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Opening extract from
Jepp, Who Defied the Stars

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Chapter 1

Being a court dwarf is no easy task. I know because I failed at it.

But before I tell you how I failed, and how I ended up imprisoned in this star-crossed coach, bumping up and down bone-chilling roads, I will tell you a little about myself. My name is Jepp and I was born fifteen years ago in the town of Astraveld, twenty miles south of Utrecht.

To call Astraveld a town is probably not quite correct—it is more of a crossroads, and a dangerous one at that, set among lands claimed by both the Spanish Netherlands and the Protestant North. Astraveld was a real town once, when my mother was young, with long, flat stretches of green fields, cows and chickens, a harvest festival, a small church, and a dirt square where farmers traded eggs and barley, and visiting merchants plied spices and cloth. But when the Protestant North rose up against Spain, most everyone fled except her family and three

or four others. My grandparents realized they needed a different livelihood, independent from their pillaged lands, so they opened an inn that served both Catholic and Protestant alike, until the day my grandfather was stabbed in the heart by a drunken Spanish soldier who mistook him for a spy. Even after this tragedy, my family stayed, bound by the stars, my mother said, to a town that had been their home for as long as anyone could remember.

A few years later, my grandmother died and my mother became the sole mistress of the family establishment. She proved a formidable businesswoman. As the traffic of war flourished, she hired the remaining families of Astraveld in various capacities, and her inn, like the Ark itself, sustained the inhabitants of our much-reduced town.

It was at this inn that I was born, as skirmishes continued around us between the Spanish Netherlands and the Protestant North. My mother would not talk about my birth, just that she loved me from the first sight. She was broad-shouldered and stout with a brown mole on her left cheek. Her eyes could flash stern enough to shame the rowdiest drunk or—upon viewing a mewling kitten or another of the hapless creatures she so enjoyed—crinkle with mirth. The remaining families of Astraveld, who felt deep gratitude toward her, showered me with affection and praise. As the popularity of the inn grew, but I did not, I attributed the laughter and smiles of passing travelers to the love owed me as prince of my mother's spirited kingdom.

Our inn consisted of two storeys—the first contained an open room in which the eye was immediately drawn to a large hearth where orange flames crackled and roared under a great cauldron

of bubbling porridge. Circling the fire were mismatched chairs and tables—abandoned by various townsfolk as they fled the uprising—and beneath them, always, gaming cats—their eyes squinting gaily as they scanned the floor for mice. Two or three girls, hired by my mother, carried pewter mugs of ale from behind the bar and delivered them with loaves of black bread and small bowls into which they ladled the porridge. The ale was watered down, the porridge bland. The rich, pungent odor of sweat and hops soaked into a traveler's hair and clothes. And yet, especially after a long journey, such as the one I am forced on now, the cozy room and its companionable smells offered just the respite a weary soul required.

Although fealty to my mother prevented the Astraveld families from ever remarking upon my condition, my mother could not always control the yaps of travelers, especially after they had emptied several mugs of ale. I still remember the first time this happened—I was seven and playing with one of the cats, dragging a piece of string before it by the fire. Two men in dirty burlap coats, their potato noses red with ale, were watching me and, in my mind, admiring how I teased the cat with its prey. With hearty laughter, they calculated something on their fingers and then, with a red-faced grin, one of the men called me over. I walked up to them fearlessly, expecting some kind word or compliment. But as soon as I reached him, the man hoisted me up on his lap. Then he seized my string and, dangling me in the air by the ankle like a hare, began to measure me with it.

“Three feet and an inch!” cried his companion. “That’s what the dwarf is. I am sure of it!”

I did not have to struggle and cry out, as I would at other times ahead, because in a flash my mother was there, slapping the man that held me with such force that he dropped me and I tumbled into her apron. The terror I felt ebbed as she enveloped me in her arms.

And so I learned the word that would come to supplant my name. But I thought not of myself as a dwarf. I was Jepp to my mother, Jepp to the families of Astraveld, Jepp to the regular travelers who greeted me warmly and brought me gifts. My favorite among these was an alphabet primer with which I taught myself to read. But there was also the body of a spiny mer-creature with a tiny snout, a wooden knight, a yellow finch that escaped its cage and was eaten by one of the cats, and a pair of stilts that allowed me to tower over all. The sea of humanity that passed through the inn was my school: I heard stories of the New World, of sea monsters, of men who gazed upon the celestial spheres, of foreign courts, of new dyes for paint, of cities teeming with pageants and universities, of churches that soared up toward God like the tower of Babel itself.

