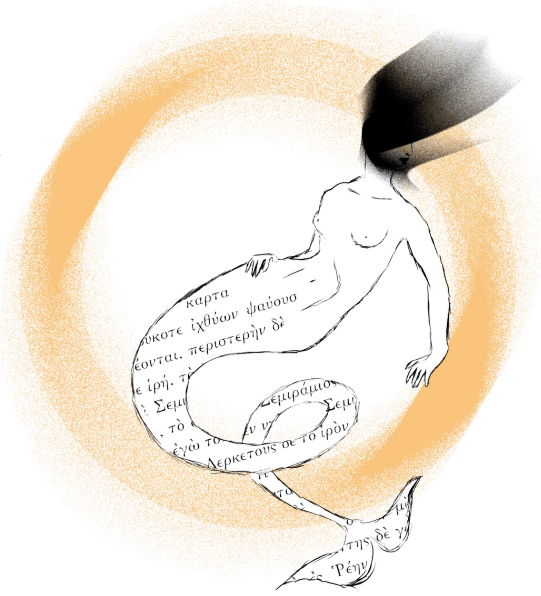
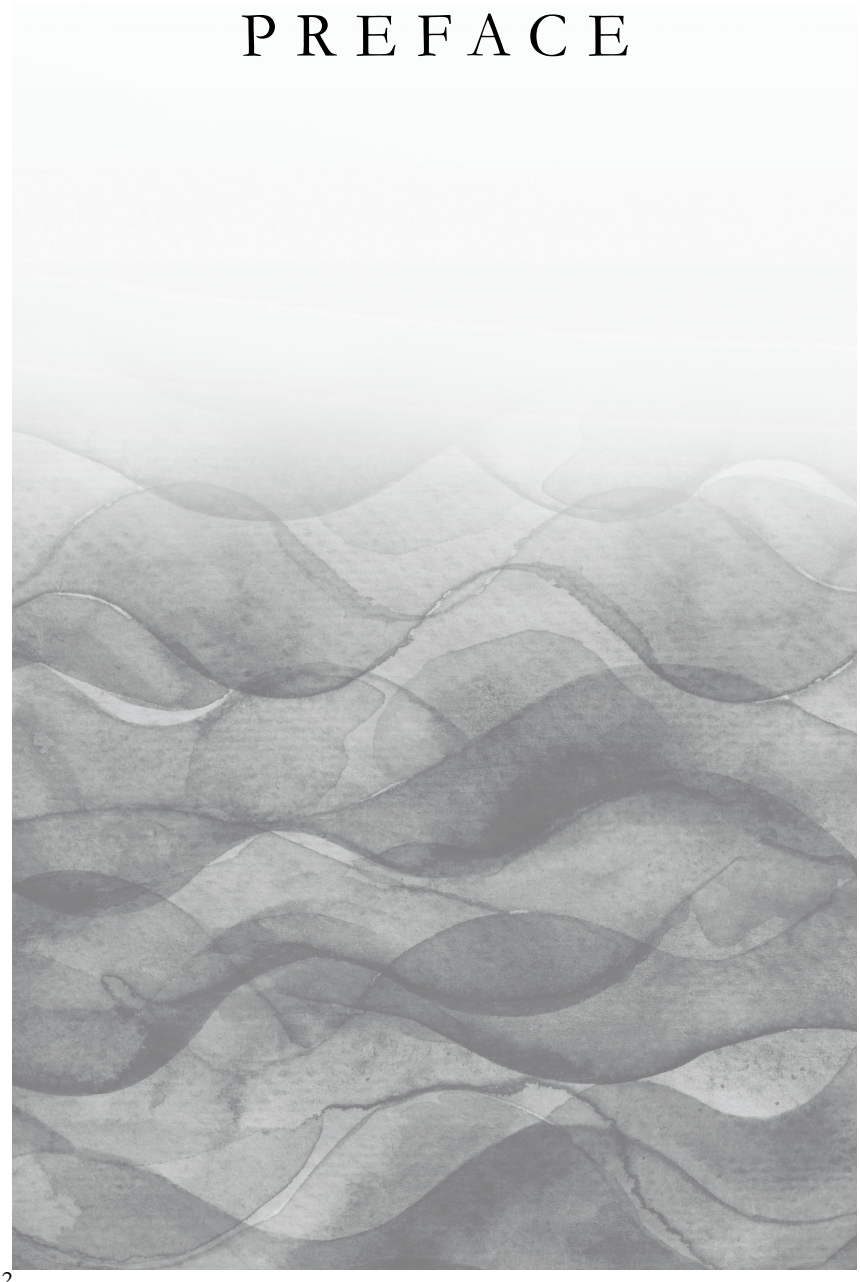
ATARGATIS

