

“The Book With No End”

by Colleen Anderson

excerpted from

Bibliotheca Fantastica

edited by

Don Pizarro

Dagan Books, LLC
Ithaca, NY

Bibliotheca Fantastica © 2013 by Dagan Books, LLC.

Stories copyright © 2013 by the authors.

Cover illustration by Galen Dara.

Cover design and interior layout by Carrie Cuinn.

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher.

Printed in the United States.

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro.

ISBN-10: 0-9831373-8-2

ISBN-13: 978-0-9831373-8-2



Logo by Fiona Lynn Zimmer

Please visit us on the web at

<http://daganbooks.com>

THE BOOK WITH NO END

Lizbet feels much like an ant as she and the others slowly shovel and brush away the fine gritty dirt from the emerging walls. Her specialization in dead languages will give her an edge but does not excuse her from being on hands and knees in the sand. She will decipher any cuneiform tablets uncovered, should they be lucky enough to find any. A month ago ground-penetrating radar indicated several buried chambers in the Sumerian city of Nippur, one of the seats of civilization and the home of the earliest form of writing.

The area has been picked over by hungry archaeologists for decades; it is the land where Gilgamesh and Enkidu went on adventures, where Inanna tromped the unknown caverns of her sister's realm to overcome death. If any truths are to be found, they will be in the oldest myths, when humans tried to crack open the world's mysteries. This is what Lizbet needs: to unearth the very genesis of when civilization awoke and grew in might.

What she wants is complete control. Being able to manipulate boys, men, and teachers has always given Lizbet a primordial thrill, as if she were the battery that ran the world.



Two grueling weeks under a sun that sucks the moisture from skin and withers everyone beneath its glare. Lizbet is ready to take a flight home at the end of the week. They haven't even found the foundations yet, just walls and more walls. Even an abandoned village would have a few artifacts. Maybe it is time to look at a more illustrious career, a faster road to what she wants.

Markus has just called a halt after twelve hours, a normal day when you're racing against the time a foreign government

gives you. Back-breaking work; they may as well be ancient Sumerian peasants. Lizbet stands and stretches, running her tongue over dry lips. Sipping water from her Camelbak, she wipes from her eyes stray strands of hair now the color of dunes and peers at the sun lumbering toward its dusty bed. Another tedious day.

She turns toward the tent to find shade and takes a step when the ground capsizes beneath her. There isn't even time to yell as dirt and stone follow her into a hole.

Her plummet is buffered by sand and the old sandstone beneath her feet. She half-slides, half-falls in a cascade and lands on the hump of the water bag strapped to her back. Dirt and stones rain upon her. She opens her eyes to see a dark shape plunge toward her; she moves her head to the side barely in time to avoid the large piece of masonry. Blinking and scrubbing at the dirt in her mouth and eyes, she coughs and sits up. Her back is sore and her hip is already pulsing with pain. There will be a few bruises from the twenty-foot fall but no bones seem broken. As she stands, she moves each limb then, satisfied, slaps dirt from her clothes and hair. She sucks water from the tube, swishes, and spits out mud. As people's shouts filter from above Lizbet looks around, still rubbing dirt from her eyes. A treasure trove reveals itself: more artifacts than almost any Sumerian excavation to date.

Someone calls down.

"Yes, I'm all right. Just bruised."

"We'll find a rope and ladder and get you out."

Lizbet barely hears them as she walks around the rectangular chamber that is bathed in amber light and settling dust motes. She has discovered a mystery. The ancients built rituals around them: the Orphic rites, the Dionysian and Mithraic cults, the Eleusinian mysteries—all these had force and endurance. There is something here; she feels it at this ancient nexus of civilization where words were given power, and

knowledge was stored for millennia. Lizbet's fingers tingle. It is here again: that electric vibration, that thrumming resonance she senses when power is within her reach.

She runs her hands over the contours of three stone bulls and of petite, glazed clay bull dancers, looks at turned wooden bowls full of unsown seeds, and stops in front of a low palette with the dusky bones of some past lord or lady. A wooden chest, several bronze blades, a folded pile of grayed fabric that would disintegrate on touch completes the riches of the funereal chamber. She circles the room again and is drawn to the skeleton, not laid out in any sarcophagus, bare of the shreds of any garment or of the telltale glint of ornaments. Stripped of everything but its bones. Devoid even of any desiccated remnants of hair or flesh.

