



"...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." Genesis 1:2

Premise

Upon the marriage of King Isolee and Queen Eloise, majesty returned to Heaven's vacant throne and peace reached the Four Corners. In his pursuit of the princess, Isolee created a life-filled world named Terah. Terah continues to flourish in the Well of Eloise, a sacred garden named for the tears wept by the princess in her glorious sorrow. The peoples of Terah have never encountered their creators but often wonder about their origins.

Prince Leosei and Princess Oliese are the children of Isolee and Eloise. One evening, after being chased by a falling star, they discover their mother's well. The vibrant sphere hovering above the waters entrances them. Seconds slip into minutes as the children are drawn closer with irresistible force until...

Splash! The children are plunged into the seas of Terah, inexplicably transported from Heaven and stripped of their godliness. Now treated like ordinary beings, they must travel to the mythical Wall of Water at the end of the world if they wish to return home. They are joined in their journey by Peter Urchin, a kind but mischievous vagrant who helps them navigate Terah's untold dangers.

Chapter 1: Falling Stars

A trio of comets streamed across a velvety purple sky. On a grassy hill below, Princess Oliese and her brother Prince Leosei watched the spectacle in wonder. The two of them were unattended at one of Heaven's many cliffs. A sea of clouds stretched in all directions from the mountain ranges that carried Heaven's great palaces on their backs.

"Look," the young girl pointed with a stubby index finger. "The stars are racing! Where do you think they're going?"

"They're not going anywhere," the older boy informed her, his pubescent voice lacking the authority he intended. "They're falling. That's why they're called falling stars."

"Why do they fall? Have they forgotten how to fly?"

"Of course not. Stars can't fly."

"Then how do they stay up there? Do they float?"

"No, they don't float. They're just... up there, somehow. I don't know how." Prince Leosei sat up from a reclining position and brushed off bits of nothingness from his tunic. "Come on," he motioned. "We can watch the stars from home. It's safer."

Sitting cross-legged on the grass, the princess shook her head no. Curly strands of white hair bounced above her shoulders. "I like this place better," she yawned.

Leosei reached out a hand to his sister with a pleading smile. "We'll get in trouble if we don't go back. Alabaster is probably looking for us."

"But he's never cross with us," Oliese reasoned, "even when he should be." The princess laid back on the grass with her arms folded under her head. In the evening light, her curls seemed to glow. "We won't get in trouble."

Her brother's smile dissolved into disapproval. "Why do you like to frustrate me? I'm older than you, and you're supposed to do as I say."

"But I always do as you say!" she whined. "And you never want to have any fun."

Leosei stomped his boot into the ground. "I do too! We're watching the stars. Doesn't that count for something? Especially since we're breaking the rules."

The princess was wearing her pouty face, scrunching up her button nose and pursing her lips. She was scarcely nine years of age by Heaven's measure but knew all manner of expressions. This one she wore often.

"Don't make that face," Leosei warned. "You should learn to be more appreciative. We'll both be punished with more studies if we don't hurry back."

"I'm all caught up on my studies," Oliese answered, only half paying attention. "Plus I did extra work. Alabaster doesn't know. If he tells me to do more, it's already done."

"I see," Leosei mused. "You've got it all figured out. In that case, I won't ruin your evening by expressing concern for your well being."

"Are you cross with me?"

"Why should I be cross?" he answered. "You've got nothing to worry about. It's only my hide that'll be tanned upon our late return."

"You talk fancy when you're cross. I don't care for it."

"Who cares what you don't care for?" Leosei retorted, shrugging off his sister's impertinence. "I certainly don't." He started back toward Samson, their horse, who lay beside a broken fence and a patch of coniferous trees. Red as wine, the muscular beast righted itself at the prince's approach.

"Hello, boy," Leosei welcomed. He rustled the horse's mane. "Yes, good Samson. Strong Samson." He raised his voice to make sure Oliese could hear him. "Not stubborn and ungrateful like my sister."

But the princess was not listening. Her eyes were pinned to the starry host, captivated by a new comet that shone brighter and loomed larger than any she had seen before.

"Leo!" she exclaimed, her voice a mix of delight and disbelief. "Look at that one!"

The boy prince mounted Samson as his sister spoke. He was about to chastise her further when he saw it, too. “Oli, I won’t tell you again,” he started, then stopped. “Oh wow,” he trailed.

