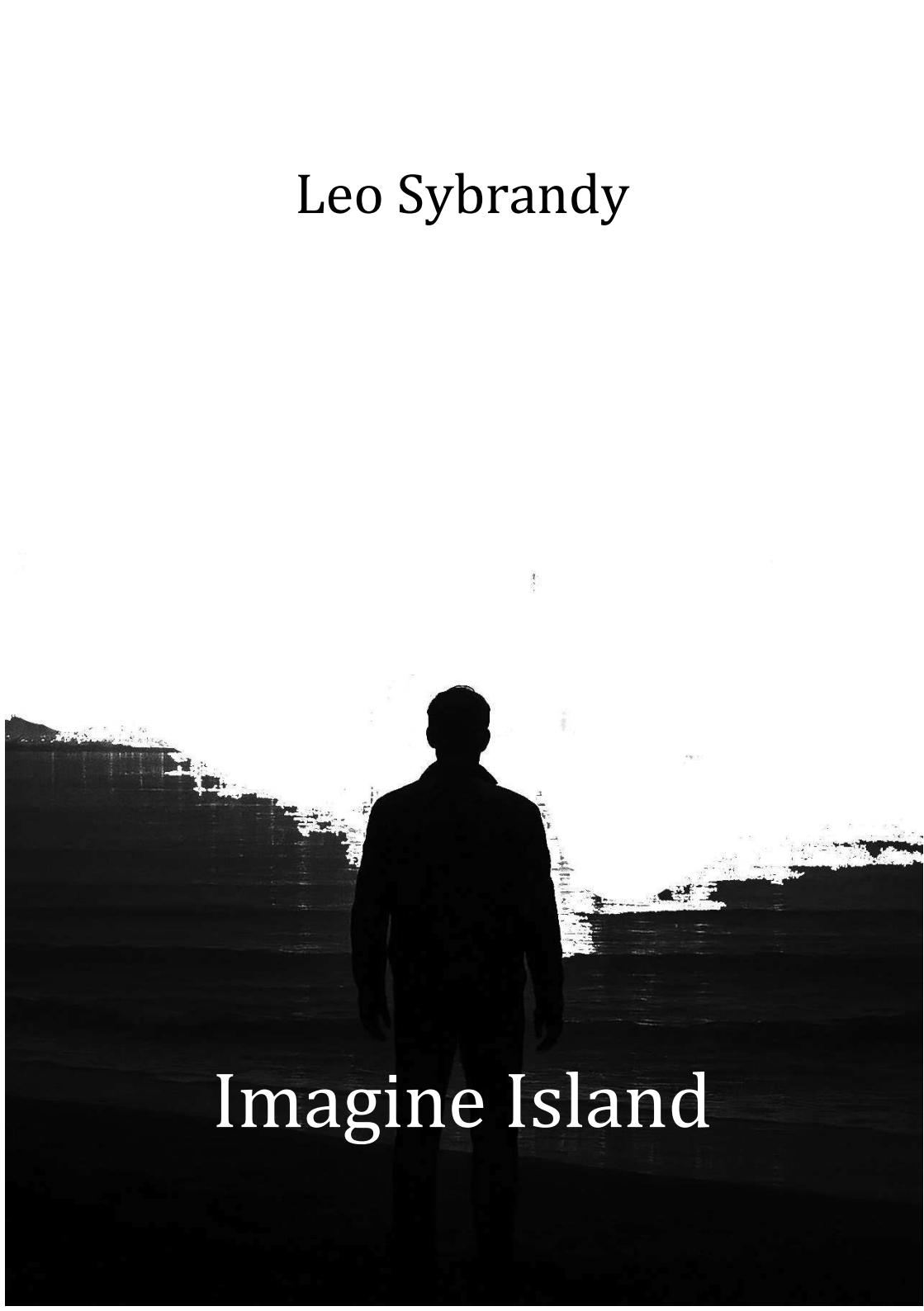


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Imagine Island

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Years ago, I helped a young student, Jaynee, with the subject of philosophy... The assignment: A depiction of an ideal world. We called it Jayneeland. The teacher was very pleased with the result. This story is based on the ideas we incorporated into that project.

