

Phaeton

Young Phaeton entered the gleaming throne room of the palace of the sun. There, wearing a purple robe, sat Helios, the radiant god of the sun. His throne sparkled with glittering diamonds, and his crown blazed with dazzling, golden beams.

"I've traveled here, Helios, to find out if I am really your son," said the boy. "My mother Clymene says that I am, but my friends laugh at me and say that I'm not."

"Come here and let me **embrace** you, Phaeton," the sun god replied. "I am indeed your father. To prove it, you may ask me for anything and I'll give it to you. This I swear to by the Styx, the river of unbreakable oaths."

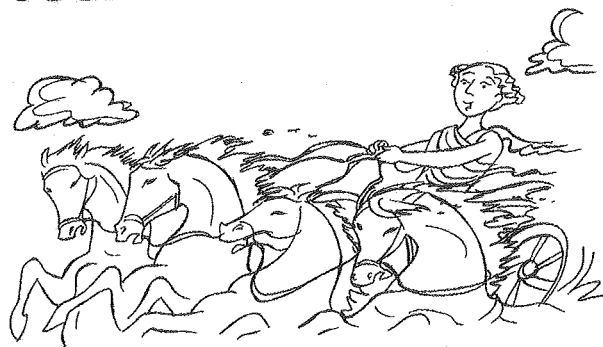
"Oh Father," the boy exclaimed, "I do have a wish. Every day you bring light to the world. I want, just once, to do as you do and drive the sun chariot across the sky."

Helios immediately regretted his promise. "Please ask for something else," he begged his son. "The trip is much too dangerous. The path is steep, the height to which you must climb is dizzying, and the fiery horses are too strong for you to control." But Phaeton insisted that this was his only wish and his greatest dream. At last, Helios had no choice but to give in.

The time to start the journey across the heavens was drawing near. The stars were beginning to fade, and the moon would soon disappear. Helios led the boy out to the place where the golden-wheeled chariot stood. Its horses were snorting, impatient to leave. "I fear for your safety," said the god as he set his crown on Phaeton's head. "Hold the reins tightly and spare the whip," he advised. "Stay on the path and drive neither too high nor too low."

Dawn threw open the gates of the east, and the horses swiftly sprang through them. As the glowing chariot rose up into the sky, Phaeton was filled with excitement and pride. But, before long, the fire-breathing horses sensed untrained hands on the reins. They left the well-worn path, causing the chariot to swing and tip wildly. Trembling with terror, Phaeton dropped the reins. The horses, now totally out of control, rushed up into the highest heavens and then plunged down close to the earth. Scorched with heat, the forests and fields caught fire. Seas shrank, and lakes dried up. Mother Earth cried out in pain to the gods for help.

Zeus, king of the gods, knew he had to act quickly if the earth was to be saved. Taking careful aim, he hurled a thunderbolt. The chariot broke apart, and Phaeton fell from the sky into the River Eridanus. Helios watched sadly as the water nymphs buried the boy who had set out so boldly to achieve his greatest dream.



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