Princess Oliese bounced to her feet, a smile illuminating her entire countenance. She picked up the folds of her gown and half-ran, half-stumbled toward Samson and her brother.

“It’s the grandest star we’ve ever seen!” the princess gushed, peeking back to spy the comet.

“Unnaturally so,” Leosei worried. “And it’s moving pretty fast.”

The princess slowed as she reached Samson’s side. “Leo, do you think it will land nearby?”

“I think it’s going to land on our heads! Come on, take my hand.”

Princess Oliese obliged. As Leosei hoisted her onto the saddle, he gave Samson an appropriate kick. The mighty stallion hurried its hooves toward the hilltop. Clods of rich earth and green grass flew from Samson’s wake. Princess Oliese’s garments whipped through the air as the horse and its riders ascended a sharp incline. Sharper still were the many boulders scattered along the slope. Leosei guided Samson with precision befitting of a needle and thread, evading new calamities at every pull of the bridle.

“Leo, the star is following us!” Oliese shouted. Was that even possible? She clung to her brother’s waist, arms wrapped and fingers locked. The prince urged Samson faster but dared not look back himself.

“Left or right?” he shouted. He believed his sister, sight unseen. But she had become too frightened to answer. The comet dipped toward them in a shallow arc as the prince and princess sped up the incline. From above, they appeared as little more than specks on the hills that formed the mountains’ feet.

Bits of white-hot fire and iridescent gases sparked and hissed across the comet’s surface. An orb of fierce blue spun forward inside its fiery center, propelling itself ever closer to the escaping children. The comet was no natural phenomenon; Leosei sensed this, but to prove it, the prince pulled Samson hard to the left, obscuring the horse and its riders behind an enormous boulder. They were only concealed for a moment before the comet rolled sideways in a broad curve, adjusting its course.

As they reappeared, Leosei spied their pursuer from the corner of his eye. He was right. Oliese had witnessed the comet's deliberate shift and couldn't help but scream.

"Leo! It changed direction!"

Leosei pulled Samson right this time, veering toward the steepest part of the incline. They could escape if they reached the top and descended into the shadow of the hill. The comet roared behind them, adjusting its trajectory with impossible precision. It spewed a cloud of super-heated vapors ahead of itself, desperate to overtake them, but its own speed eclipsed the spray. Samson neared the hilltop as the comet closed the distance with one final burst of propulsion.

"Leosei!" the princess cried, but her voice was drowned out by the noise. They could not hope to outrun the star at such an incline. Collision was imminent. With one hand on the reins, the prince gripped his sister's hands at his waist.

"You have to fly!" he commanded at the top of his voice. Oliese shut her eyes and obeyed. Then Leosei let go of the reins and pushed off Samson. Together as one, the prince and princess fell backward off the horse. The comet's heat raked against their skin like claws as they fell, but it could not hold them.

Samson bounded over the hilltop with an incredible leap, free of his cargo, and descended the other side. The furious blue comet impacted the earth with tremendous force. Splinters of light exploded, screeching through the air like maimed birds. Once-compact clods of dirt plumed and fell back to the earth in scattered bits, burying the comet's wails beneath a patchwork of sediment. Columns of smoke billowed from the hilltop, now a blackened, smoldering crescent-shape.

Samson sped down a shallow incline and eased into a measured trot. The comet's chase had shaken the poor creature's mind. The horse was unharmed, but he carried along the path until his nerves settled. After some time, Samson stopped. He spent a moment whinnying before he flicked his head, marking the absence of his riders. His ears perked at the sound of Leosei's voice.

"Oli!" the prince shouted through his hands. He coughed, inhaling a fine dirt powder that had lighted on his garments and was still falling around him. "Where are you?" he called again,

turning a full circle. The prince found himself near the base of the hillside, not far from their earlier vantage point. The many boulders he and his sister had evaded now loomed between him and the hill's sunken crescent. The prince looked himself over with apprehension. His arms and legs were intact. Save for an indistinct headache, he was in no serious pain. A trickle of blood fell from his brow and onto his cheek. He wiped it with his hand but only succeeded in smearing dirt across his face.

Oliese had saved them both. But where was she?

Sneaking out into the hills after nightfall was forbidden. The idea had been his own, and he would never forgive himself if she had been harmed. He called her name again, less certain and more frantic.