My height was just a fact of life—the real mystery that captured my imagination as I grew in years was my paternity. When I was very young my mother had insisted that I had no father. She claimed that she had conceived me after staring at a turtle that had come between her and the well. But gradually, when I developed no hump or shell, I began to doubt this provenance, and my suspicion turned to the few remaining able-bodied men of Astraveld.

There was Pieter, our brewer, a quiet, pock-marked man who

carved me a small wooden horse. But he had sired two burly, red-haired sons who lifted barrels of ale over their shoulders as lightly as the horizon heaves up clouds. With my dark hair and eyes, I could not imagine these fair Atlases to be my brothers.

There was Farmer Helmich, whose rough hands were oversized for his short-limbed frame. His wife, Jantje, was so full of chatter that she gaped in between tales like a fish gasping for air. But Helmich only had eyes—or rather ears—for his wife, beaming at her like a perpetually amused audience. They had no children.

Willem, who could read and write figures and helped my mother keep track of what was bought and sold, told me tales from the Bible and about the pagan heroes of Rome. Long and thin as a flute, he lived with us at the inn; and of all the men, I would have liked him best as father. But when I hinted this to my mother, she averred that he had no interest in matters of the flesh and laughed so merrily that I knew it to be true.

I turned my attention to the cast of travelers who paraded through the inn—the soldiers, merchants, scholars, farmers, monks, gentlemen, servants, fortune tellers and musicians. I did not know what I was searching for—a familiar look in a stranger's eye, a tender gaze at my mother? By some sign, I believed, my true father would reveal himself.

As I waited for this grand moment, I envisioned each man in the fated role, and how my resulting life would be in court, on stage, in university or on the battlefield—as the son of kings, heroes, men of action—a son reclaimed to live a life of adventure and renown. These were my boyish fantasies, but in my bed at night, the stars unblinking in the cold sky and my candle

crying waxy tears, I would have been happy enough with a simple country man, so long as he claimed me as his own.

At fourteen, I was not much taller than I had been at seven, though my thoughts and feelings took up a much greater part of me. My mother and Willem alone seemed to understand this; visitors to the inn continued to proffer toys and pat me upon the head. I began to spend less time there, retreating to the barn with the cats or settling myself in the crook of a tree root with a book about the lives of the saints, which I had collected in addition to my primer. The urgency of finding my father seemed to wane. When I dreamed, it was of perfect loneliness—a hermit in a cottage, a monk in a cell—a sublime vision of what I already felt and assumed to be my lot.

My mother thought my melancholic humor was the result of idle hands, and put me to work. I sat in a corner of the great room, in view of the hearth, washing mugs and bowls in a wooden bucket. But even though I labored now in the heart of the noisy inn, I was as removed from the commotion and stares as I had been in the field or barn. I kept my head down, focusing on my task, reciting stories in my mind to while away the time. When spoken to I spoke, but I did not seek out company. “What ails Master Jepp?” my mother was asked. “Growing up,” she would say. Some would laugh, thinking this a jest, but some understood.

It was on a busy autumn night, as I dragged my rag over the dregs of porridge stiffened in a bowl, that I became aware of someone staring at me. There was nothing unusual about this—I was accustomed to stares from new visitors. After glancing up at a dapper, bearded man with a feathered cap and a ruffed

collar, I concluded him a stranger and his curiosity the familiar sort. But his dress struck me as uncommonly fine, and his manner odd: unlike most strangers, who after a time lost interest and turned away, this man continued to gaze upon me, his mug of ale untouched. When one of the girls brought him porridge, he waved it away and then stopped her to ask a question.

“Jepp,” I heard her say.

“Jepp,” he repeated. He stood up, removed his cap, and bowed grandly in my direction.

With pulsing heart, I recalled my boyhood fantasies. Though I did not see my features reflected in the man’s face, I felt certain that he was the instrument of my fate. Of this, sadly, I would not be mistaken.

Chapter 2

A few moments later, this gentleman approached me, just as I knew that he would. “Jepp?” he said.

