

THE DIARY OF ALIZA SCHULTZ (SPECIAL 2023) - ALETHEIA

Original transcript edited by Orion and reviewed by Jenah

[BEGIN THE DIARY OF ALIZA SCHULTS SPECIAL 2023.]

[TDoAS theme song plays.]

UNKNOWN (TOM): Day one, 72 hours remain. At least, that's what the book says. Written neatly but clearly with some passion into the hard cover. It's written in pen, which was pressed hard enough into the cardboard during the writing that the grooves are visible. I won the book by accident in an online estate sale auction. That's the nature of estate sale. There are simply too many objects for each to be listed alone, so they must be sold in lots. Once you separate out the main lots, the things people care about, the miscellany tends to be thrown together, haphazardly. Everything must go. Furniture, electronics, knickknacks, and every single book. I bid \$150 on a lot that caught my eye. A VHS player with two unlabeled tapes, three jigsaw puzzles, and fifteen of these assorted books. There seemed to be at least a dozen books in each lot. The estate owner must have owned thousands. Though, what I was interested in was one of the jigsaw puzzles, Aletheia, a limited addition German puzzle that saw a limited print run in the 1980s. I could resell Aletheia for at least twice what I paid for the whole lot, if the puzzle was in good condition. Knowing just how old the puzzle was, I kept my hopes in check and set out on pick up day eager to survey my haul.

The estate of Burton Hutchinson, late owner of Aletheia, was huge, ornate, and stuffy. It felt as though no fresh air had been let into the building in years. Dust was kicked up into the air as savvy collectors of antiques hauled out more respectable finds than mine. Grandfather clocks, taxidermy, painting, a chandelier. I was there for Aletheia. Comparatively meager in value, but an antique within my understanding. My lot was in situ inside of a cabinet in a games nook, a friendly woman with a patient smile explained to me at the door. She offered me a trash bag to put my items in. I accepted gratefully, having had no plan on how to move my items out, save for my own two hands, large VHS player and all. I felt a duty to remove all of my items, no matter how singularly focused I was on Aletheia. Everything must go.

When I found the cabinet containing my lot, somebody had already opened it and was combing through my things. This annoyed me more than I could logically explain. I did not care about the

book that they were holding. It meant nothing to me. I only cared about Aletheia. The interloper was slight and pale, with dark messy hair. They had a book with no label in one hand, hard cover open. One of the fifteen books that I paid for. I cleared my throat loudly as I approached. They shot up straight, a sheepish look on their face, but they did not let go of the book.

“Oh my,” they sputtered. “How embarrassing, where are my manners? Um, hello, uh, you must be the guy who won this lot,” they said. “I chickened out after \$100. I won those five lots over there.”

They gestured to a large pile of mostly books in a nearby corner.

“Oh well, maybe this one wasn’t meant for me. I’m Mel.”

They extended their hand for a handshake, the other hand still holding on to the book. A book that clearly held some sort of value.

“I’m Tom,” I said, reciprocating the handshake.

“You’re a lucky guy, Tom,” they said. “There are plenty of people who pay good money for this book and then some. It’s too bad. I thought that it might be in this lot, based on the photos on the website, but I couldn’t be sure. Plus, I had already spent all of my good money on all of these other books, so I had to part with this one. So you’ll have to take good care of it for me. Okay, Tom?”

Mel smiled and snapped the book closed with a satisfying thud. Some dust left the surface of the book and took to the air. They handed the book to me.

“If you say so, I’m only interested in one of the puzzles,” I said.

“Oh, you absolutely must read this one,” Mel said. “It might be confusing at first, but everything becomes clear by the end. Will you do that for me, Tom? Will you read the book?”

“Sure, why not.” I said. I had no intention of reading the book.

“Thanks. And if you ever want to sell it, come find me,” Mel said. “Have fun.” They winked and exited the conversation to collect their lots and leave. I filled my trash bag and followed suit.

I examined the contents of my haul once I was safely home. Aletheia was in unfortunately poor condition, waterlogged and missing enough pieces that I could tell even without counting them. I didn't regret the purchase though. Aletheia was exceedingly rare. I had never seen it in person before, and might never have gotten the chance. The purchase was worth it just to see it, even in this state. Still, it was in no condition to resell. I could not in good faith offer it up to a buyer as a whole object. It would remain an interesting curiosity, something for me to prop up on a bookshelf.

