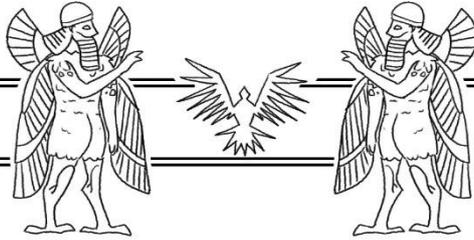


THE ERESHKIGAL TAROT



Part 2

As usual, Utu's trip started in the Zagros mountains, where a huge cave linked the world of man with the underworld. From the air, he saw the makeshift village of Utnapishtim and his companions near Dilmun. They were already leaving their mud brick huts to start the day's work. Silently the boat moved further to the west. It crossed the big desert that lay between the lands of Sumer and Egypt, the country of the Pharaohs. The river Nile was still swollen from the flood winding its way towards the sea. No man, no boat was in sight. Although he still loved the feeling of inner peace the clean and bright morning air conveyed to him, Nergal's words had made him aware that apart from the harsh punishment mankind had to endure, they now suffered from an additional injustice. Under these circumstances, the promise that the survivors would be able to rebuild their lives was not worth a straw. They were still doomed - either by starving if they buried all their dead properly, or by being driven insane from the haunting of the gidim. With the consent of the gods, Enki had made an agreement with Utnapishtim and his comrades. He, Utu, would make sure that the gods honored their part of it.

The sun god passed the once fertile plains along the Nile and it did not take long until he reached the lonely spot with the flat rock and the dug-up sand, where he had seen Nergal the day before. He checked the air and the ground thoroughly to make sure no one was in sight, especially not Nergal's raven like figure, before he reduced his flight level and came to land directly on the rock.

From a hidden vault in the railing Utu pulled out a little ivory casket, elaborately decorated with carved out sun symbols, opened it and took out a delicate piece of cloth shimmering in dark shades of green blue and purple. He draped the cloak over his head and sat down to make sure that his body and the Magilum boat were completely covered by the cloth. The effect of this was immediate. A cold breeze blew up the dust and darkness set in.

Utu waited and it only took a couple of minutes until bloated hands, arms and legs came out of the ground, then whole bodies emerged and within seconds thousands of drowned gidims stood in front of him, cursing and insulting each other, the gods, and the survivors of the great flood. Yet they waited until the gidim of an old, bearded man climbed up the rock. He did not notice the presence of Utu and his Magilum boat but prepared himself to address his followers. The sun god

chuckled silently. He loved his invisibility cloak and today it was especially useful, as it gave him the possibility to see those unburied gidims, who would not stand the presence of his light.

"Fellow citizens!" the gidim shouted. "Follow me to find out if Utnapishtim and his companions have survived the flood! And if they are still alive, let them feel the severe punishment any man must endure who neglects his duty to bury and honor the dead. Let us have our revenge!"

As the crowd cheered, he lifted off and flew eastwards followed by the huge swarm of revengeful spirits. Utu pinned his cloak to the boat and followed them silently. Meanwhile in Sumer some men and women were busy ploughing the land with the horses and the cattle they had brought with them on their ship, others were busy building a ziggurat for the gods. It was much smaller than the temples that had been erected before the flood but it was a start.

When the sun suddenly disappeared and darkness spread across the land, they all looked at the sky with horror. Since they could not find an immediate explanation for what was going on, they all followed their instincts and gathered in the ark, as this big ship gave them a feeling of strength, reminding them of their ability to survive. When Utnapishtim joined them, they assailed him with their questions.

"Did you receive a message from Enki?", Abu wanted to know.

"Is Utu bearing a grudge against us?"

"Have they changed their mind? Do they want to kill us?"

"What's going on?"

