

HELIOS, the sun, mounted his glowing chariot and drove out in great splendor as soon as Eos threw open the gates of his golden palace in the east. His radiance lit up the wide expanse of sky. So bright was he that only the gods could look straight at him without being blinded. Brilliant rays encircled his head, and his chariot glowed like fire.

With a strong hand, Helios guided his four fiery steeds up the vault of the heavens. The path was steep and narrow and the horses were wild, but Helios held them well on their course. At high noon, he stopped at the top of the sky and looked around, and nothing could escape his piercing gaze. Again he drove on and now he gave free rein to his steeds. Far to the west they could see his glittering evening palace, and, eager to reach their stables, they raced on the downhill course, faster and faster. They passed a great herd of white cows hurrying homeward to Helios' palace and met a large flock of sheep going out to pasture in the sky. For Helios owned a snow-white cow for each day of the year and a woolly sheep for each night.

The shadows grew long and dusk settled over the world when Helios and his foaming team arrived. His five daughters, the Heliades, awaited them. They unharnessed the tired horses and let them plunge into the ocean for a cooling bath. Then the horses rested in their stables and Helios talked with his daughters and told them all he had seen that day.

In the dark of the night, he boarded a vessel of gold with his team and sailed around the world, back to his palace in the east. The way was far shorter by sea than by air, so he had time to stay for a while in his morning palace too before he set out on another day's journey.

Helios had a son named Phaëthon. He was a mortal and very proud of his radiant father. One morning as Helios was about to set off on his daily journey across the sky, Phaëthon came to him and begged him to grant his dearest wish. Helios, who was very fond of his handsome son, rashly swore by the river Styx to give him any wish he might have, but when he heard Phaëthon's wish, he sorely regretted his oath. He tried in vain to make his son change his mind, for what Phaëthon wanted was to drive the sun chariot for one day, and Helios knew that no one but he himself could handle the spirited steeds.

Phaëthon was determined to have his wish, and Helios had to give in. Sadly, he put his golden rays on his son's head and rubbed divine

ointment on his skin so he could withstand the searing heat of the chariot. He barely had time to warn him to stay well in the middle of the heavenly path when the gates of the palace were thrown open, and the rearing horses were brought forth. Phaëthon leaped into the chariot, grasped the reins, and the horses rushed out.

At first, all went well and Phaëthon stood proudly in the glowing chariot. But the fiery steeds soon felt that unskilled hands were holding the reins. They veered off the heavenly path and brushed by the dangerous constellations that lurked on both sides of it. The animals of the zodiac were enraged: the bull charged, the lion growled, the scorpion lashed out with its poisonous tail. The horses shied and Phaëthon was thrown half-way out of the chariot. Far down below he saw the earth and he grew so dizzy that he dropped the reins. Without a firm hand to guide them, the horses bolted. They raced so close to the earth that the ground cracked from the heat of the chariot and rivers and lakes dried up. Then upward they sped so high that the earth froze and turned to ice.

Zeus stood on Olympus and shook his head. He had to stop the careening chariot to save the earth from destruction, and he threw a thunderbolt at it. In a shower of sparks, the chariot flew apart and Phaëthon plunged into the river Po. On the riverbanks his sisters mourned so long that Zeus took pity on them and changed them into poplar trees and their tears into drops of golden amber.

Hephaestus had to work the whole night through to mend the broken chariot so Helios could drive it again the next day. Helios grieved over his lost son, and he never again allowed anyone to drive his chariot except for Apollo, the god of light.