The rest of the items were uninteresting, as expected. I didn't have any VHS tapes to put in the VHS player, as nice as it was, and I wasn't interested in watching some dead guys' home movies. The other puzzles were in as equally poor condition as Aletheia and not nearly as rare. The books felt like filler meant to pad out a bookcase and not books that someone would actually read. So, this only left the book that Mel had singled out to hold my attention. Even that book didn't appear interesting on its face. It was a journal with a blank hardcover. No frills, just the sort of thing you would buy to write down what mundane thing you had done that day, what you had eaten. I would have discarded it without a second thought if Mel hadn't implied that it was so valuable. They even asked me to read it and they were nice enough, even if I would probably never hear from them again. My curiosity and boredom got the better of me. And so, I decided to read.

“Day one, 72 hours remain. That is, for you, Tom, starting now. The timer begins as soon as you begin reading the book that you received from Burton Hutchinson. Hello, Tom. If this is to be read, then it is you who is reading this during a very specific time period. It is nice to finally meet you.”

I stopped reading and flipped quickly through the rest of the pages. Mel must have done this. This must be some sort of prank or a magic trick. But how? I could imagine ways to slip names into books, but Mel had only known my name for a very short amount of time before they handed me the book. A quick scouring of the inside revealed no concealed perforations or other ways of altering it. Nothing that I found satisfied my imagination, and so I read on.

“This is the last book in an infinite series. You are the last guest to arrive at the hotel, with infinite guests and infinite rooms. It is an honor to finally have you. The infinite other books come from many sources, but all of them culminate in the book you are reading now. These gears all turned in service of getting this book to you through Burton Hutchinson. The baton has been passed. I am sure that you are confused and unconvinced, but I doubt that such feeling will keep you from reading.”

The book was right about me. I was confused and I didn't believe that it was pointing me toward anything real. I considered it a bizarre work of interactive fiction, even if I could explain how it was interactive. Magic trick or not, I had no intention of putting the book down until I was finished reading it. If someone had put all of this together just for me, that was fascinating in its own right. It didn't have to be real. I would prefer if it wasn't. I was drawn in. It continued.

“There is a horrible beast that slinks just below the horizon. It is massive, green, spindly, with a shivering gait and elongated claws. It is always just beyond the curvature of the Earth. The authors of the books that culminated in this one dedicated their lives trying to see this creature. They flew planes. They stood on mountain tops trying to catch the briefest glance of a long green claw disappearing over the horizon as day transformed into night. None of them ever saw it. This book has made its way to you as Burton Hutchinson slinks under the horizon to join the beast. That is where we will all go. We will all join it there. You will too, but you will be different because you will see it. I am proud that you are reading this book in spite of your skepticism, Tom. It takes a strong and singular mind both to be a skeptic and to have one's mind changed. You will read until the words feel like thoughts that originated from your own mind. The beast that slinks below the horizon will visit you first in your dreams, then in your thoughts, and then in person. He will hold out a long claw. He will press it into you, and you will hold on to the claw. You will become part of the beast. Like all of us, like Burton Hutchinson before you, you will persist below the horizon. 72 hours remain. The instructions end here, for now. I wish you well.”

I turned to the next page. It was blank. The whole rest of the book was blank. I suddenly couldn't remember if there had been words there before. I closed the book and sat it on top of the other books from the estate sale. There was nothing else to read, after all.

As soon as I had set the book down, the phone rang. I'd on;t normally answer calls from numbers that I don't recognize, but something about the book had put me in a suggestive state, a sort of hypnosis. I answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Tom! So good to hear from you again. It's Mel," the voice on the other end said.

"Mel? How did you get this number?" I asked.

"Your name is publicly listed on the auction website," Mel explained. "Because you won the lot with the book in it?"

I knew that the auction website did not list my phone number, but I pushed that aside.

"What did you call me about?" I asked.

"You promised me you'd read the book," they said. "So, did you? What did you think?"

"Is this some sort of prank, Mel?" I asked. "How did you get my name in there?"

"Your name is in there?" Mel asked. "It was blank when I tried to read it. How interesting!"

"This is harmless enough, but I don't really have the patience for it," I said. "What is going on?"

"You know that stupid puzzle you wanted? Aletheia?" They asked.

"What about it?" I asked.

"From the Greek 'Lethe', the river in the underworld. You drink its water to forget your old life after you die. What does the puzzle look like?" They asked.

"It's a painting of a fish with silver scales." I said.

“I thought so. I have books too, you know. That’s how I knew it was a fish. Anyway, sorry about your puzzle, and enjoy your book. And think about that river in the underworld. Okay, bye.”

The line went dead. I wasn’t sure if Mel was pranking me, or if they were somehow true believers of a great beast that slinks below the horizon. Regardless, the whole ordeal left me bemused and tired. It was getting late. The sun had set without me noticing. I cleaned up and went to bed.

