





Phaethon and the Chariot of the Sun



Phaethon would have been a happy boy, but the other children his age teased him because he did not know his father. So one day he asked his mother, Clymene, “Who is my father? Do I even have one?” Clymene told Phaethon a secret: He did have a father—a powerful one—but one so busy that Phaethon had never seen him before. Phaethon’s father was Helios, the sun god himself. “Every day he drives his shining chariot across the sky,” Clymene told him. “That is why he cannot be with us. If he did not do his job, there would be no light to shine upon the earth!”



Phaethon told this to the other children, but they only laughed at him. They did not believe that the sun god was truly his father. “Fine!” Phaethon said. “I will prove it to you!”

He knew the palace of Helios lay on the far eastern edge of the world, where the sun begins its journey every morning. In spite of his mother’s protests, he decided to set out on a journey there. “I must go find my father,” he said. “Then the whole world will know.” He walked for days, and finally he reached the magnificent, shining palace of the sun.



When he entered, a long hallway spread out before him. Along either side stood the Days, the Hours, and the Years—waiting for their time to pass. At the very end, he saw his father seated on his shining throne.

Shocked to see his mortal son, Helios removed his glowing crown, and Phaethon looked upon the

face of his father for the first time. “My son!” Helios cried happily. “After all these years, we are finally together.” Father and son talked for hours, but at last Phaethon grew brave enough to ask, “Father, would you grant me one request?”

“Anything! You are my son,” Helios said happily. “I will promise you whatever you wish! I swear it by the river Styx.” This was a foolish choice, for when a god swears on the river Styx, he cannot break his promise.

“Let me drive your golden chariot,” said Phaethon. “No one back home believes that you are my father. If my friends see me driving your chariot, I will prove it!”

“Oh no, son,” said Helios. “That is far too dangerous!”

“You don’t understand,” said Phaethon. “They tease me and mock me!”

“Then they are not your friends. You have nothing to prove to them. Besides, the sky-road is so steep that I can barely navigate it. Along the way there are animal-like constellations—the bull, the lion, the scorpion, and the crab—that try to wreck my chariot day after day. Not even Zeus himself could do what I do, and you are just a mortal boy.”

Although Helios told Phaethon of each and every danger that lay before him, Phaethon would not listen. He was already imagining himself performing a task that even Zeus himself could not do. He pictured the faces of those who had teased him going pale with astonishment. “I must drive your chariot,” said Phaethon resolutely. “I must!”

Helios could not refuse his son. “Very well,” he said, defeated. He led Phaethon to where his chariot was kept.

Dawn was nearing. The fiery horses were pawing the ground with anticipation, and Phaethon jumped gleefully into the chariot. Helios shed tears as he smeared protective ointment on his son’s body and placed the glowing crown on his head. “Please, son! Take my advice—not my chariot. I do not want to lose you so soon after meeting you!”

“I can do it! I will prove it to you—to everyone!” said Phaethon. “Goodbye, Father!”

The goddess of the dawn threw open the palace doors. Phaethon whipped the fiery horses into motion and the chariot roared up into the sky. Helios watched his departure sadly. “Goodbye, my son.”

In only a few seconds the sun chariot soared above the clouds, but by that time, Phaethon was

no longer in control of the horses. They sensed that it was a mortal rather than a god holding the reins and began to run amok, taking the sun far off course. Out of the dark regions of the sky lunged fearsome beasts with starry bodies—slashing, biting, and pinching at Phaethon as he flew by. The chariot flew too high and bumped the sky. Then it swooped too low—scorching the land and causing the oceans to boil.

“Wait! Please! I’ve learned my lesson!” Phaethon cried. “I no longer want to drive the chariot!” But it was too late. The chariot could not be stopped.

The gods on Mount Olympus saw that the earth would be destroyed if something was not done. Reluctantly, Zeus took aim at Phaethon’s chariot with one of his thunderbolts.

With a single lightning strike, the chariot was destroyed. The flaming horses ran free like fireflies in the night, and Phaethon fell to the earth, flickering like a falling star.

Helios refused to shine for a day, and darkness covered the earth. Now the world knew the truth about Phaethon’s father, but the boy was gone forever.