I barely managed to answer, so stricken was I with anticipation. “Yes?”

“Please join me at my table.” He smiled as if my assent would bring him great satisfaction.

And so I did, clambering up upon a chair, feeling from this vantage like a guest in my own home. He introduced himself. He had a name, a very long one that he presented as if rolling out a carpet of words. But I quickly fell into the habit of calling him by the Spanish title Don, and from this he did not dissuade me.

As Don chatted about the rigors of travel and praised the flavor of my mother’s ale, I waited for him to arrive at the true subject of our conversation. Finally, I could be patient no more.

“Do you know my father?”

Don stared at me in confusion. "Your father?"

"My mother never revealed his identity to me. I thought perhaps—"

Don interrupted me with a laugh. "I know nothing about this."

I looked away, attempting to conceal my disappointment.

"But you are right to guess that there is an important matter I wish to discuss with you," he continued. "Have you ever pictured yourself at court?"

I shook my head, not wanting to reveal my own foolish dreams.

"There is a place for you there," he assured me. "As a court dwarf."

Though I had imagined myself being summoned to court many times, it was never for the distinction of my height. As I pondered this surprising turn of events, my mother rushed over from across the room, her face creased with worry.

"Good evening," said Don, greeting her with a sweeping bow as he repeated his lengthy name.

"He wishes me to go to court," I blurted out.

I expected her to dismiss Don's overture promptly, for it wasn't the first time a stranger had made an offer to take me on his travels for companionship or show. But with a respectful nod to Don, she took a seat and listened as he spun fantastic visions of what such a life might entail: I would hobnob with princes, diplomats, church officials, and painters; feast on stuffed game and almond cakes; dance the galliard to the strains of viol and lute; and be schooled in ancient languages, new sciences, and the secrets of the spheres.

"This is indeed a fine life," my mother said when he was done.

Although my impressions were much the same, I felt betrayed. Surely, she wished to keep me by her side? Had I become so sullen that she wanted to send me away? But when I sought counsel in her eyes, they evaded my own, looking downward.

"I don't want you to go, Jepp," she said, as though reading my thoughts. "But what this gentleman promises..."

"Our family has always been in Astraveld," I protested. "I have a good life."

This remark seemed to touch her deeply for she grabbed my hand beneath the table and held it fast in her own. I would have stayed by her side all my days had her words not clashed with this gesture.

"You can have so much more, Jepp. You can see the world, learn your place in it." She hesitated, looking at Don for assurance. "And when you're done, you can come back, my love. I will be here."

Don squinted his dark eyes and grinned agreeably at her. "None of us would ever keep a boy from his mother's breast."

At this tender remark, my mother withdrew her hand from mine and nodded at Don, her eyes wet with tears. I understood then that she did not wish me gone but only to have the greater life of which I dreamed. That she was willing to part with me no longer seemed an insult but a testament to the depths of her love. I thought back to the pretty scenes Don had painted of court. Even though I had been invited there under the auspices of my stature, I would be a member of this world. And Don had promised my

mother that I could still come home. It was this homecoming that made the journey seem enticing for, on my return, I imagined telling her and Willem of all the astonishing things I had seen.

But before I could agree to this adventure, I had one more question. The primer upon which I had taught myself to read and the legends of the saints had whet my appetite for more than just feasts and finery. “Will there be books?”

“Books!” Don said with a laugh. “There will be an entire library for you. Like nothing you’ve ever seen!”

The next day, with my mother’s blessing, I departed with Don for Brussels, the capital of the Spanish Netherlands, and the court of the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia and her husband, the archduke Albert of Austria. There I would join the Infanta’s retinue as her court dwarf. The journey would take three days in Don’s coach. I had never traveled so far, and never in a conveyance so elegant and fine. A cloth of red velvet hung over the hard wooden seat. Silk pillows, ornamented with gold brocade, softened the jostles of the road. Pelts of fox and sable prevented drafts and a hot coal wrapped in a sturdy burlap blanket on the floor warmed our feet. Satchels of rosemary hung from the ceiling to freshen the air and a repast of candied almonds and honey cakes banished the smallest shadow of hunger.

