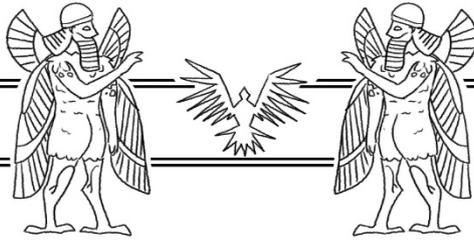


# THE ERESHKIGAL TAROT



## Part 1

He awoke to the sensation of fresh air tickling his nose. He tried to open his eyes to get rid of those pictures that had seared into his brain, images of muddy water creeping higher and higher. He was sitting on his throne when it reached his ankles. It took only minutes until it covered his knees. And then the walls began to wobble as the mud bricks, soaked with water, slowly dissolved. He still sat on his throne when the ceiling beams creaked. The muddy water reached his chest. His mind wandered. Had it been the right decision to reject Utnapishtim's offer to join him on his huge ship or had pride and cantankerousness taken the better of him? But after all, what was there to be gained? His life's work as a king, the wealth of the city of Shuruppak was drowning in the floods. There was no fresh start for an old man like him. The water touched his chin. He forced himself to stay seated, to resist the buoyant forces of the floods. His hands clutched the armrests of his throne as he stared at the ceiling watching the cracks in the beam widen until it finally burst and fell into the floods with an enormous splash. The water engulfed the old king's face. He could not breathe, yet he still clung to his throne. Only his feet struggled in a last fight for survival that was as instinctive as it was hopeless.

He had died and normally he should have arrived at Irkalla by now. However, this fresh breeze felt very much of this world. And wasn't there a twinkling star shining into what could only be his grave? Looking more closely, he realized that he was not more than a few inches below ground. Carefully he tried to move his right hand. He felt a slight movement, but it was too weak to sweep the layer of sand, earth and clay out of the way. A horrible thought crossed his mind: If this was no grave, he must be lying where the flood had washed him up. He had to find out where he was.

With all his might he moved his legs, his arms and even his head, feeling the dust entering his nose and mouth. Strangely enough, he did not feel an urge to cough. After moving relentlessly for a couple of minutes, the crack near his eyes widened and he managed to loosen a bigger lump of earth with his shoulder. He stopped for a while to rest, then braced himself and sat up. The land around him was flat, with branches and stems of uprooted trees, door frames, rusty wheels and chains lying around haphazardly. When Ubaru Tutu shook the dust off his limbs, he looked incredulously at a pair of dark brown bird's legs with sharp claws.

His shoulders and most of his body were covered with feathers. There was only one explanation for this metamorphosis: He had become a gidim, a ghost. And he was still here on earth because he, the king of Shuruppak, had not been properly

buried. What a disgrace what a scandal! Wild rage overcame him, a destructive frenzy he had never experienced in his lifetime. His anger was overwhelming but at the same time it felt good as he felt full of an energy that reminded him of life.

“Where is Utnapishtim?” he snorted. “I bet this useless fool survived in his wooden colossus and completely forgot the rest of his family; Couldn't even muster the common courtesy to bury my dead body! But I remember you, my son, I have not forgotten you! Just you wait till I find you!”

He kept muttering to himself as he wandered the barren wasteland, kicking objects lying around with his feet, when he stumbled across a hand protruding from the ground. It seemed he was not the only one in this dismal situation. Ubaru Tutu grabbed the pale hand which was bloated from having spent weeks under the water just as his own and pulled. First an arm appeared and suddenly a man sat up. Ubaru Tutu crouched down to discern his face in the darkness. It seemed familiar, although its features were distorted from an incredible rage and someone or something had bitten off a part of his chin leaving a blackish hole through which part of the jaw bone was showing.

“Bantu?” the old King asked hesitantly.

“Your Majesty”, the old scribe cried out. Is this the underworld? He looked around incredulously. “It seems we are still on earth. This means – “

“We've been left here without being properly buried”, Ubaru Tutu completed the sentence.

Bantu stammered, “This is outrageous! A king and his court who tragically perished in the floods, have been refused their right to a proper burial!”

