Perseus and Medusa

Ancient Greek

As a baby Perseus was cast out to sea in a chest and washed up on an island. He was taken in and looked after by a fisherman, who was the brother of the king, Polydectes.

When Perseus grew up, the King tricked him into promising to kill a Gorgon and bring him its head. The Gorgons were three terrible creatures, half woman and half beast, with tusks, and snakes for hair. People who looked at them instantly turned to stone.

The goddess Athena helped Perseus by giving him a helmet to make himself invisible, a polished shield to protect himself from looking directly at the Gorgon, a sword to chop off its head, a silver satchel to carry the head in and a pair of winged boots to help him escape.

Putting on the helmet, Perseus went in search of the three Gorgons, knowing that the only one that was mortal was Medusa. Finding them all asleep, and fearful that the writhing, hissing snakes would wake them, Perseus crept up to Medusa, looking at her only through the reflection in his shield, and struck off her head with the sword.

He placed the severed head into the silver satchel and flew off over the mountains on his winged boots. Although the other two Gorgons woke up and chased after him in fury, Perseus was able to escape to safety.

Returning to Polydectes' court, Perseus amazed the King and his guests by pulling Medusa's severed head out of the bag. The look of amazement was frozen on all their faces, as the King and his guests were instantly turned to stone.

1. What did the fisherman find on the seashore and what did he do as a result?

2. How do you think Perseus felt the moment after he made his promise, and what do you think he was most worried about?

3. What was Perseus able to do with the shield, and why was it important that it was polished?

4. Which Gorgon did Perseus choose to attack, and why did he not attack the others?

5. What do you think Perseus took care to do when he returned to fulfil his promise?