What can one tell from the bones of the dead, those ivory sculptures no longer corrupted by the indulgences and errors of living? Only the greatest stories, the traumas that embed into a person's core, only those etch themselves on bones. And yet these are more pristine than baby's bones. No nicks, no mended breaks, teeth all present, perfectly straight and whole, no axe marks of any untimely death, no disease nor malformation have touched this body. Everything in the room is incredibly fragile and the air that now circulates could destroy some of the artifacts in days. She moves softly, almost reverently, and kneels beside the wooden bed on which the pristine skeleton rests. How could anyone in an age of primitive medicine remain unmarred?

The palette is only about a foot off the ground; beneath it, Lizbet glimpses a shadow on the floor tiles that must have once been brightly painted. She reaches underneath and pulls out a stiff bundle tied with cord that crumbles in her hands. An animal skin, most likely cow, crackles and powders brown hair onto the floor. The bundle is as long as her forearm and twice as thick. Lizbet delicately folds back a tiny portion of the old hide

and pokes her finger inside to feel a supple softness, slightly clammy and unpleasant. Tilting it to the light, she distinguishes some form of marking. A parchment or vellum with inked symbols upon it. Her heart thumps harder now than it did from her fall.

There is noise around the hole as people prepare to let the ladder down, and Lizbet knows she can't share this find. Quickly, she drains the water from her Camelbak and unzips it to wedge the package inside. She pulls off her shirt, leaving on the tank top, and puts the pack back on with the shirt tied to it so that the bulk is disguised.

“Okay, Lizbet.”

She climbs the ladder and is bombarded with questions.

“What's down there? Some furniture?”

“That and more,” she tells Markus, who keeps shifting from foot to foot. “Untouched artifacts, a skeleton; weeks of work.” There is so much talk and chaos that no one even notices her overly full water pack; when she pleads bruises and needing to lay down, there are no questions.

Lizbet will return to the lab with the first shipment of artifacts: one tablet and a couple of pots with engraved cuneiform. Other quadrants have yet to be excavated. But she has enough and wants to examine her find in private.



The cracked animal pelt reveals three layers: papery gray leaves, several unknown powdery substances, and a sticky residue. Lizbet finds the inner layer is a skin or sheath still supple after millennia. She experiences such a rush that she has to sit down, as if she'd inhaled an opiate.

She works painstakingly for weeks to remove the integument from its chrysalis. With techniques perfected for burn victims, she immerses the skin in a stainless-steel water tank

and doesn't unroll it until she's certain it maintain its integrity. Still, she peers at what she can with a magnifying glass, noticing the smooth, cinnamon brown color as well as the cuneiform symbols in red and black ink.



After a second week of immersion, Lizbet carefully unrolls and cleans the skin. It is human.

This amaranthine skin is an entry to another world—like the Rosetta Stone. While it may be the key, it is not the full answer to her quest. The cuneiform script is not unusual, nor dissimilar from previously excavated tablets, but the arrangement of symbols can make a world of difference in meaning.

The earliest writings were tabulations of possessions. Soon after, people started to write about the mysteries, to create formulas and ways to cross into the underworld or the sphere of the gods. Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Herakles: the earliest adventurers walked in realms that held true control and the potential for fundamental metamorphosis. Lizbet feels that hunger and begins rereading all the epics, but only the most accurate translations. This skin is worth all the finds in the world.

The amaranth skin tests her knowledge and expands it as she unravels the tattooed script. It tells of a binding, readings, maps, immortality, and the greatest of powers: all will know the name of the wearer.

She knows it now; that is what she truly wants—immortality.

There are three different types of information in these inked markings: short phrases about the sheath's abilities when worn, riddles to solve, and instructions for attaining immortality. This is only the start of a long pursuit. The recipe is

in every inch of skin covered in pictographs from the flap and eye holes that once covered the skull, down to the thin twists that were fingers and toes, but it does not list the ingredients except as clues, such as where to hunt. This could take years.



For the next ten years Lizbet travels the globe by plane, train, jeep, horse, mule, and camel. She ages. She reads numerous papyri, scrolls, tablets, stones, and texts, solving puzzles and riddles. Some lead to other artifacts or ingredients. The rarer spices, oils, and pastes, she ships to a post office box; the artifacts require a range of blackmail, auction purchases, and bribery. Her expertise in ancient languages allows access to most texts, whether painted on stone, engraved, woven, imprinted, written, or branded.

There are items that no longer exist, and those she must reconstruct. When unable to find the kudurru of Nebuchadnezzar's vision, she re-examines all such stones and checks the translations. The vision is engraved on the stone that held boundary allotments for King Marduk-nādin-ahhē. The museum won't release that kudurru, so she photographs it and has a jeweler meticulously carve a replica in black nephrite. Each reconstruction is worth the expense.