“It would be,” the old King replied, “if my son and his followers had survived. And this is exactly what we must find out. If they are still alive, we will make sure they will regret the day they were born.”

Bantu nodded eagerly and spreading his newly acquired wings he noted, “At least our means to hunt them down seem to have improved.”

Ubaru Tutu hesitated and looked at what was protruding out of his back, before he tried to flap his wings the way he knew birds did. He rose immediately and laughed.

“This is certainly a better way of locomotion than anything we had before,” he shouted down to his old servant who was patting down his legs to get rid of the sand. Bantu followed his master's lead and soon the two gidim soared over the unknown plain that had become their accidental and insufficient burial ground.

From above they could see that the crust of hardened sand broke up hundreds of times beneath them and arms, legs, and whole bodies of the drowned population of Sumer raised from their makeshift graves. Maybe it was the memory of his life as a king, maybe it was the realization that this could be his chance to take vengeance for the unjustifiable destruction of his realm, that gave him a feeling that

those corpses slowly raising from the ground were his citizens and that he was meant to lead them.

Right at the centre of the plain he saw a rock which he chose as a landing point and as a stage from where he watched how his subjects-to-be were slowly getting to grips with their changed bodies. They seemed to feel the same rage as he did, as they almost immediately started quarrelling and attacking each other. Ubaru Tutu raised his voice, which fortunately had not lost any of its strength and authority during his transformation.

“My dear friends, take your time to shake the sand off your limbs and listen to me. Many of you know me, my name is Ubaru Tutu and I ruled over Shuruppak for more than three hundred years. Over three hundred years I worked hand in glove with the priests of the temple, not only to improve the lives of my citizens but also to make ever-increasing sacrifices to the gods, especially to the great lady Ninlil. We praised the gods as is right and proper. I never expected their gratitude - that would have been presumptuous - but neither did I anticipate that they would turn against their humble servants and kill us all, or at least almost all. For it is possible that a small group has survived the deluge and has not bothered to bury their dead. If this is the case, we could try to find them and claim our right to a proper burial to get access to Irkalla. But honestly, after all that happened, I'm not so sure if I am keen on this option.”

Raucous laughter interrupted his speech. He spread his wings and the gidim fell silent.

“The alternative is to create our new home ourselves. As the gods destroyed everything on Earth, men, cities, animals and even plants, I'd say we can assume that they are no longer interested in the planet. This gives us the chance to take possession of the Earth and make it a better place for us than the underworld ever could be. Or is there anyone who would prefer to live under the rule of a goddess, who happily helped destroy everything you held dear?”

Curses and boos from the crowd filled the air. With some difficulty Ubaru Tutu drowned the noise and continued shouting even louder, “Of course, we can hide and leave the earth to a few survivors – and I am just assuming they exist – who are already busy reconstructing their old lives and have quickly forgotten us and our fate. I daresay they are rebuilding the temples and worshipping the gods as if nothing had happened.”

The hissing of the crowd became even louder. Some shouted, “Kill them!” Others shook their fists and called for revenge.

At Irkalla, Utu had gone on board of the Magilum boat to start another trip around the earth. Slowly the ornate ship slid through the huge mountain caves out into the open. He loved the loneliness up in the air. Not a dead soul disturbed his musings, as he watched the landscapes reappearing from the sea lit by dawn.

Ubaru Tutu was inebriated with the effect of his words on the crowd. He was not aware that morning was dawning, when he suddenly felt his limbs stiffening and getting numb. A glance at his audience told him that they were afflicted by the

same symptoms, and when he turned his head eastwards, where a thin sliver of red light had appeared, his eyes burnt like fire. The sudden pain forced him to look away. At the same time Ubaru Tutu knew that this was the moment to establish his leadership.

While the crowd of gidim moaned and staggered towards the pits they had emerged from, he braced himself to control his limbs and managed to shout, his voice trembling only slightly,

"We have become creatures of the night! Go back to your pits but do not forget to assemble as soon as night sets in, as it will be the night of our vengeance!"

A sharp pain flashed through his body and took his breath away. With all the composure he could muster he staggered towards the place he had come from and with a sigh of relief slumped into the empty pit.