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PREFACE



Looking back on my homeland, a land that has changed so many hands across time, I couldn't help but wonder: what is the thread connecting so many scattered fragments of history? When I look at the mosaic of stories that make up this part of the world we call the Middle East, I find tales that, with time, have lost their chronology. Stories that slipped through the cracks of memory because too few cared enough to keep them alive.

The story of Atargatis is one of them.
The first mermaid to have a human recollection.
We have coins, sculptures, and jewelry bearing her image yet not a single complete narrative.
What is left once a story is long forgotten?

In telling this one, I'm aware of the natural inaccuracies the retelling brings. But isn't that part of the magic of myth? Something born in a place and a moment, whose memory has drifted and reshaped itself through time and tide?

As you read this, I want to bring you back to a time before nations, before people and stories were pressed into the mold of identity, to the world where Atargatis lived, fluid and unbound.
And from there, slowly, carry you forward again to the now.

This is the story of Atargatis.

ATARGATIS

THE GODDESS, THE SEA, AND THE BIRTH OF THE SIREN



Before she had a name, she had a sound.
A hush of waves rolling over pale stones, a breath of wind threading through reeds, the silver flicker of scales sliding just beneath the surface. These were her cradle-songs, carried along the coast of the Mediterranean where the city of Ashkelon faced the sea like a sentinel, half sand, half memory.

In those days, before the world hardened into stories and maps, Ashkelon's shoreline was alive with shrines and altars. And behind them, tucked like a secret between temple walls, lay a deep sacred pool fed by ancient veins of water. Travelers whispered that this pool was older than the city, older even than the sea's first tide.

Within it, fish swam in slow circles, glimmering like living shards of moonlight. No one touched them. No one threw nets there.
No mortal dared harm the goddess's fish.

Lucian himself wrote centuries later of a sanctuary in Syria where fish wore tiny jewels and wandered unharmed among worshipers. He had not seen Ashkelon's pool, but he would have recognized it immediately.
And it was in Ashkelon; coastal, windswept, bathed in salt and sunlight, that she walked.

Atargatis.

A goddess of water and life, of fertility and storms, and the trembling edge between what breathes and what swims. Her temples echoed with the cooing of her birds, her pools shimmered with the scales of her fish, and the people honored her with coins; and with silence.

One twilight, when the air was turning purple and the sea held the last gold of day, a shepherd came to the sacred pool. He leaned over it, cupped his hands, and drank unwisely from the sacred waters.

The fish circled his reflection.
The water trembled.
And in that tremble she appeared.
She stepped from the shifting dusk.
The shepherd did not fall to his knees.
She did not thunder.

They simply met.
And in that gaze, human eyes meeting divine, a seed was planted, reckless and strange.

She loved him. In the way a wave might love a stone:
gently at first, then all at once, reshaping the world around it. From that love came a child.
Semiramis.

But shame is a blade that cuts gods as deeply as mortals.
Shame that a goddess had loved a man.
Shame that she, the Lady of Waters, had let human hands touch her.

In the night she abandoned the infant on a mound of sand, where doves gathered, warming the tiny body with their wings.

The shepherd vanished from her story; some say she hurled him into the sea, others that grief alone carried him. Some even suggest that he died of old age. Either way, what remained was regret.