She dated the tattooed skin to be around eight thousand years old; it has not aged, is indeed like amaranth known for its long lived quality. How is it that the sheath holds information about more recent civilizations and artifacts? That alone indicates some prognostication and hints that it might be a piece of the map to immortality. She discovers a clue on a worn clay tablet, tracing the lead through a partially burned manuscript back to an inscription on a weather-beaten wall. She must guess and think and try to parse these together into the precise instructions.

There are other tasks and tests set out in those books, yellowed scrolls, and slabs of marble and clay. Laced within the intricate symbols and tales are riddles to solve, revealing tasks to fulfill. Sometimes the message is repeated in different areas of the skin, in slightly different phrasings but always three times. Lizbet knows that early forms of chants and songs used repetition to memorize tales. She does not need to do this as she has the script on flesh plus all her notes.

Before she begins to undertake the list of tasks, she must verify that their order is correct.

The first requirement is relatively easy: *Segregate yourself*. For years her jealous obsession has made of her a recluse.

Next: *Examine the living*. She sits in libraries, funeral parlors, restaurants, and emergency rooms. She walks malls, parks, and campuses, studying people in all their states. Every test requires her to examine her own feelings and emotions, and then to list them. People are mere lab mice, and she finds them easy to understand. Her motivation is clear but not so her own emotions.

Examine the dead. She volunteers to do forensic archaeology on homicide victims. While the first few gory examinations revolt her, used as she is to the desiccated forms of the ancient world, she becomes curious; what murder method was used, did the victim experience pain, did she suffer long? Did the murderer feel anything, joy, anger, numbness?

Do not help those in need. She travels to Haiti, searching out the worst slums, the most destitute and ill. She strolls among them and, rather than compassion, feels revulsion at the scrawny limbs and the people with cholera. They are rotting and should be put down.

Be cruel. When Maggie complains of a sore tooth, Lizbet responds, "If you stopped eating candy, your teeth would be better off and you'd lose some of that weight you're gaining." When José shows up with his short hair gelled into spikes, she

laughs: "That won't hide your bald spot, nor get you a date." No one willingly works with her anymore, but she doesn't need them. She continues this stage of the test: two women milling at the subway, she just pushes out of her way; she stares at an old woman bowed over by the weight of her wrinkles, and stays in her seat; she kicks away a street person's cup of coins. She feels no shame, only a small joy that she now possesses this power.

There are many tests; their goal is to eliminate her feelings and emotions. But when she has distilled them down to the last one, the exhilaration of control, she becomes stuck. She cannot get rid of pride, anger, exaltation, and the small thrills of command. She must hone herself into the perfect vessel or the process will not work. Once she attains immortality, then she can glory in it.

If she attains immortality.

The weeks stretch into months, and her frustration mounts as she feels the push of time. Emotion is her undoing. The more she tries to bury them, the more her emotions surface and the stronger she wishes to drown them with scotch. To have wasted so many years, cut off from everything, all in the vain hope of gaining true power. All for nothing. She has failed.

She buys another five bottles of scotch. And then, another five.



Lizbet's binge rides her through several months, until she is numb, uncaring. One day, in a bleary stupor, she realizes that she cannot allow herself to care; it is the caring about the outcome of her quest, whether negative or positive, that brought her down. In the end the alcohol is her savior; she realizes she was a fool for almost letting that near-final step become insurmountable. She sobers up and repeats all the steps again.

This time around the tests are, paradoxically, both more

demanding and easier. She watches and sometimes even participates in events, all without reaction; the more tests she undergoes, the less she feels.

On sabbatical, Lizbet spends more time alone, often in the dark, without food, to meditate on the cuneiform characters the sheath has shown. Loneliness doesn't matter. She is able to read the different messages; hidden messages become visible when viewed from dermis or epidermis side; head to toes; right arm to left leg; fingers then toes; areas where the flesh once covered organs, such as heart, kidneys, lungs, stomach; the eight chakras in a line from genitals to scalp. It is the ultimate topographic map; each layer of meaning is deeper, more profound.

Thus, she learns the rudimentary language of the elements. It would take decades of practice to fully master the skill, but she nevertheless stirs a leaf, ripples water, causes smoke to rise from a twig, and makes a bloom open, by simply pronouncing the right letters in the right order. She has no need to write down these arts; if her journal is ever discovered, any who read it will need to find their own steps.

