When you come to the end of the third paragraph, identify the task that Theseus' mother gives him. Do you predict that Theseus will succeed or fail in his quest?

On a visit to Corinth, King Aegeus of Athens secretly married the Princess Aethra. She had grown tired of waiting for Bellerophon, whose wife she should have been, to come home from Lydia. After a few pleasant days with Aethra, Aegeus told her: “I am afraid I must leave now, my dear. It will be safest, in case you have a son, to pretend that his father is the God Poseidon. My eldest nephew might kill you if he knew of our marriage. He expects to be the next King of Athens. Goodbye!”

Once back, Aegeus never left Athens again.

Aethra had a son whom she named Theseus, and on his fourteenth birthday she asked him: “Can you move that huge rock?” Theseus, a remarkably strong boy, lifted the rock and tossed it away. Hidden underneath, he found a sword with a golden snake pattern inlaid on the blade, and a pair of sandals. “Those were left there by your father,” Aethra said. “He is Aegeus, King of Athens. Take them to him and say that you found them under this rock. But mind, not a word to his nephews, who will be furious if they discover that you are the true heir to the throne of Athens. Because of them I have pretended all these years that Poseidon, not Aegeus, was your father.”

Theseus went by the coast road to Athens. First he met a giant named Sinis, who had the horrible habit of bending two pine trees down towards each other, tying some poor

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1. Bellerophon (ˈbɛl-ər-ə-fən): The Greek hero Bellerophon rode the winged horse Pegasus and killed a fire-breathing monster called the Chimera.

2. Poseidon (pō-sĭ’don): One of the Olympians, the twelve major Greek gods and goddesses. Poseidon, called Neptune by the Romans, was the god of the sea and of horses.
traveler to their tops by his arms, and then suddenly letting go. The trees would fly upright and tear him in two. Theseus wrestled with Sinis, threw him senseless on the ground, and then treated him as he had treated others.

Next, Theseus faced and killed a monstrous wild sow, with tusks larger and sharper than sickles. Then he fought Procrustes, a wicked innkeeper who lived beside the main road and kept only one bed in his inn. If travelers were too short for the bed, Procrustes would lengthen them with an instrument of torture called "the rack"; if they were too tall, he would chop off their feet; and if they were the right size, he would smother them with a blanket. Theseus beat Procrustes, tied him to the bed, and cut off both his feet; but, finding him still too tall, cut off his head as well. He wrapped the dead body in a blanket and flung it into the sea.

King Aegeus had recently been married again: to a witch named Medea. Theseus did not know about this marriage, yet on his arrival at Athens, Medea knew by magic who he was; and decided to poison him—putting wolfsbane\(^3\) in a cup of wine. She wanted one of her own sons to be the next King. Luckily Aegeus noticed the snake pattern on Theseus' sword, guessed that the wine had been poisoned, and hastily knocked the cup from Medea's hand. The poison burned a large hole through the floor, and Medea escaped in a magic cloud. Then Aegeus sent a chariot to fetch Aethra from Corinth, and announced: "Theseus is my son and heir." The next day, Aegeus' nephews ambushed Theseus on his way to a temple; but he fought and killed them all.

Now, it had happened some years before that King Minos's son, Androgeus of Crete, visited Athens and there won all the competitions in the Athletic Games—running, jumping, boxing, wrestling, and throwing the discus. Aegeus's jealous nephews accused him of a plot to seize the throne, and murdered him. When Minos complained about this to the Olympians, they gave orders that Aegeus must send seven boys and seven girls from Athens every ninth year to be devoured by the Cretan Minotaur. The Minotaur was a monster—half bull, half man—which Minos kept in the middle of the Labyrinth, or maze, built for him by Daedalus. The Minotaur knew every twist and turn in the Labyrinth, and would chase his victims into some blind alley where he had them at his mercy.

So now the Athenians, angry with Theseus for killing his cousins, chose him as one of the seven boys sent to be eaten that year. Theseus thanked them, saying that he was glad of a chance to free his country of this horrid tribute. The ship in which the victims sailed carried black sails, for mourning, but Theseus took white sails along, too. "If I kill the Minotaur, I shall hoist these white sails. If the Minotaur kills me, let the black ones be hoisted."

Theseus prayed to the Goddess Aphrodite.\(^4\) She listened to him and told her son Eros\(^5\) to make Ariadne, Minos's daughter, fall in love with Theseus. That same night, she came to Theseus' prison, drugged the guards, unlocked the door of his cell with a key stolen from Minos's belt, and asked Theseus: "If I help you to kill the Minotaur, will you marry me?"

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3. wolfbane, or wolfsbane: a poisonous plant of the buttercup family, with hoodlike yellow flowers.