Atargatis walked back to her sacred pool. The fish rose toward her as if in greeting.The Mediterranean murmured behind her, vast and indifferent.

She still loved the shepherd; more than she could bear. And if she could not walk beside him in life, then perhaps she could join him in death, in whatever shadowed realm waited beyond mortal breath.

She stepped into the water.

It should have swallowed her.
Water takes mortals easily, and even gods have been known to vanish when they choose. But the pool refused her; not out of cruelty, but out of recognition. The fish circled her hips, her thighs, her legs. They would not let her drown. They held her.

The waters changed her.

Her lower body lengthened and shimmered. Her feet melted into scales. Her legs wove together like two waves becoming one. A tail, sleek, strong, glistening like polished stone, took shape beneath her.

Above the water, she remained woman: crowned, mournful, luminous.
Below it, she was pure sea: graceful, inhuman, unending.
This was her transformation.

Not death.
Not escape.
But return.

From the sacred pool she slid into the Mediterranean's open arms.
And the sea carried her story farther than any land-bound temple could.
It is there, in those salt-bright currents, that her myth began to change shape.

Atargatis did not hunger.
She did not lure.
She did not sing men toward doom.

But the sea is a great storyteller, and sailors are not careful listeners.

They told of shapes seen at dusk on distant rocks.
Of hair floating like seaweed in moonlight.
Of a woman's torso rising from the water, shimmering, sorrowful, strange.
Of a tail slipping beneath the waves like a whisper swallowed by tide.

And inevitably, of a voice.
Not hers. not truly that is, yet born from the idea of her.
A voice carried by the wind, part sigh, part song, part yearning.
A voice that called to sailors in the night. Her story drifted westward like currents, shedding details and gathering new ones.

In the Greek lands, where stories traveled like migrating birds, those whispers grew into something darker.
They became sirens; creatures perched on jagged rocks, singing to sailors with voices sweet enough to unravel a man's resolve.

Homer placed them on an island piled with the bones of the enchanted dead.
Apollonius made them companions of Persephone.
Ovid traced them back to a grief-stricken transformation.
Always singing.
Always dangerous.

The siren's voice promised truth, beauty, knowledge; whatever a sailor most longed for.
And that longing led to ruin.

Later ages changed their shapes again.
The feathered siren softened into the fish-tailed mermaid. closer than ever to Atargatis.
The mermaid became a figure of beauty, melancholy, allurement.
A creature of desire, prophecy, peril.
In the north she became the selkie.
In the rivers she became the rusálka.
On the Rhine she became Lorelei, combing her hair above the rocks where boats shattered like shells.

Over centuries, the siren became a symbol:
of temptation, of danger, of the thin line between wonder and oblivion.

Even now, the word siren carries a warning.
It is the shriek of ambulances and fire engines, the sound that splits the city and tells you someone is hurt, someone is burning, someone is being carried too close to the edge.
The ancient meaning “beware the call” never left us.
It simply traded rocks for rooftops.

Yet beneath all these tales, beneath the feathers, the fish-tails, the combs of gold, the songs that sink ships, there is still a shadow of her.
Atargatis.
The first to slip beneath the sacred water.The first to carry sorrow into the sea.The first shape that blurred the line between woman and wave; longing and loss.

Her name blurred as stories traveled.
From Atargatis to Atergatis to Atar'ata to Derceto, to something softer, stranger.

Her sacred fish became symbols.
Her sea-pool became legend.
Her tail became a lure, a promise, a warning.

And in time, the goddess of Ashkelon. Lover, mother, mourner, swimmer of sacred waters, became the first mermaid, the ancient ancestor of every siren and sea-maiden who ever sang a sailor into wonder or ruin.

For the siren is a memory of her.
The mermaid, a reflection.
The fish-tail, her legacy.
The song, her story.

And every wave that touches Ashkelon's shore still carries her name, whether spoken or forgotten,
in the rise and fall of the sea.

SCAN FOR MUSIC



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