Day two, 48 hours remain. I had a dream that night about the beast that slinks below the horizon, just as the book said that I would. I saw the beast, but I could not see all of it at once. I could only focus on pieces. I would forget about one piece as I concentrated on the next. The beast was down in a valley, and I was watching it from a mountaintop above. The beast took up the entire valley. It was tall enough to look me in the eye on top of the mountain, but I never saw any eyes. The beast seemed to be made entirely of limbs, thorny, rough, green, like branches, an ever-morphing thorn bush with sharp claws protruding in all directions. It moved shakily away from me, gravity pulling the ball of branches over itself as it half rolled. Eventually, one long claw reached the horizon. The beast hooked the claw over the horizon and pulled the rest of its mass along with it until I could no longer see it. I woke up.

I kept a close eye on the book all day, checking it frequently. If I truly were to expect more instructions, then I didn’t want to miss their appearance. I still treated the book with skepticism, even after the dream, which might have been induced by the book in the first place. I imagined some sort of invisible ink that would only dry and reveal itself after a set period of time, which would reveal the next set of pages to me. Still, just a magic trick. There were ways of doing that.

It wasn’t until a full 24 hours had passed from the last time that I read from the book that more words appeared on the page. I didn’t catch them appearing. I had checked the book an hour prior and there were no new words. These words appeared fully formed. They didn’t fade in over time. They were simply there. I did not have an explanation for this. I opened the book to the new chapter and began to read.

“Day two, 48 hours remain, and you are still a skeptic. I admire that about you, Tom. Your suppositions about the world do not vanish because you have seen something that you can’t explain. However, I must ask you to let your guard down. You had a dream where you saw the

beast last night. The rest of us have not been so lucky as to achieve even that. It is safe for you to trust what you are thinking. You saw him. He saw you. The connection has been made. There is knowledge that can only be seen and understood once under the horizon. The beast had correspondence with you. Did you understand it? Did you think what it was thinking? I hope that you could see the truth. What a wonder that would be. There is truth and there are objects, and the point of thought is to map one onto the other. Our incomplete minds make this impossible. Truth lies below the horizon. It cannot exist anywhere else. You cannot locate it without the beast. The beast is the map. The beast is honed to truth, like a bird using magnetoreceptors to decide its migration route. You will be traveling soon, Tom. You will be going to a new home. Trust the magnet in your forehead. It will lead you below the horizon. We will find your way home. We will all meet harmoniously there, like the overtones of a perfectly performed pitch. The overtones of our memories will dictate the timbre of the truth. Everything will be remembered, forever. We will not drink the water from the river and forget, only to start over again. We will surpass starting over again. You will descend below the horizon without drinking. You will find truth through continuation. 48 hours remain. This ends the instructions for now. There may be further instructions, but you may not find them within this book. I wish you well.”

Just as it had the day prior, the book ended there. The remaining pages were blank. One page near the back had a corner missing. Had it always been missing? I hadn't carefully inspected every page. I closed the book firmly and set it back atop the estate sale hall.

As I took a step forward from my chair to the shelf, I stumbled. My foot caught a low point in the floor that I was not expecting. I inspected the floor where I had stumbled. There was a sizable dent in the hardwood, about the size of a fist in diameter and equally as deep. The wood was warped but not broken around it. I had never noticed this dent before. It was possible that I could have dropped something too hard on the floor while moving things into the room. The garbage bag full of junk was heavy and could make a dent of that size if dropped from enough height. Even the VHS player alone could do that. I didn't remember dropping it though. In fact, I remember being especially careful with it out of fear that the plastic bag would rip at the bottom and its contents would fall out. There was also the possibility that this dent occurred long ago and I was just now noticing it. The timing of my discovery peaked a superstitious part of my mind that I tried to keep at bay. I grumbled to myself. I had surely already lost the rent deposit on this apartment in myriad other ways. This was merely a minor inconvenience in a room that I rarely used.

I left the room and attempted to go about my day in vain. I found myself fixated on the book and its contents. I was too distracted to get anything done. I would get flashes of the beast in my head, but the flashes weren't from the dream that I had the night before. These were new visions of the beast, ones that felt like they were being beamed into my head.

The beast was looking at me, pleading. I knew that it was looking, but I never saw any eyes. I knew that it was trying to communicate something to me, but I didn't have the tools or the language to know what. I could see it extending a long green claw out to me. I could not extend myself back to meet it even if I wanted to. The beast was in my thoughts. It was not in front of me in the physical world. It existed inside of my head. The phone rang as I was thinking about the beast, startling me. I answered.