"Oliese!"

The purple night sky had dipped to royal violet, stretching the shadows from the boulders across the hills. Leosei strained to focus on their shapes through the darkness. He reasoned that even if Oliese were standing next to him, he would have trouble seeing her with so little light. What hope did he have of finding her if she were unconscious?

"Don't think like that," he whispered. Oliese's hair often glowed in the starlight. Perhaps he would find her that way. And perhaps, like him, she had continued down the hill without being harmed. It was possible. He turned once more, looking past his immediate surroundings. There! On the horizon, just past Heaven's edge.

Silhouetted by starlight, Princess Oliese floated in the air. She trembled a hundred feet above the vast expanse of endless clouds, her eyes closed and body tensed. The princess had safely carried Leosei and herself the full length of the hillside. When she couldn't slow their momentum before reaching the cliff, she must have let him go.

Brave Oliese! His sister. He felt proud, but she appeared petrified, suspended over certain death by nothing more than willpower. The prince tried to call out, but he was so overcome with concern that his throat constricted. He coughed instead, a short, burning thing that stole his voice. How long could she stay afloat? He wasn't sure, but if he didn't help her, she would be lost. Leosei took a deep breath.

“Oliese!”

The young girl’s heart flooded with joy. Her brother had survived! She wished to reply, to plea for help, but falling into the clouds was too great a risk. Oliese’s gift was still in its infancy. Much like a ship without a rudder, the princess was at nature’s mercy. Concentration was vital.

“You have to focus,” Leosei encouraged. His voice sounded closer now. With her eyes still closed, she imagined him reaching out and drawing her back to solid ground.

“Leo?” she squeaked. He was a good brother, she thought. Kind. Always concerned for her safety. Sometimes he overstepped his bounds, which provoked her to act out or flatly ignore him. This was not such a time, however. His presence was a blessing.

“Focus on my voice. Picture yourself moving toward me.”

“I can’t seem to open my eyes.”

“That’s fine. You don’t need to. You can fly back if you will it to be so.”

Poised at Heaven’s edge, Prince Leosei watched his sister tremble in midair. He would have been trembling himself except that she needed him to be strong. The king had imparted this truth on the prince’s twelfth birthday. Leosei borrowed the power of that memory to aid him, and the sound of his father’s voice returned with warmth and wisdom.

“Your sister has a gift rarely seen in Heaven,” the king had confessed. “Some may come to fear her because of it. Others may want her abilities for themselves. If you can help her develop it, through patience and understanding, she will grow stronger. More secure.”

“But she never listens to me!”

“No,” the king laughed, “but she does hear you, and she looks to you for support. Be ever mindful of that, and be strong for her.”

A distant rumble brought the prince out of his reverie. The clouds beneath Oliese were beginning to stir. Her presence there, however miraculous, was anomalous. The laws of reality would not bend without protest.

“I can’t do it,” Oliese despaired. “I need to move for it to work, but I’m stuck.”

“You’re not stuck, you’re scared. That’s OK. I’m scared, too.”

“Can’t you reach me?”

“If you stretch out your arms, maybe.”

“I’ll fall.”

“Don’t be silly. You flew both of us down the hill! That’s how strong you are. You only need to imagine the wind obeying you. Command it! Use it to fly closer, and I’ll grab you.”

Oliese nodded. They had done something like this before. She began to uncurl her body, first unlocking her knees and extending her legs. Next she stretched out her arms. A breath of cool air rushed upward from the churning clouds. It rustled through her hair and whipped the length of her dress, but it also pushed her closer to Leosei.

“That’s it! Remember, the wind obeys you!”

“I’m so cold,” she whispered. The princess’s eyelids were sealed with tears that had begun to slip down her pale cheeks. The wind made them feel like icicles against her skin.

Leosei wished that Alabaster had been with them. Their caretaker was rarely at a loss for words or deeds. What about Samson? Was the horse near enough to hear his call? Perhaps, if the prince undid the horse’s saddle, its straps could work as a makeshift lasso. Oliese was still too far away. In all their previous efforts, the princess had never recovered full flight after losing momentum. She believed her gift was linked to wind and motion alone. Leosei suspected otherwise, but it wouldn’t matter if she perished.

