

Medusa was the loveliest of the handmaidens who had dedicated themselves to the goddess Athena. All had sworn devotion to her shrine and promised to have no knowledge of men, spending their days in praise and song for the beauty of Athena and her works.

However, Zeus had laid eyes upon the loveliness of Medusa and began to watch her. He timed her comings and goings, watched her tend the gardens and altars in Athena's shrine, he listened to her sweet singing, and even observed her as she went to bathe in the sacred fountain in the center of the shrine. He went to Athena and demanded Medusa. Athena consulted with the girl and found her steadfast in her devotion to Athena and not at all flattered by the attentions of Zeus. Athena refused Zeus. Now Zeus was the chief of the gods and dangerous when crossed.

Zeus watched and waited until Medusa was alone in the garden and, disguising himself as a stallion, turned Medusa into a mare. In that sacred grove, dedicated to the virgin goddess Athena, Zeus took the unwilling Medusa.

The rage of the women and the goddess knew no bounds. Their cries of pain, frustration and impending revenge echoed thorough the heavens and earth and cracked the very rocks at the base of Zeus' throne on Mount Olympus.

Medusa was unable to speak so consumed was she with rage and shame and sorrow for her vows so roughly torn from her and dishonoured. Athena in her rage at Zeus and her pity for Medusa, allowed the mental anguish to be reflected in Medusa's person.

Wings grew on her shoulders, her delicate hands became bronze claws, her teeth lengthened into fangs and serpents hissed and writhed where once her long soft hair had swung. Finally there came a fixed stare into her eyes that carried the story of the betrayal, the hurt, the shame and the rage, a stare so powerful that any man who looked upon it was immediately turned to stone.

Medusa flew into exile to scream her outrage into the sky and make the seas rough with the beating of her wings. Sailors soon knew to avoid the crashing waves that pushed their boats on to the rocks on the island that was littered with stone statues of all men who landed there.

But one came, Persus by name. He had boasted, in defence of his mother, that he would bring the King the head of Medusa, and so make the sea once again safe.

The King of Argolia was presented with his beautiful daughter. He called her Danae and immediately consulted the Oracle only to be told that her son, his grandchild would cause his death.

The King had his daughter confined to a tall tower, out of the sight of all men – but, unfortunately for him, not out of the sight of the gods.

When Danae had grown to woman hood, and was in her full beauty, Zeus changed himself into a shower of gold and visited her and the result was Persus.

Determined to rid himself of the curse of a grandson who would kill him but afraid to take the life of a child of Zeus, the King had Danae and the infant pushed out to sea in a wooden crate with out food or water. In the morning the crate washed up on the shore of the kingdom ruled by Polydectes, a cruel man and tyrannical ruler. Danae and Persus were found by Dictys who was fishing. He took them home and cared for them.

No sooner had Polydectes set eyes upon Danae than he fell in love with her. She made excuse after excuse to avoid the king.

Persus grew – tall, fair to look upon, strong and impressive at hunting and games. Only his constant attention protected Danae from the king's advances so Polydectes determined to get rid of the boy.

Persus was invited to the palace, given much strong wine to drink and shamed in the presence of a host of other men. He vowed to show his courage and strength by bringing Polydectes the head of the Medusa.

Zeus sent Hermes to Persus with winged sandals and Athena, knowing how Medusa longed for relief from her suffering, supplied Persus with a golden shield and told him to look only upon the reflection of Medusa in its burnished surface.

When Persus arrived on the island the shore, the sand, the rocks and the grass were littered with stone statues – from weathered and crumbling to new – all with such aspects of terror expressed in their bodies and upon their faces that Persus' courage began to leak away.

He heard the roar as Medusa flew towards him, and crouched behind his shield. When she was close enough for him to hear the hissing of her snake hair he slowly rose to his feet, and opened his arm. He fixed his eyes on the image of the hideous face reflected in his shield and with one mighty blow struck the head from her body.

Persus placed the head into a leather sack and flew towards home. Not for today are the details of how he used the head to defeat the monster set to devour Andromeda, nor how he finally won her hand and carried her to his mother but when he arrived back in Polydectes' kingdom he found his mother a slave in the palace and Dictys a prisoner.

Persus demanded an audience with the king and, commanding those who loved him to cover his eyes, pulled Medusa's head from the leather bag. Polydectes and his cruel companions were turned to stone. Then Persus freed Dictys who then married Danae and took over the kingdom to shouts of joy from the people.

During the celebrations Persus completed in the games and threw the discus so hard that it crossed the boundary line and killed one of the spectators – a man who turned out to be his grandfather.

Athena reclaimed the head of Medusa and she affixed it to her own shield. The rage in the image frightens all enemies and reminds women of the power of their rage and that anger is sometimes our only defence.