elation, and pain wash over me, but the next it was all replaced with relief as... As Allen smiled at me. Like he wasn't surprised to see me at all. And then he asked me to come up and watch the sunset with him.

(beat)

I hesitated. Out of everything that happened today, that's honestly what surprises me the most. That I hesitated when he asked. I looked down at the city again. There was a warm coastal breeze rolling off the distant ocean, playing through the trees and flowers below. A few strange birds floated on the updrafts, calling out and filling the air with life and music. And there was Allen. It couldn't have been more perfect.

(beat)

(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

I just felt something nagging at me, like there was something else I was supposed to be doing, something I'd forgotten. Allen laughed when he saw the look on my face. I think he actually called me a space cadet, like he used to whenever I got too lost in my own thoughts. Then he said...

(voice catching slightly)

"Your parents will be coming up soon. Might want to leave room for them on that ladder."

(beat)

I didn't know what to say. Allen insisted again, asking me to come sit next to him, but instead -- I closed my eyes and breathed in, deeper than before. The air felt colder than it should have in that warm, sunny place, and I felt the rough, weathered wood of the ladder under my hands again. I opened my eyes, and this time I could feel the edges of the illusion all around me. Or... Maybe just the edges where these woods and that city touched. Perhaps they're both real, in their own way. I'd like to think so.

(beat)

And then I remembered. I still had work to do in the world at the bottom of that ladder. I thought of Bill, and Maria, and... Even Anna. Counting on me. And if I climbed to the top of that ladder and joined Allen, they'd never know what happened to me. I'd just... Vanish out of the world. Gone without a trace.

(beat)

I opened my eyes, letting the warm breeze wash over me again. I took one last look at Allen. He was absolutely radiant in the fading light, as beautiful and striking as he was that November morning when I first fell in love with him. And then I finally spoke. I said...

(beat, hesitating)

Actually... Never mind. That's something I'd rather keep between Allen and I.

(MORE)

SAM BAILEY (CONT'D)

That, and the look on Allen's face
when I said it. That's an image
I'll keep with me until the day I
die.

Sam takes a significant pause, then starts again.

SAM BAILEY

I climbed back down the ladder, the
city fading from view until I found
myself back in the woods where I
started, with my feet on level
ground. When I looked around, I saw
that all of the other ladders had
vanished -- and when I looked back
towards the one I'd just been
climbing, it was gone, too.

(beat)

I walked back to the cabin without
incident, alone with my own
thoughts. The sun was setting by
the time I got back, which means
that either I spent more time in
that place than I thought, or time
passed more quickly here than it
did in that place.

(beat)

I made myself a cup of tea and sat
down to watch the sunset through
the front window. It wasn't
anything like the sunset in that
seaside city, but -- it was lovely,
even so. Even so.

Sam sits in silence, THEN TAKES ANOTHER SIP OF HIS TEA,
SIGHING CONTENTEDLY.

CLICK.

ROLL END THEME
AND CREDITS