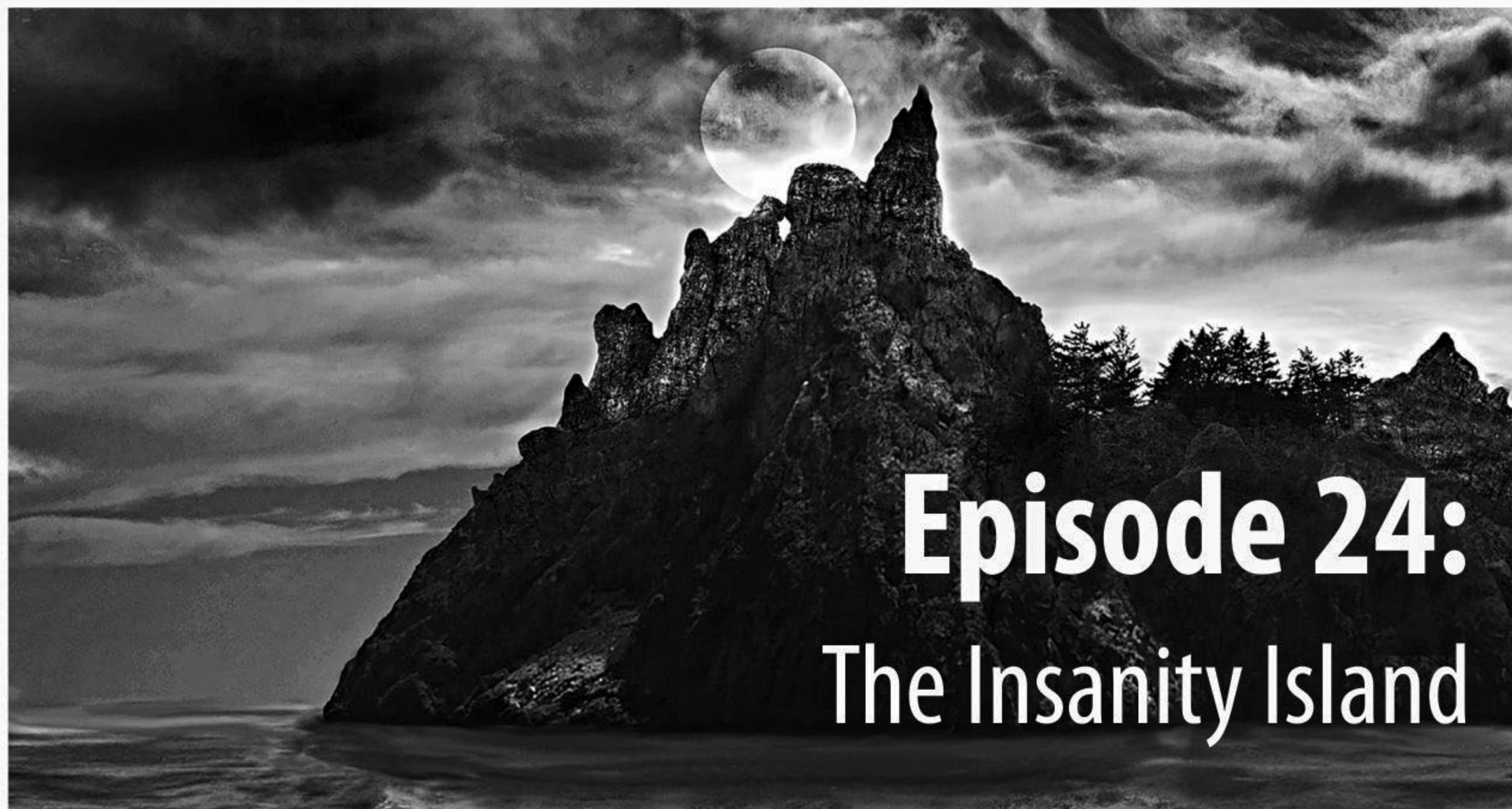


UNREPENTANT

SHOUNAK REZA

I go on,
 I walk on
 I am unrepentant
 You cannot forgive me
 For what my eyes never see
 My mind resides in a cage.
 Things will fade, I will age,
 Nobody will remember that month-
 Not even the wisest sage.
 Nobody could predict
 The way it encircled me.
 It never let me escape.

I am unrepentant
 I am a wreck
 I am the pages
 Of a book now lost
 I am the horseman
 That never made his way
 Through the fog.