"Hello?"

"Tom, it's so good to hear your voice again," Mel said. "Did you read the book again today?"

"I did. Did you know that new words were going to appear?" I asked.

"I don't know that much about your book. That's why I wanted to see it so bad at the estate," Mel said.

"Do you believe in the stuff about a beast under the horizon?" I asked.

"I guess so. I mean, I believe in truth. I believe in unconcealment of truth, whether that's defined by the horizon and the curvature of the Earth is arbitrary. The truth is the truth, don't you think?" They asked.

"I suppose so," I said. "I'm a bit lost on what it all means."

"Well, did you solve your stupid puzzle?" Mel asked.

"No, Mel, the puzzle's damaged. It's waterlogged and it's missing pieces. I don't even know if the pieces that are in the box would fit together," I said.

"Well, it's worth a try. Might give you some insight into what the book's trying to communicate to you," they said.

"Maybe if I have some time after dinner," I said.

"Do it before tomorrow and come visit me. I have something that I want to give to you," they said. "I've been working on a sewing project."

"I don't have your address," I said.

"Sure you do. I stuck it in the puzzle box before you got to the estate," they said. "You didn't see it in there?"

"Must have ended up on the bottom," I said.

"Well, solve it already and come visit me. I gotta go. There's sewing to be done. Bye, Tom." The line went dead.

I don't remember what I did after I got off the phone with Mel. The thoughts about the beast slinking below the horizon monopolized my experience. If I ate dinner, I have no recollection of it. At some point, I found myself in bed, not remembering how I got there, not knowing if I was going to bed or if I had woken up in the middle of the night. I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

I woke up the next morning to find Aletheia out and solved on my dining room table. It was as fully assembled as was possible, the painting of the silver fish. Some of the pieces bulged against each other, made turgid by water damage, squeezed into the correct spot holding tension. Other pieces were missing entirely. The missing pieces were concentrated around two parts of the puzzle, the fish's eye and the fish's mouth. A slip of paper with Mel's address on it was laying on top of Aletheia.

Day three, 24 hours remain.

The slip of paper with Mel's address pointed me to a dilapidated apartment building all the way across town. It looked to be an inspection away from being condemned by the city. The parking lot only had two cars in it. My car and one other, which I presumed to be Mel's. I double and triple checked the slip of paper to make sure that I had the right address. I was definitely in the right place.

I had trouble believing that the chipper person from the estate sale and the phone calls lived in a place as run down as this. Mel appeared to be the only person living there, too. The place felt unsafe. I thought about cutting my losses and turning back, but I couldn't stop thinking about the beast below the horizon. Even on the drive over, I got distracted at a stoplight thinking about the beast and was only brought back to this world by the honking of angry commuters. It felt like it was getting closer to me. And Mel was the only other person who knew what was going on. They were the only one who knew about the book. I pushed down my fear and made my way up six flights of stairs to the apartment listed on the slip of paper. I knocked on the door.

The doorknob turned slowly and deliberately. It felt like an important moment, as though it were initiating a ceremony. When there was enough of a crack in the door, a hand slipped through and beckoned me inside. It was pale and thin like Mel's hand, but I did not see the rest of Mel. I entered cautiously and looked around.

The room was not what I was expecting to see in an apartment building in such disarray. It was clean, large, and mostly empty. Bookshelves extended from corner to corner, wall to ceiling, all the way across the room. Each bookshelf was packed tightly with books, all of which had the same basic appearance as the book that I had been reading. Medium-sized, plain, hardcover books. I did not see any room on the shelves for additional books, but there were also no books lying around on the floor. The room had exactly as many books as it could carry.

Mel had taken their place in the center of the room as I entered. They were wearing a flowing silver robe that made a small puddle of fabric on the floor around them. The robe concealed most of their features. I could only see their thin, pale hands, their gaunt face, and their dark, messy hair. I could not see the rest of Mel.

"I'm so glad you made it, Tom," Mel said. "I was worried that you weren't going to come."

"I came because I can't stop thinking about the beast," I explained.

"Do you believe what you think about?" They asked.

"I don't know what I'm experiencing if it isn't belief," I said. "I can feel the beast inside of my thoughts. I'm not merely thinking. I'm using my thoughts to embody..."

"Truth!" Mel completed my sentence. "You're attaching truth to the thoughts. That's belief."

"So I guess I do believe in the beast below the horizon," I said.

"That's good," Mel said. "There isn't much time. This is your final confirmation. Of course, I don't think that you could have gotten here if you didn't already believe." They smiled at me. "So I guess I did a pretty good job showing up to the estate and drawing your interest to that book."