Unfortunately, this time, their leader had no answers for them. Shocked that no one would be able to help them this time, two women and a young man squatted in a corner sobbing pitifully. Their resilience was exhausted, they did not have the power to face another catastrophe. Utnapishtim went to them and put his arms around them to give them some comfort, when they became aware of a flapping noise that became louder and louder. They looked up and saw that suddenly gidims intruded from all sides. Not only did they get in through the hatch on the deck of the ship but as it were, they permeated through the wooden walls as if as if they were not even there. There were so many of them and as soon as they saw the survivors, they dashed towards them. To their horror the gidims passed through them leaving them in utter confusion feeling weak and nauseous. Abaru Tutu was among the first intruders. When he set eyes on his son, he shouted:

"I knew it, I knew you are alive, and you just don't care about burying me! All those pious words about the will of the gods, when it is actually all about you, what you think the gods tell you, what you think is right, what is of immediate use for you. And you never seem to understand that there are basic rules that have been passed on to us by our forefathers. All these generations followed them because they knew that if they did not obey, the Me would crumble and that is just what is happening now. The Me, the contract between the gods and humanity is null and

void because of you. The Earth is no longer a realm of the living but of the dead. Your self-centered behavior cost us the admittance to Irkalla."

"This is not true!" Utnapishtim cried, his face white as a sheet. "It was Enki himself who ordered us to rebuild our livelihoods as quickly as possible. It was him who told us the gods would protect us, if we continued to show them our reverence through our sacrifices."

"And where are they now, your gods? Who is here to protect you against your fathers, mothers, your siblings, uncles, aunts and cousins, who have all drowned and been left to rot out there? How can you expect to go on with your life having failed them so profoundly?"

Utu stood right between them and felt a little confused, mainly because he could understand and agree with both sides. This whole mess was caused by Ereshkigal's laziness and her condescending behavior towards her husband. But these thoughts did not get him anywhere. If he ever wanted to taste the warm crust of a loaf of fresh bread and the juicy meat of a well-seasoned steak again, he had to act right now. He removed the cloak from the tip of his forefinger and pointed at the little group of survivors who were immediately illuminated by a halo of light.

"The gods are still here!" His booming voice echoed through the ship and silenced the living as well as the dead.

"And they will make sure that their will shall be done." Shocked and horrified not so much by Utu's voice but by the glaring light he emanated the gidim moaned and crowded together in the darkest corners of the ship. Abaru Tutu however, only stepped back a bit, just to get out of the light and covering his eyes with one of his wings he asked, "If you still care for mankind, why do you care for the survivors only?"

Utu hated this kind of trick questions and, as always when he felt cornered, he threw a tantrum. He pulled the cloak off his head. The sun god's gleaming light immediately filled the womb of the ship and turned the army of vengeful spirits into a trembling heap of desperate creatures begging for the mercy of darkness.

Utu shouted, easily drowning their wailing, "How dare you question the intentions of the gods? No wonder no one wants you down there in Irkalla, spreading your mischievous ideas amongst quiet and peaceful dead souls. After I get those poor people out of harm's way, I shall convoke the gods to decide about your fate. Until this is done the sun will not set. Thus, you will be forced to stay in the darkness of this ship until we render our verdict."

Once more he disappeared under his cloak leaving only a corridor of light for Utnapishtim and his comrades, which lead from the womb of the ship up to the hatch. With this light he ushered the men and women out of the ark,

"Go ahead! You will come to Dilmun with me, and you will stay there until you can return here safely." Grateful, Utnapishtim and his friends climbed on deck into daylight. The sun god followed them making sure that the hatch was thoroughly

bolted. Their trip to the residence of the gods did not take long. At their arrival, Utu handed his guests over to Nisaba who showed them their quarters in a beautiful pavilion where they found plenty of fruits to eat and fresh water to drink. Thanking them, they made themselves comfortable and tried to overcome the shock they had just experienced.

The sun God did not waste any time and immediately summoned the gods to discuss the future of the gidims. Within minutes, Enlil, Ninlil, Nanna, Nisaba and the others assembled in the large columned hall created by An in those days long past. Utu noticed that one of them was missing but did not mention it. The gods chatted with each other, speculating why they had been called such a short time after the last one could be all about. They were too busy to notice that Nergal had not turned up and Utu had no intention to wait and so he addressed the assembly.