I felt like Apollo, flying over the ground, my thoughts as buoyant as my chariot. I was only vaguely aware of the horses’ hooves dancing over the red and yellow leaves; the drowsy sun glinting over streams; the peasants, industrious as bees, harvesting their fields of peas and barley, rye and beans. Next to me, Don tunelessly hummed a madrigal. Over the course of our journey, he offered no further details about my future life, preferring to

silently pick at his teeth with the sharp-edged splinter of a chicken bone. By the third afternoon, I could not help but to deluge him with questions.

“Will I have duties? As a member of the court?”

Don pulled the chicken bone out of his mouth and looked upon me quizzically, as though he had forgotten I was there. “Your only duty, Jepp, is to be yourself.”

This did not satisfy me in the least. I bit into a honey cake and determined to prod him more. “What are your duties, Don?”

Don tugged at his beard, considering this for a moment. “To satisfy the wishes of the Infanta and her court.”

“Where were you headed when you discovered me?”

His dark eyes blinked rapidly. “Back to the court...from...” His voice strained to sound merry. “This is not your business, Jepp.”

I flushed, not intending to irritate my patron. “All I meant is that it is lucky you found me.”

Don leaned close to me. His breath was surprisingly rank, and I struggled not to draw back. “There is no luck,” he confided. “There are only the stars, Jepp. That is where our fortune or lack of it resides.”

“Not with God?”

“God made the stars.” Don looked around as if checking to see if someone had joined us inside the coach, an angel or demon in the deepening shadows. “But it is the celestial bodies that make us. I am born in the month of the Scorpion. My element is water. I can transform myself just as water can become steam or ice.”

This should have been a warning to me. But I sought to draw

this slippery figure closer. “My mother says I am the sign of the water bearer.”

“Aquarius,” said Don, musing upon this. “Despite being the water bearer, it is an air sign. I suppose there is something air-like about you.”

“Air-like?”

“Driven by the head. You ask too many questions.”

My feelings wounded, I struggled to find the proper words with which to respond. “But I am being myself, Don.”

“You do not know yourself, Jepp,” he replied somewhat wearily.

I felt confused, for how could I be myself if I did not know myself? As the sun sank below the horizon, I began to have doubts concerning my destination. Perhaps, like Don, everyone at the court spoke in such indecipherable riddles. Perhaps I would fail to impress and they would send me back home. The thought was not entirely an unwelcome one.

As the coach hurried forward through the cooling afternoon, my thoughts raced back to Astraveld, to my mother’s kindly eyes, to Willem’s stories, even to such chores as bringing water from the well and sweeping ashes from the hearth. Like all things left behind, they appeared even dearer in memory.

I opened my primer, one of the few mementos I had brought from home, seeking comfort in the familiar words and pictures. But instead of reading the pages before me, I recalled my mother’s embrace, her parting words. No longer had she deigned to suppress her grief at my departure. Her cheeks stained with tears, she had bent down on her knees and cupped my face in her hands. “You were born for a better life, Jepp. Now it is yours

to claim,” she had said. But it was my past that I longed to recover and my future that loomed frightening and cold.

In the dark, our coach reached the city wall. My apprehension was great as we drove through a gate in a huge stone fortification and turned up a lane. On either side of the lane were tall houses, each one blazing with light. Dogs roamed the street and the smell of night soil fouled the air. We rumbled past a large square filled with peddlers’ stalls where groups of bundled figures shivered around small fires, and then past a church that rose and rose, disappearing in the night like a ladder to the stars. Though it was near time to sleep, Don seemed more awake—his dark eyes flashing at the city sights.

The coach hurried along a street lined with grand brick and stone houses and then began to climb a hill, ascending over the city as if to some Olympian mount. Don adjusted his hat. The road leveled out on top of a promontory and we drove through enormous gates, by many gardens, and toward a palace, illuminated by torches, which appeared as great as any mortal-made structure I had ever seen or imagined. It was at least four storeys high and seemed to me endless, a labyrinth of arches, gables, and windows. “Coudenberg,” announced Don in the same grand manner that he had first introduced himself.

I whispered the name of my new home—*Cold Hill*—and, as though I had uttered an incantation, my doubts vanished. I suddenly understood that, if anything, Don’s words had failed to do justice to the wonders of the life that awaited me. I felt as if I had passed into a dream.

Don, watching me, smiled. “Just wait, Jepp, till you see your quarters.”