The clouds were growing restless. He could hear their discontent in each new peal of thunder. While harmless in the daylight, the clouds were treacherous at night. Heaven’s finest winged calyxes could be ensnared by cover of darkness and dragged to their deaths.

“I’m going to find Samson,” Leosei called to Oliese. “I need to move away for a moment. Remember! The wind obeys you.”

“The wind obeys me,” she managed. Under less dire circumstances, she would have disputed this point. Here and now, she hoped her brother’s words were true.

“The wind,” she continued. Her voice quivered. The princess was but a step removed from breaking into sobs. Leosei steeled his own emotions, knowing that leaving Oliese’s side was their best chance for getting help. He abandoned his sister and ran toward the hill.

“Samson!”

If called, the horse would come back, but Leosei’s voice would need to travel a great distance. He called again, still running, and reached the nearest patch of boulders. “Samson!”

A glib thought entered the prince’s mind.

“May as well be shouting at the wind.”

But Princess Oliese had taken her brother’s encouragement to heart. Her gown drifted in a gentle manner as she spoke the mantra, numbing her fear through repetition.

“The wind obeys me.”

Again.

“The wind obeys me!” Her voice grew more certain. She could hear the change, and she was beginning to believe the words. The clouds issued a challenge in reply. Crack! Boom! Bits of light flitted inside their pillowy forms like glow bugs in a bottle.

“Obey me!” Oliese screamed. The line between desperation and frustration blurred into anger. Her eyes flashed open. No more crying. No more tears. The clouds of Heaven thundered anew, but the princess ignored them. She scoured the hillside for her brother.

A warm, piercing light spilled over the sunken crescent. Oliese winced, but her eyes adjusted quickly. The light revealed two horses and the form of a single rider. Alabaster! He had found them. In his free hand, their caretaker bore an infinity lantern. Its light shifted, angling down to illuminate Leosei, who was struggling to ascend the hill.

Oliese smiled but knew they would not reach her in time. The clouds intended to engulf her. Outward and upward they swirled, enraged, forming a funnel that climbed dozens of feet into the air, reaching like a hand to pluck her from the sky. Its insides were a howling funnel that

wormed beneath the clouds and led to a consuming darkness. A mournful wail spiraled from the void, belonging to all who had perished beneath the clouds. These were the voices of the dead.

Oliese pushed the wail to the periphery of her mind and focused instead on her own heartbeat. It was racing too fast to measure. Good! That meant she was still alive. She used this truth to steady her resolve, for if she could not control the wind...

“Then I defy it!” the princess issued for all to hear. She tilted her head back with borrowed confidence, straightened her body, and brought her arms to her sides. The toes of her boots met, and Oliese became like an arrow in an archer’s bow. She shot through the air neither upward nor forward, but downward—headlong toward the base of the cliffs. The cloud funnel opened its maw to swallow her, yet she tore through its structure with little resistance. Vaporous tendrils snaked through the gaping hole she made in its throat. Pursuit was futile, for the princess was away.

Oliese batted aside the curls of hair that the wind had tossed in her face. The path ahead revealed two avenues: the underbelly of the cliffside and an infinite expanse of clouds. While these clouds appeared docile, but they were no more viable than the others. They harbored the same fate beneath the surface.

The princess knew she was falling. She had intended to build momentum, and while she had succeeded, flight eluded her. She would pass through the expanse of clouds in seconds if she failed to change course. Oliese focused again, remembering Leosei’s encouragement. The wind had obeyed her once already. She was determined that it would do so again! She gave the command, and fresh air sprang up so quickly that it compressed her chest and forced the breath from her lungs.

The princess gasped and nearly lost consciousness. She continued to fall, but her momentum had been cut in half. The effort had purchased minutes in place of moments.

Minutes for what?

To keep from panicking, Oliese drew in bits of air at a measured pace. Her lungs burned but were replenish. She turned her attention away from the pain and toward the cliffside. Something metallic glinted in the starlight. Gold? Silver? She strained her vision, discerning what appeared

to be a stairwell nestled between crags. Beyond the stairs, a narrow recess opened in the side of the cliff. An old lookout point, perhaps? There wasn't time to keep guessing. Striking the cliffside was preferable to what lurked beneath the clouds.