There is one final preparation before she can undertake the ritual to bind the sheath to her. It will be the last time she can let herself feel emotion, and it must be convincing, most of all to herself. She goes to a club, drinks good scotch, and finds a man worth fucking. She forms no attachments but brings him to her place, then discards him once she's done. The act is repeated with a variety of men until she's sure the seed has taken. There must be no record, so she buys the pack of strips and waits for the color to confirm that she is pregnant. She waits long enough to make sure she doesn't lose the fetus; meanwhile she continues to study the skin, the Dead Sea Scrolls, hieroglyphs and pictographs, the Talmud, the Bible, the Quran—but only the earliest versions, the purest. She does not find any more clues or messages. The time has come.



Lizbet packs everything she needs: the artifacts, the skin, the unguents and herbs, water, food, and camping gear. She finds a cave that will not be visited until spring creeps out. Autumn has strangled the life from last leaves and they lie, discarded husks, upon the ground. The sky is clear and pallid as the weather cools, and she has enough wood.

In various nooks, fissures, and natural shelves of grey and black striated stone she places the scrolls, the stones, the vessels, and the statues that she procured from all over the world. They might not be necessary for the final ritual, but she leaves nothing to chance. Great sacrifices have been called for; she has met all but one last requirement.



The months have passed in contemplation and practice. Lizbet can now move water, wind, earth, and fire, though it is still a demanding feat. Winter has been cold and dry, and spring will heave itself from the earth soon. She does not mind the pain when the contractions begin. The circumstances of her labor do not matter; only that the fetus live.

The final preparation is the most explicit: suckle the baby for three days, then kill it while looking into its eyes. It cries as if it knows its fate. Its measly life will serve a greater goal.

Lizbet decides to strangle it; the neck is so small that she only needs one hand to encircle the soft pink flesh. Her fingers sink in as she squeezes. The baby flails and shrieks only momentarily before the blood supply is cut off. Fascinated, Lizbet watches the face blister red and the eyes bulge.

She brings the body near the fire and guts it with the curved gurkha blade she acquired in India. Blood pools like oil on the stone; she uses it to mark her skin with sigils. The entrails

are set aside for later. She cuts through the skin and meat, and breaks the soft bones, puts all in an iron kettle to which she adds spices and water, and a few root vegetables. She eats the food thus prepared over the next three days.

Three is one of the great magic numbers. It stands for past, present, and future; beginning, middle, and end; life, death, and rebirth. Religious paintings were done as triptychs. There are many groups of three. Stories are often written in three parts. This is the final part of the trilogy.

It is the end of the third day as Lizbet checks for any residual emotions. She is full and ready. There is no elation. She will do as she set out to do those many years ago. It is time to begin the culminating ritual.

The intestines have dried into sinewy rawhide and lie upon the small wooden altar near the fire. The fire is built high for warmth and for the spirit to find her. Her clothes are piled within a niche in the cave wall. Her skin shines with the oils of datura, nightshade, and poppy. The obsidian blade used in Zapotec rituals to release *istli* through human sacrifice lies next to the amaranth sheath stretched out on the ground.

She has eaten nothing since she consumed her child three days before. Three days of feasting, three of fasting, a circle completed; what was taken in and transformed is consumed and excreted. The coils wind in and out.

She sits upon the tattooed skin and writes her final words in the journal. Lizbet closes the book, then picks up the blade and carves fine symbols into her flesh; she marks the chakras. Triangles, swirls, waves, circles—figures as old as time with the power of eternity behind them. Feet, ankles, knees, pubic bone, belly, chest, back, hands, wrists, elbows, neck, forehead—all have characters etched into them; blood oozes from her.

She binds the sheath to her ankles, then to her wrists, using her teeth to tie the knot. Next she fastens the amaranth sheath around her belly and neck with the sinew of her sacrifice. Lizbet

lies down, the cuts stinging and throbbing in time with her pulse; on these next three nights of the equinox, she chants the words of power. As she is absorbed, she thinks: *I shall be reborn to live forever.*



Humanity is a book: their stories make up the world; their skins, like this skin, tell a tale. I am the reader who knows each book's ending. I have read the leaves left here by the binder. The stories often begin with a birth, but the tales differ, though they all end with my beginning.

I have two siblings. My first task is to kill the oldest, skin the body, and lay out the clues for the next binder. One is new, one is old, one is always in transition.

I look at the pattern of glowing symbols on my skin; they tell me the way. I call the wind and mist to veil me, to absorb me. Then I fade. I am everywhere.

We three are everywhere. Our quest was written at the beginning of time. Our touch reaches all and they will know our name. Some have called us Fate or Destiny but most people call us Death. Ours is the longest tale in the world. We are the book with no end.