**The Descent of Ishtar/ Inanna to the Underworld**

Ishtar (hereafter referred to by her Sumerian name, Inanna) could often be sweet and benevolent, but she had a pronounced greedy, impulsive, and reckless side. On one occasion in particular, these latter aspects of her personality caused her to suffer dearly.

She was already one of the preeminent deities in the sky, the abode of the greatest gods, and on the surface of the earth, where humans lived and worshiped her. Nevertheless, there was one realm that eluded her grasp: the underworld. So unquenchable was her thirst for power that she set out to extend her dominion to include the land of the dead as well.

True to her fiery, tempestuous disposition, she devised no particular plan by which she would conquer that dismal realm. Instead, she simply adorned herself in her finest clothes, the symbols of her queenly power, instructed her vizier Ninshubur to have the gods rescue her if she didn’t return in a timely manner, and went straight to the underworld’s gates.

When the underworld goddess, Ereshkigal, saw her privileged sister before the gates, she wailed, “What brings her to me? What has incited her against me? Surely not because I drink water with the Anunnaki (group of deities), I eat clay for bread, I drink muddy water for beer?”

Ereshkigal instructed her gatekeeper to allow Inanna to enter, but to remove one of her garments at each of the seven gates through which she must pass before reaching Ereshkigal’s court. The gatekeeper did as he was told, forbidding Inanna to pass otherwise, so that by the time Inanna came before Ereshkigal, she was utterly naked – and thereby thoroughly divested of her royal power. The fact that the ancient Mesopotamians laid their dead in the grave naked is surely no coincidence here; though Inanna came to the underworld to conquer it, she inadvertently came under its power, and the underworld conquered her instead.

Inanna, blinded by passion, had apparently failed to realize this. She charged Ereshkigal, dethroned her, and sat triumphantly on her throne. But since Inanna was within the underworld’s power, the decrees of its court were binding for her, and the court’s seven judges condemned her to become fully and truly dead. The goddess was then reduced to a slab of meat hung on a peg on the wall – and, worse still, already green and rotten.

When a considerable length of time had passed and Inanna still hadn’t returned, Ninshubur suspected trouble and pleaded with several of the gods for assistance in rescuing his master. He first went to [Enlil](http://world-mythology.org/mesopotamian-mythology/enlil/), the wind god, but Enlil regretfully replied that he had no power over the underworld. Ninshubur then went to the moon god Sin, who gave him the same response.

At last, he went to Ea, who agreed to help rescue Inanna. With dirt from underneath his fingernails, Ea created two mourners, whom he sent to the underworld with water and grass to revive Inanna.

The mourners evaded the guards at the seven gates and came before Ereshkigal. They found her engaged in her usual laments over the wretched circumstances in which people had recently died and come to her realm – the bad timing, injustice, and pain of the whole business of dying. The mourners added their own expert voices to her cries of woe.

The goddess was so touched by their contributions that she agreed to grant them anything in her realm that they desired. They immediately requested the slab of rotten meat on the wall. Ereshkigal evaded their request and offered them many other grand and splendid things, but they refused each offer and insisted on the meat. In the end, Ereshkigal had no choice but to give them what they wanted. The mourners took the slab of meat, poured over it the grass and water they had brought with them, and thereby brought Inanna back to life.

When the three turned to leave, however, the underworld’s judges issued a final ruling. Even though the judges couldn’t stop Inanna from leaving, they could stop her from leaving without consequence. In exchange for her freedom, they demanded that she find a replacement to send to their realm. They sent a host of the dead along with her to ensure that she fulfilled their ruling.

Inanna emerged from the dark depths to find the whole world in mourning for her. She was greeted with shouts of joy and praise. Her old friends and servants each bowed before her and rejoiced at the sight of her return.

The deputies of the underworld asked Inanna if any of these friends or servants would be a fitting substitute for her. Inanna declined, saying that she would not allow them to take people who showed her such affection and loyalty.

But when Inanna and the hosts came to the house of Inanna’s husband, Dumuzi (Tammuz), they found a very different scene. Dumuzi, who had as yet heard nothing of his wife’s return, was caught in the middle of a party, dressed in fine clothes, eating fine foods, and sitting in a luxurious chair. He had evidently been having the time of his life in Inanna’s absence. Enraged, Inanna cursed Dumuzi and bade the underworld hosts to take him as her substitute.

Dumuzi invoked the aid of his brother-in-law, the sun god Shamash, who came to his defense, telling him where to hide from the ambassadors of the dead. Several times Dumuzi hid, saw the hosts approaching, fled, and hid again.

He was hiding in his sheep pen when the hosts finally caught up to him. Shamash could do nothing more. Dumuzi was taken to the land of the dead.