In that same year, I assisted a student, Jayren, in putting together a PRP (Profile Research Project). For mathematics... about the Golden Ratio. I have also made use of that in this book.

Previously published in Dutch:

Young Adult:

- **De Magiër van Duivelstad**
- **De zaal van de twee waarheden**
- **Maribel en de kracht van de Tumi**
- **Het Ziggy experiment**

Thrillers:

- **De waardering der herinnering**
- **Fase 7**
- **Fase 8**
- **Fase 9**
- **Doodgewone verhalen (verhalenbundel)**
- **Planbureau Adventure**
- **Project December**

Societal themes:

- **Onderwijs effect**
- **Liam**
- **Gevangene van zijn eigen macht**
- **Thrills**

‘Man is by nature, and prior to any education, good, and can only be corrupted by experiences in society. Every human being has a unique character and needs freedom to be able to develop, without coercion or punishment. Moral values, including altruism, can only arise through careful upbringing in a civil society.

In my society, everyone has something and no one has 'too much' and the citizens act 'as much as possible in accordance with the general interest without the need for a great state power.'

No longer a contract between individuals and the person who will rule over them as sovereign, but a treaty of free individuals who mutually decide to form a community. We only need to be true to our own authentic being and have respect for nature.’

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712-1778

Intro

Hotel Bar ‘The Crystal Glass’ - Tuesday evening, 11:14 PM

Most of the guests had departed, and those who remained spoke in hushed voices, their words dissolving into the soft pop music.

Behind the mahogany bar, Sneek was polishing glasses. In his years behind the counter, he had seen everything from marriage proposals to shady deals, and he had learned that the quietest nights were often the most treacherous.

Someone walked in... presidential candidate Frederik Burmann. Alone. Without his usual swarm of advisors and security guards. He wore his suit like armor that had become too heavy after a long battle. Fatigue tugged at the corners of his eyes.

“A double whisky on the rocks,” Burmann said, dropping onto a barstool.

Sneek nodded and chose a bottle from the top shelf. He knew Burmann from the news. A man of the people, they said. A short-tempered man, his opponents claimed. Sneek poured the golden liquid into a glass, added ice cubes, and slid it toward the politician without a word.

“You know,” Burmann said suddenly, “they say I’m a coward. That I don’t dare. And maybe they’re right.”

He swirled the glass in his hand. The ice clinked against the rim.

“But tomorrow... tomorrow I’ll show them.”

Sneek looked up. He knew that tone. People who had drunk too much and felt they had something to prove. “Another one, sir?” he asked.

“Make it two,” Burmann said. “Set them both down.”

Sneek refilled the glass. He was about to say something about the late hour, but Burmann had grabbed his phone. He sat hunched over the screen, tapping with a determined look. Sneek wiped the bar clean, slowly, to buy time.

“Busy day, Mr. Burmann?”

“Busy month,” he said without looking up. “I’m sick of it, all that hypocritical nonsense. They pretend to be decent, but they’re all just out for themselves.

Tomorrow, I’m letting it all out. Everything. Let them see who I really am.”

He gave a lopsided smile. “Grit—that’s what they want. Well, they’re going to get it.”

Sneek saw the screen light up. The text was already half-written. It looked like a confession and an indictment at the same time.

“Maybe it’s better to read that again tomorrow morning,” he said. “The night is rarely a good time for talking.”

Burmann looked up, his eyes glassy but sharp. “What do you know about it?”

“More than you think,” Sneek said calmly. He laid down his cloth. “I’ve seen all sorts here. People who wanted to do something that they couldn’t take back the next morning.”

He nodded toward the glass. “Drink that first.”

For a moment, it seemed as if Burmann was going to say something, but he remained silent. His thumb hovered over the screen. Then, he slowly lowered the phone.

“You’re right,” he said softly. “Maybe tonight I should just stay silent.”

Sneek shrugged. “Nothing wrong with silence, sir.

There’s plenty of time to do something stupid tomorrow.”

That elicited a short laugh from the politician. He finished his glass and gave a brief nod.

“Thank you, Sneek, was it?”