AAQIB HASIB

PRELUDE

Thousands of miles away, a TV screen flickered as the silhouette on the sofa seemed to lay asleep, a glass bottle in one hand and a TV program brochure in the other.

Written on the cover was "Episode 24: The Insanity Island airs tonight at 11 PM." Looking back at the old black and white tube unit of a television sitting lazily in front of the sofa, one's eyes would immediately find its way to the small digital clock display, right above the channel and volume knobs.

The time read 22:59.

As the next few seconds passed, the time finally changed to 23:00. The TV grew silent for a few seconds before a very jazzy opening theme jingle began to play.

"AWL broadcast network. The best network in tooooooownnnnnn."

Finally ending with the curtains being drawn back, as a man who appeared to be the host of the show walked onto the stage.

"Ladies and Gentleman", he said through the speaker of the TV, "thank you for joining us once again tonight."

"Tonight, we have for you a very special episode. This truly is reality television at its finest. Our participants are all ready to go on the island. Only one man will emerge victorious."

He paused and looked at the audience with an ominous smile before continuing, "The island is not an easy ordeal to escape; it has lot more in store than a simple obstacle course, challenged to make the visit of some of these contestants", he paused again letting the thrill and tension build, before saying again, "quite permanent."

His smirk was almost menacing at this point, as if enjoying the ordeal that hung over the fate of these men.

"So without further ado", he said as he clapped his hands together, "let us begin tonight's special episode."

THE ISLAND

In a place much closer, I was jolted awake by the sound of sirens.

This was not a drill. It was simply a

game. A show meant to entertain the masses at even the highest of costs to the participants.

There were five of us. We had no names only numbers and mine was five.

I had run out of time to think. The door to the cell in which I had resided for a fortnight opened automatically. Insanity Island had commenced and there was no time left to mull over my thoughts.

I ran out of the cell, the corridors outside were just as dark as my cell. Within a few minutes of navigating through multiple sets of corridors, I found myself in a room the size of a basketball court.

Through the other door on the far side of the room entered another man, dressed in a sweatshirt with only the number two on it. Challenge one had commenced.

A large screen on the wall to my left suddenly turned on. There was a man on the other side of it, smiling from ear to ear.

"HELLO CONTESTANTS", he screamed, "this is round one, and I am so glad numbers 5 and 2 were the first ones to meet".

"Your challenge, if you choose to accept it", he giggled a little, "is to wrestle your opponent to the ground, and tie them up using the rope provided to you".

At these words, two large strands of rope landed at each of our respective feet from somewhere above.

"At the sound of the buzzer, feel free to begin".

Those words did not linger in the air long before the sound followed--
BZZZZZZT.

My years of *krav maga* experience were equally matched by his *judo* skills. After struggling back and forth for fifteen minutes, I was finally able to catch him in a hold. Never had I wished for violence to be an option, but the rules did not allow for contestants to physically harm one another.

I manoeuvred him into a position which allowed me to tie him up at last. Relieved, I sat down on the ground.

That's when another announcement came across through some sort of PA system.

"Number 5 has bested number 2. While on the other side numbers 1 and 4 have been defeated by number 3. We're down to our finalists. The competition is getting intense folks".

I was afraid of what gargantuan man lay in wait for me. He who had already bested two people in the time it took me to defeat but one. I ran through; my eyes had not adjusted, but I was afraid of what lay ahead.

The next room was even bigger than the last, and once I finally stepped foot in it, I saw my challenger. He was massive, standing at nearly seven feet. I could see his muscles clenching in anticipation at the little ant that stood in his path to victory.

Multiple screens lit up, with the host smiling wider than ever. He cleared his throat before announcing once more, "So here we are, the last challenge. Unlike the previous ones, this particular challenge is one of mental fortitude".

"You see dear audience and contestants, for this part we have decided to bring your family members onto the island as well. They are waiting, hidden away somewhere."

He paused again, smiling at his own brilliance it seemed.

"If you wish for your families to be freed, then we will, of course, free them. But the price is a permanent residency for you here. Choose to let them stay, and they will take your place, while you escape the grasps of this prison at last".

"So what will it be", he finally asked.

The screen now showed both our families; my brother on one side, and his wife and children on the other.

The final doors opened, we both locked eyes. He looked defeated, as if he had no intention to move. My mind, however, was made up. My feet moved before my next breath, and I was out the door in a flash.

I escaped the island that night, but my soul was forever there.

Aaqib loves petting doggos. Send him pictures of your "good boys" at aaqibhasib94@gmail.com