4. Aphrodite (af’ro-dit’ë): the Greek goddess of love and beauty, called Venus by the Romans.

5. Eros (er’äs’): the god of love, called Cupid by the Romans.
"With pleasure," he answered, kissing her hand.

Ariadne led the boys quietly from the prison. She showed them a magic ball of thread, given her by Daedalus before he left Crete. One need only tie the loose end of the thread to the Labyrinth door, and the ball would roll by itself through all the twisting paths until it reached the clear space in the middle. "The Minotaur lives there," Ariadne said. "He sleeps for exactly one hour in the twenty-four, at midnight; but then he sleeps sound."

Theseus' six companions kept guard at the entrance, while Ariadne tied the thread to the Labyrinth door. Theseus entered, ran his hand along the thread in the darkness and came upon the sleeping Minotaur just after midnight. As the moon rose, he cut off the monster's head with a razor-sharp sword lent him by Ariadne, then followed the thread back to the entrance where his friends stood anxiously waiting. Meanwhile, Ariadne had freed the seven girls, too, and all together they stole down to the harbor. Theseus and his friends, having first bored holes in the sides of Minos's ships, climbed aboard their own, pushed her off, and sailed for Athens. The Cretan ships which gave chase soon filled and sank; so Theseus got safely away, with the Minotaur's head and Ariadne.

Theseus beached his ship on the island of Naxos; he needed food and water. While Ariadne lay resting on the beach, the God Dionysus suddenly appeared to Theseus. "I want to marry this woman myself," he said. "If you take her from me, I will destroy Athens by sending all its people mad."

Theseus dared not offend Dionysus and, since he had no great love for Ariadne anyway, he left her asleep and set sail. Ariadne wept with rage on waking, to find herself deserted; but Dionysus soon walked up, introduced himself, and offered her a large cup of wine. Ariadne drank it all, felt better at once, and decided that it would be far more glorious to marry a god than a mortal. Dionysus' wedding present to her was the splendid jeweled coronet which is now the constellation called "The Northern Crown." She bore several children to Dionysus, and eventually returned to Crete as Queen.

In the excitement, Theseus had quite forgotten to change the sails, and King Aegeus, watching anxiously from a cliff at Athens, saw the black sail appear instead of the white. Overcome by grief, he jumped into the sea and drowned. Theseus then became King of Athens and made peace with the Cretans.

A few years later, the Amazons, a fierce race of fighting women from Asia, invaded Greece and attacked Athens. Since Theseus listened to the Goddess Athene's advice, he managed to defeat them; but never afterwards stopped boasting about his courage.

One day his friend Peirithous said to him: "I am in love with a beautiful woman. Will you help me to marry her?"

"By all means," Theseus answered. "Am I not the bravest king alive? Look what I did to the Amazons! Look what I did to the Minotaur! Who is the woman?"

"Persephone, Demeter's daughter," Peirithous answered.

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6. **Dionysus** (di'-o-ni'sos): the Greek god of wine and celebration, called Bacchus by the Romans.

7. **Athene** (a-thē'né), also called Athena (-na): the Greek goddess of wisdom, warfare, and crafts.

8. **Demeter** (di-mēt'ēr): the Greek goddess of fruits, grains, and fertility; her daughter Persephone was abducted against her will by Hades, ruler of the underworld.
"Oh! Are you serious? Persephone is already married to King Hades, God of the Dead!"

"I know, but she hates Hades and wants children. She can have no living children by the God of the Dead."

"It seems rather a risky adventure," said Theseus, turning pale.

"Are you not the bravest king alive?"

"I am."

"Let us go, then!"

They buckled on their swords and descended to Tartarus by the side entrance. Having given the dog Cerberus three cakes dipped in poppy juice, to send him asleep, Peirithous rapped at the palace gate and entered.

Hades asked in surprise: "Who are you mortals, and what do you want?"

Theseus told him: "I am Theseus, the bravest king alive. This is my friend Peirithous, who thinks that Queen Persephone is far too good for you. He wants to marry her himself."

Hades grinned at them. Nobody had ever seen him grin before. "Well," he said, "it is true that Persephone is not exactly happy with me. I might even let her go, if you promise to treat her kindly. Shall we talk the matter over quietly? Please, sit down on that comfortable bench!"

Theseus and Peirithous sat down, but the bench Hades had offered them was a magic one. They became attached to it, so that they could never escape without tearing away part of themselves. Hades stood and roared for laughter, while the Furies whipped the two friends; and ghostly spotted snakes stung them; and Cerberus, waking from his drugged sleep, gnawed at their fingers and toes.

"My poor fools," chuckled Hades, "you are here for always!"

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9. Tartarus (tär′tə-rəs): the Greek underworld, ruled by Hades.

10. Cerberus (sər′bar-əs): a hideous three-headed dog that guards the gate of Tartarus.

11. Furies: three female spirits who punish wrong-doers; the Furies have hair made of snakes.