“Yes,” said Sneek.

“If I ever become president, you’re getting a medal,” Burmann said, half-joking, half-serious.

His gaze was fixed on nothing, on the reflections in the mirror behind the bar. A few minutes passed in silence. Then the door of the bar opened, and a man stepped in with the predatory gaze of a tabloid journalist. Sneek recognized him immediately: one Johnson from the platform ‘The Unmasking’. A hyena in a suit tailored too tight.

Johnson walked straight up to Burmann, a smirk on his face and a phone loosely in his hand.

“Mr. Burmann! What a surprise to find you here all alone. Drinking away the campaign stress?”

Burmann’s shoulders tensed. “I’m off duty, Johnson. Leave me alone.”

“Always on duty, Mr. Candidate,” Johnson said, leaning his elbow on the bar, too close.

“I was wondering, since we have the chance... those allegations about your brother-in-law’s construction fraud, which sources say you knew about...”

“No comment,” Burmann snapped at him, his eyes boring into his glass.

Johnson laughed softly. His thumb brushed over the screen of his phone. Sneek saw it. The camera was on, subtly pointed downward, but the microphone would capture everything perfectly.

“People say that family loyalty ranks above the law for you,” Johnson continued, his voice now loud enough for the remaining guests to look up.

“Is that the kind of president you’ll be? A man who protects his corrupt family?”

Sneek saw a vein throbbing in Burmann’s temple. He began to move slowly, almost imperceptibly, toward the end of the bar.

“I said, leave me alone,” Burmann growled. His knuckles turned white as he gripped his glass.

Johnson leaned in even closer, his voice a vicious whisper.

“Or is it true what they say about your wife? That she’s the one who really wears the pants, and you’re just the ventriloquist’s dummy who...”

That was it. The spark in the powder keg.

Everything happened in a fraction of a second.

Burmann lunged upward. His barstool clattered to the floor. His face was a mask of pure rage. He threw the rest of his whisky into Johnson’s face, and his right hand balled into a fist, ready to strike the smirking journalist, who was getting exactly the reaction he had hoped for.

But the punch never landed.

Just as Burmann’s arm shot forward, Sneek was there. He hadn’t thrown himself between the two men. He hadn’t made a scene. With a swift, fluid motion, he had placed his hand on Burmann’s forearm, right on the tendon. His grip wasn’t painful, but it was unyielding. Hard as steel.

“Mr. Burmann,” Sneek said. His voice was low, calm, and cut through the tension. “Don’t.”

Burmann froze, his breath catching in his throat. He looked from his clenched fist to the bartender’s hand and then into his eyes. They were the eyes of someone who had seen the consequences of foolish actions a thousand times before.

“That phone is on,” Sneek continued, his voice still a compelling whisper, intended only for the two of them.

“Tomorrow, you won’t be a candidate anymore.

Tomorrow, you’ll be the face of every talk show—the man who lost his self-control. Exactly what he wants.”

The words hit home, harder than a punch.

The rage in Burmann’s eyes gave way to something else: a flash of panic, followed by the icy realization of what he had almost done. The tension drained out of his arm. Slowly, he lowered his hand.

Sneek let him go and, still the perfect bartender, turned to Johnson, who was wiping the whisky from his eyes. “Sir,” Sneek said with a polite but icy authority, “your presence is no longer appreciated. I must ask you to leave.”

Johnson, robbed of his climax, sputtered something about freedom of the press, but Sneek’s chilling gaze and Burmann’s sudden, dangerous silence made him decide not to push his luck further. With one last dirty look, he turned and left the bar.

A deep silence fell. Burmann was still standing there, trembling from the suppressed adrenaline. He looked at his hands as if they belonged to a stranger.

Sneek picked up the fallen barstool and set it upright. He took a clean glass, filled it with ice-cold water, and placed it in front of the presidential candidate.

“Drink this,” he said softly. “On the house.”

Burmann looked at him. The arrogance was gone; the anger was gone. What remained was a man who had just looked over the edge of an abyss and been pulled back. There was an immeasurable gratitude in his eyes. He nodded, his throat too dry to speak.