"You tricked me into reading it?" I asked.

"No, I convinced you to read it," they said. "Just by making it look valuable. That caught your interest, right?"

"I was going to throw it in the trash," I said.

"You were never going to throw it in the trash, because I was never going to not convince you to read the book," Mel said. And what about your books, Mel?" I asked. "All of these, what do they say? Do they explain what's going on? What's about to happen to me?"

"Hmm." Mel scrunched up their face. "Not exactly. There are a lot of books or they say a lot of things. And those things are about what's happening to you, but it's not as simple as that. None of these are your book. Your book is the final book. All of these other books flow out of it in reverse. That's what it is. Ebb and flow. It all ebbs and flows, and from what I understand, it's all about to flow into you."

"Is that what it means to go under the horizon? Everything is going to flow into me?" I asked.

"I think so," Mel said. "What happened when you solved that puzzle?"

"The fish was missing its eyes and its mouth," I replied.

"Did you think about the river, Lethe?" They asked. "It would be a waste if you made it under the surface only to drink the water of forgetfulness and have nothing to show for it."

"What do I do about that?" I asked. "Don't I have to drink the water and forget? Isn't that why Lethe exists? Doesn't everybody have to drink the water?"

"Well, fish don't drink water, do they?" Mel asked. "Not like we do. They filter water to get oxygen from it, but that's not drinking. That's like when we breathe air. So fish that swim in the river aren't drinking the water."

"So I'm the fish?" I asked.

"You become the fish," they said.

"How do I become the fish? Is it something that I have to do?" I asked.

"That's why the books wanted me to bring you here, Tom," they said. "It isn't something that you do. It's something that you learn. I've been fashioning together a message for you, a message that I'm not allowed to read, but that I am allowed to bring to you. I spent all of last night sewing it together."

"Okay, what is the message?" I asked.

"I'll show you, but you have to leave once you've seen it," Mel said.

"I'm ready," I said.

"All right," Mel said. "Thank you for letting me help you."

Mel brought their arms straight up into the air, the sleeves of the robes fell down, revealing their bare arms. I heard the flapping of book pages. Once their arms were free from the sleeves, they crossed their arms across their chest, one arm above the other, each hand aligned with the opposite elbow. Sewn into the flesh of Mel's arms were four small leather-bound books, two on each arm. The wounds looked fully healed. The books looked like appendages to Mel's body. It was not possible for such a thing to heal in one night, if ever.

The books flapped wildly as Mel moved their arms into place, lining the four books up with each other. Once their arms were in place, the books all snapped to specific pages in an instant, revealing an image that could only be seen when all of the pages aligned. It was a drawing of a fish, hooked by the mouth, being drawn into the pages by a long, sharp, green claw. As soon as I recognized the image, it was gone again, lost in a flurry of stochastically moving pages.

"Leave once you've seen it," Mel reminded me. "Don't forget, Tom, don't drink from the river."

"I saw it," I said.

"Bye, Tom," Mel said. "Good luck."

I turned and left the room.

When I returned home, the dent in my floor had transformed into a hole the size of a basketball. The boards were no longer warped, they had rotted away and fallen into the hole. There was a dark, empty space extending further than I could see. A moldy odor seeped out from the floor and into the room. It was late. I placed a throw rug over the hole and went to bed.

Day four. Zero hours remain.

The sun went down for the final time. It was pitch black. I was drowning in the river. I could feel something holding me under the water, pulling my limbs down every time I tried to scramble to the surface. I could not see what was holding me under. I held my breath with determination. I refused to drink the water. I refused to forget. I believed in the knowledge that I had unconcealed. I refused to drink the water.

I could feel the river rocks pound against my body as the current carried me under the horizon. I could feel blows coming down on my head, attempting to shock me into giving up. I refused to forget where I had been.

I held my breath until it felt like my lungs burst. They were turning inside out, shifting, morphing. I could feel my body shrinking, my limbs pulling inward until they were gone. Fins, gills. I was swimming. I was breathing the water.

I was a beast of the ocean. The water was the medium that I swam in. It was the entirety of what I knew. It was the truth under the horizon. I swam in this water for eternity.

The hole in the floor first claimed the entire room, then the entire house. Every piece of me has fallen in and disappeared. It filled up with water. There are sinkholes appearing all across the city, all across the world. Buildings are falling in. They are falling under the horizon. They are filling up with water. I am following the entrance to where the beast can see me.

There will be no one left to instruct if you drink from the river and forget.

I wish you well.

[TDoAS theme song plays.]

[END THE DIARY OF ALIZA SCHULTS SPECIAL 2023.]