"As you all know, we decided to allow Utnapishtim and the other survivors of the deluge to rebuild their livelihoods on this planet and continue their service to us. If we stick to this decision and I think we all do... "

At this point he made a break and looked at the other gods who nodded their approval.

Utu continued, "... then we have to make sure that they have the conditions they need to thrive."

"The Earth has been good enough for them for thousands of years. What are you aiming at?", Inanna interrupted her brother impatiently.

"I am talking about the thousands who did not survive the flood, those who drowned and found their makeshift graves at the bottom of the sea. You know the Me, our agreement with mankind, as well as I do. If a dead man, woman or child is not buried by its family at least one meter below ground, they are not allowed to join the dead in Irkalla but are doomed to wander the Earth as vengeful spirits. And this is exactly what is happening now. Thousands of gidims started haunting our small group of survivors and trying to kill them by pushing them over the edge at night, not allowing them to get rest from the day's toil. I have seen how it happened; they won't be able to resist this army of ghosts for long."

"But you promised I won't have to accommodate them all in Irkalla. You have no idea how complex another reorganization of the underworld would be," Ereshkigal complained.

"For heaven's sake you are a goddess!" Utu shouted. There were times when the goddess of the underworld could break his nerves with her sluggishness. "Make a little effort! And by the way, have you asked yourself where your husband has run off to? Why has he not joined our gathering as would be his duty?"

The gods looked around searchingly.

"I can tell you what Nergal is up to. He is fed up with taking second billing to Ereshkigal. He wants to create his own realm of the dead with those lost souls. And turning to the goddess he said,

“My dear sister, either you are a queen and behave as one or you share your realm and your power equally with your husband.”

“Did you really call us just to mediate in a domestic quarrel between the gods of the underworld?”, Ninlil asked. Don't you think we have other things to do than interfering with the business of our fellow gods?”

Utu felt his face burning with anger. As so often before, Ninlil completely missed the point. But before he could think of an appropriate response, he saw a buzzing curtain of flies and mosquitoes planting itself in front of them. Astonished, the gods watched the grey curtain transform into a black impenetrable wall that plunged the assembly hall into darkness.

Enlil stepped forward, angrily trying to wipe away the insects with a dapper wave of the hand.

“Don't do that!” Baba shouted. But it was too late. When the god of winds drew back his arm it was covered with a black layer of insects stinging him to contaminate him with their venomous saliva. Baba rushed forward and lay her hand on Enlil's arm pulling out the venom from the insects and the swollen arm alike.

In the meantime, the flapping of wings that had gone unnoticed as all the gods watched Enlil's anger and pain could no longer be overheard. Millions of bats and flying foxes were approaching. At first, they stayed behind the curtain of insects forming a cupola-like vault that reached down to the ground. Then, gradually, they approached the assembly of the gods, inch by inch, slowly enwrapping the whole place, plunging it into complete darkness. Ereshkigal, still furious about Utu, spoke first.

“Nergal, show yourself!” The god of death and diseases appeared. Whether he obeyed his wife's call or whether he considered it to be the right moment according to his dramatic composition, remains his secret.

The whole spectacle left the other gods dumbfounded. Utu considered to destroy this bizarre living sculpture with a couple of sunrays, when he felt Enki's arm on his shoulder. Before the god of water could say anything, Nergal raised his voice.

“Let's make this short. You my dear divine friends have killed almost all life on Earth without thinking about the consequences. Now the planet is an empty desert. And here we have thousands of creatures in need of a home. Irkalla is full, as my wife has repeatedly stated. Is there anyone among you who is willing to look after those creatures full of hatred and vengefulness? Who of you would want to keep them at bay and guarantee the safety of Dilmun? No one? I thought so.”