In the meantime, the Magilum boat approached the makeshift graveyard. Lost in thought Utu looked over the sandy plains that had barely dried up. Lifeless wood, pieces of metal and other remains of the Sumer civilization that had become flotsam and jetsam.

"What a waste", he thought. "I should not have given in to my anger and joined Enlil so readily. But what is done is done."

His musings were interrupted by the strange feeling that there was something he should pay attention to, something he was missing. He focused and looked down on the barren landscape with more attention. Right below him, the sand was not flattened by the waves but turned up as if someone had dug it up, just like children did when they built castles in the sand. Utu checked his position. He was too far away from Dilmun to accredit the small group of survivors with the diggings below him. But if it had not been them, who else could it have been?

His thoughts were diverted by the sight of a huge, majestic raven, circling just a few meters below him. What could possibly have brought Nergal to this forlorn area? He shouted the god's name but did not receive an answer. With a shrug of his shoulders, he continued his journey. After his return to Irkalla that night, the sun god saw Nergal walking towards the palace. He remembered their strange encounter and invited his uncle to join him for a drink at Siduri's pub. When they sat on the rocky porch in front of the cavernous building and enjoyed their pint of water of life, Utu touched upon their encounter. Nergal looked at his nephew, assessing if he could confide his plans to him. However, he did not ponder more than a few moments. Too keen was he to share his thoughts with a friend and so he answered the sun god's question with a counter question,

"Who do you think will be the winner of this whole deluge business?"

Utu answered immediately, "To me it's quite clear, it's Enki. We got ourselves into some trouble by trying to extinguish our servants and now we owe him forever for restoring the quality of life we have become used to. No doubt he will take advantage of this situation."

Nergal could not help smiling, "I'm not so sure if the die is already cast in this matter."

He leant forward and lowered his voice. "You were there too, weren't you?" he asked, staring at Utu, as if he could read the answer from his face.

"You have seen it, haven't you? I know, you always shed light wherever you go, and they can't stand the sun, but you must at least have seen the traces in the sand!"

"Now that you speak of it, I recall that the ground seemed somewhat uneven, as if it had been dug up."

"And who do you think did that? Our survivors are too far away, and we know that there are no living creatures left on earth apart from them. Therefore, the only logical conclusion is that this has been the doing of dead, unburied gidim haunting the earth, thousands and thousands of them."

Utu stared at Nergal, trying to digest the enormity of this information,

"You mean all these thousands of men and women, who drowned in the flood are now rising and haunting the planet?"

"I don't know what else they could do. It is according to the rules we set up for them. I saw them, they are still strong and filled with rage, not only against Utnapishtim and his friends who they suspect to have survived and who they blame for the shame of being unburied, but also against us. They feel betrayed that we turned against them despite the sacrifices they had made to us all those centuries. If I can find a way to win their trust, they might accept me as their leader, and we could create a more active, more interesting world of the dead up there."

"And our group of survivors? Those gidim may easily kill them."

"You bet," Nergal sneered.

Utu was shocked. The earth, the planet the gods designed as their home, should be inhabited by lifeless and evil-spirited creatures just for Nergal to humiliate his estranged wife, Ereshkigal? Utu remembered the periods of awful rows between them followed by deafening silence. Recently Nergal had spent most of his time outside Irkalla to spread plagues and diseases among the humans and had left the reign of Irkalla to Ereshkigal to avoid spending too much time in her presence. It seemed that this strategy did not bring the relief he was looking for but that it rather deepened his desire for power and a realm of his own.

The sun god bit his tongue to resist the temptation of an open quarrel with his uncle. If the events of the deluge had taught him something, then it was not to blur out his immediate thoughts but to hold back and think things over. So, he just nodded, raised his glass to his uncle and asked Siduri to refill their glasses. Utu was determined to keep Nergal away from the gidim that night. It was not hard to act on his intent, as Nergal was pleased with what he perceived as encouragement and elaborated on his plans and visions. But Utu was only listening with half an ear.

When he went on board the Magilum boat a couple of hours later, he had contrived a scheme he was going to put into practice without delay.