

Phaeton and Cygnus

Phaeton and Cygnus were the best of friends. Phaeton lived in the court of Merops the king, but his mother had told him that Helios, the sun god, was his true father. Phaeton would stand and watch the sun chariot, drawn by his father, as it crossed the sky. He would watch all day, from dawn until dusk. Cygnus knew how proud Phaeton was of his true father, and how he wished he could drive the chariot himself, if only for one day.

One day, Phaeton and Cygnus were with their friend, Epaphus. Epaphus was confident and full of himself, forever reminding the others that he was the son of Zeus, the god of all gods. Epaphus began to torment Phaeton:

‘So, you think Helios, the sun god, is your father? And yet is there any way you can prove it? If you are the son of Helios, why doesn’t he let you drive the sun chariot?’

So, with a little fear in his heart, and with Cygnus by his side, Phaeton went to Helios.

‘My mother tells me that you are my true father. Yet how can I know for sure that I am your son? Can you prove it to me?’

Helios smiled a little and said:

‘If there is anything I can do to prove that I am your father, then name it! I swear by the River Styx I will do it!’

Swearing on the River Styx would make a promise binding. So with that knowledge Phaeton replied:

‘Let me drive the sun chariot, just for one day.’

Shocked, Helios agreed, bound by his promise. But he warned Phaeton:

‘Not even Zeus himself can control the reins of the horses. Remember: do not let the chariot move too close to the earth and do not let it move too close to the sun.’

Cygnus felt afraid. If the mighty Zeus could not control the horses of the sun chariot, what chance did Phaeton have?

Cygnus watched from the banks of the Eridanus river as Phaeton mounted the sun chariot and Helios reluctantly handed over the reins of the four horses. He shielded his eyes against the burning light of the sun and scorching heat. As Helios dismissed the night, the four horses of the chariot began to rear up, eager to bring in the day. And then they were off, charging with immense power across the sky.

Cygnus could see from the start that Phaeton was in trouble. Phaeton couldn’t control the chariot, which began to veer upwards and downwards across the sky. As the chariot climbed higher in the sky, Cygnus began to shiver. He looked around him



and the river began to freeze, and a skein of white frost covered the earth. Flowers wilted and died away and animals scurried into shelters.

Then the chariot would come careering down towards the earth again, as Phaeton tried to gain control. Suddenly, the ice would melt, and a terrible heat began to scorch the land, burning crops and setting forests on fire. Cygnus watched as the river began to dry up to a trickle of water.

Zeus observed everything from his throne at Mount Olympus, as Phaeton tried to gain control of the chariot. Zeus shook his head. It was clear that no one but Helios had the power to drive the chariot across the sky. He couldn't allow the earth to be subjected to the inconstant journey of the sun chariot and to Phaeton's heedlessness. With a heavy heart, he took up a great lightning bolt and launched it into the air.

Cygnus watched as the lightning bolt crossed the sky in a flash of white, finding its target. Lifeless Phaeton plunged through the air like a falling star, down to the earth and into the river, where Cygnus waited.

Distraught, Cygnus shouted with all his might to Zeus:

'Mighty Zeus, help me! Let me find my friend so that his soul can pass into the afterlife!'

Seeing Cygnus' distress, Zeus called to Cygnus:

'I will transform you so that you might retrieve the body of your friend, but once transformed you must stay transformed forever.'

Without a moment of hesitation, Cygnus agreed. Suddenly, Cygnus felt his skin become feathers and his toes fuse into webbed feet. He spread his beautiful white wings, arched his back and then plunged into the water.

Zeus watched on as Cygnus, the swan, dived down into the depths of the river, searching for his friend. For days and days he dived, again and again, down into the flowing water, searching tirelessly for the body of his friend, until he found Phaeton, deep in the depths of the river. At last Cygnus could take his friend to be buried properly, so that Phaeton could make his final journey into the underworld. Cygnus was sure that despite the pride that led to his fall, Phaeton would be granted entry into Elysium, the place of eternal sunshine.

Zeus was so moved by Cygnus's devotion to his friend that he honoured him with a place amongst the stars.

And, if you look into the sky on a clear, bright night, you will see Cygnus to this day. His wings are outspread in flight and he lights the sky in an outline of stars.