The princess willed herself toward the narrow recess with every bit of strength. Accordingly, the wind shifted. It no longer ferried her from beneath but now propelled her from behind. Kinetic energy swooped through her body like a pendulum, jolting Oliese into a prone position and hurling her laterally toward the recess. The princess felt the urge to vomit as her stomach did somersaults. The recess in the cliffs rushed closer.

Oliese grimaced and prayed for a safe landing.

Chapter 2: The Well

Prince Leosei fell to his knees in shock. He did not know how to feel, nor could he process what his eyes had witnessed. His sister, Oliese, had disappeared from the night sky. Like the stars they had been watching, she had fallen. Her light in the world had been extinguished at Heaven's edge, a grassy drop-off overlooking an endless sea of clouds.

Behind the prince, Alabaster dismounted his horse. He was the children's caretaker and had been so for all of their years. His lean but imposing figure was adorned with simple robes. Alabaster's white eyes searched the deep violet sky for any sign of the princess. Leosei believed she was lost, but the caretaker was less certain.

"She is persistent," he spoke quietly, resting a hand on the boy's shoulder. Alabaster's golden beard was neatly trimmed to form a point. His skin was the color of fertile earth, and despite their many years, his eyes were sharp. Although they had no visible pupils, they saw farther and better than any in Heaven.

"Take the lantern," he instructed. "Pierce the clouds. She may see it and fly to safety."

Leosei heard Alabaster's words but struggled to make sense of them. Oliese had tried and failed to use her gift of flight. That's why she had fallen. Both of them had seen it! Why was Alabaster pretending otherwise?

"She's gone," the prince blurted. His voice sounded foreign to him, sickly and weak. He was desperate to challenge his own statement, to convince himself he was wrong.

Alabaster placed the infinity lantern in Leosei's right hand and pointed to the expanse below them. "Do as I say!"

The children's caretaker stepped closer to the cliff's edge and narrowed his eyes. With hesitation, Leosei got to his feet and activated the lantern. Energy shot out of it in a sharp-edged beam that would not taper or diminish no matter the distance, ending only if obstructed by solid matter. The beam did more than illuminate the darkness—it replaced it with a swath of pure daylight. No shadows could exist in its path. The effect was startling to the uninitiated and invaluable to those who knew its uses.

“Now over here,” Alabaster nodded. “Into the face of the cliffs.”

Leosei adjusted the angle with a turn of a knob and held the lantern out over the drop-off.

“What can you see?” the prince asked, sounding mechanical. He believed their efforts were a denial of the obvious. Somehow, fighting Alabaster’s optimism gave him a purpose. A sense of loss was creeping up on him, replacing the numbness of shock. Anger, too. Rightfully toward himself, but wrongfully toward Alabaster. Their caretaker had come looking for them. Leosei should never have taken Oliese here at night! Nor should he have left his sister’s side even to find help. He could have been there for her at the end.

“Trails of vapor,” Alabaster observed. “She may have taken her chances with the cliffside. Give me the lantern.”

“This was my idea,” Leosei confessed, his thoughts spilling into words. “I led my sister to her death.”

Alabaster snatched the lantern from the prince and clamped the boy’s shoulder like a vice.

“Ah!” Leosei cried.

“Pay attention,” Alabaster instructed. Surprise was visible in Leosei’s expression as pain radiated from the caretaker’s iron grip.

“First, we will recover your sister. Second, we will return home together. Third, the kingdom will rejoice that no lasting harm has befallen Heaven’s children. Now take the horses and follow me.”

“Yes, sir,” Leosei nodded as quickly as possible. Then the caretaker released him, and the prince reeled away in pain. He nursed his shoulder for a moment before gathering the reins to Samson and Flint, Alabaster’s horse. The caretaker had not treated him this way before, nor had the royal children received punishment from anyone but the king or queen. Laying a hand on them meant imprisonment or worse.

“I have the horses,” Leosei ventured, not wishing to incur further injury. His thoughts were an indistinct jumble of anguish and loss. He wondered if he had just woken from a bad dream. Alabaster’s actions, although conducted with the caretaker’s usual calm and assured demeanor, were out of character.

He is never cross with us, even when he should be.

Oliese had uttered those words earlier about Alabaster. Now their beloved caretaker was searching for her corpse. Leosei's world felt upside-down, and the prince was struggling to breathe.

"How," he gasped. "How will we find her?"

"Alive and well."



Princess Oliese of Heaven, wandering the deserts of Terah.