

## Sarnai

Three hours from a small village in the Southwest region of the Gobi Desert sat a crumbling border control office. On this particular day, within this building, there were three men, one large vehicle, and a crate containing an animal of indeterminate breeding. Beyond the building, there was a vast expanse of open space, and an immense amount of golden sand. Aside from the group gathered in the little office, there was not a tree, structure, human, or animal for as far as the eye could see. To be sure, this was an atypical day, as most other days passed in the border control office without a single occupant, save the Senior General, who maintained his daily vigil with diligence. The Senior General managed his office with supreme authority, and was true to his imperial duties with steadfast dedication despite the overall monotony of the position.

However, the appearance of the first man, a squat German, invigorated the Senior General and he was pleased to have the opportunity to complete his most sacred of duties. The foreigner arrived at the checkpoint in a large vehicle and rudely requested to be expedited through the process. The Senior General had determined, most appropriately, that this man should be detained for further questioning, and his vehicle, with the enclosed animal, was therefore confiscated and parked under the shade of the lean-to beside the building. But before the first question could be asked, the second man, a native Mongolian villager, arrived in a frenzy, and demanded to see the German. Of course, as was the only clear option, the Senior General secured both men, separately, in locked rooms for further inquiry.

Choosing to begin with the Mongolian villager over the foreigner, the Senior General entered the small room and sat down at the rickety wooden table, wiping dust from its surface as he sat.

“Why are you crossing the border, Sir?” asked the Senior General, as he flipped open a folder of papers.

The old man met the Senior General’s gaze. The villager’s eyes were almond brown and the sides of each curved upward into one of the many weathered wrinkles that scattered his face like an ancient map. The villager replied in a gravelly voice, “I am Bat-Ochiryn Tuul. My people care for the Takhi horses.”

“Takhi,” commented the Senior General. “You mean the Przewalski horses?”

“Yes, Sir,” replied Mr. Tuul.

“Ah, yes,” said the Senior General. He tapped a finger on the file in front of him and replied, “I have just read about this, they have brought these extinct horses back to their homeland. They brought the horses back to your village, Mr. Tuul?”

“Yes,” Mr. Tuul replied quickly, pleased that the Senior General knew about his village. “Yes, many months ago, people from the West came to our village. First it was a woman from across the ocean, from the *Smithsonian Institute World Zoo*. She visited us three times. She told us that the zoo had rescued ten Takhi and had bred them in America, and that they wanted to bring them back to their homeland. She told us that we would be given back our Takhi and that it would be our duty to protect them, just as our ancestors did.” The villager smiled, “This is the way of our people.”

“Was this man, the German in the other room, one of the group from the zoo?” asked the Senior General.

Mr. Tuul smiled, unfolding his hand and spreading them before him. “I thought so, yes. But it was trickery!”

“What do you mean?” inquired the Senior General.

Mr. Tuul hesitated, rubbed his leathery hands together, and thought for a moment.

“Do you know the legend of the Uylak?” Mr. Tuul eventually replied.

“No, I am not aware of this legend,” replied the Senior General.

Again, Mr. Tuul paused; he shifted in his chair, and his gaze slid from the Senior General to the wooden table.

Mr. Tuul continued, “The Uylak is the shape-shifting werewolf of the desert. To understand, you must know that at the time of our ancestors, the dunes were not made of sand, but instead, the land was rich with beautiful plants, fruits, and running water. But most splendid of all was the rose bush which grew in the center of our village. It was a giant bush, towering over the valley, yet it grew only one spectacular flower - a rose so beautiful, that the sight of its petals could cure the sick and save the damned. You see,” the villager said, leaning toward the Senior General conspiratorially, “this flower was the gateway to heaven’s realm. And as the gateway, the beauty of heaven spilled from its velvet petals and extended across our land.” The villager stopped and sat back, then continued, “But, one night, an exceptionally large full moon rose over the dunes, and in its shadow lurked a Uylak, the werewolf. When the Uylak entered the forest, he was entranced by the beauty of the rose in the moonlight, and bewitched by its

power. In the darkness of night, the wolf went to the flower and with great white fangs he bit the rose from the bush, swallowing its power into his body. As soon as he did this, a dust storm ascended over the valley; heaven's punishment to the wolf for his selfishness. The Uylak was ashamed and, unable to undo his actions, he ran away, taking heaven's gate with him and leaving the golden dunes scattered with heaven's ashes."

Mr. Tuul ended his story and placed his hands palms down on the wooden table.

The Senior General tapped the table and said, "Mr. Tuul, this is an interesting story, but it does not explain why you are here, or why you are seeking the foreigner in the other room."

"This foreigner, he is the Uylak," Mr. Tuul insisted fervently.

The Senior General blew out a long exaggerated breath, shifted in his chair and leaned closer to the suspect. "Please, why don't you start at the arrival of the foreign man in your village?"

Mr. Tuul sat forward in the uncomfortable wooden chair and began, "Three days have passed since the man appeared. He came over the mountains like a dragon descending onto the sacred garden - the tires of his caravan sending up smoke, like a warning from the sand. I should have known it then, I should have seen." Mr. Tuul placed his hands against his forehead and continued.

"This man came to the village alone. I had just returned from washing when I saw him exit the vehicle. He came to me asking if I could tell him where to find the Takhi." Mr. Tuul looked up with sorrowful eyes and said, "I did not tell him at first, but he said he was from

*National Geographic*; he said he had come to photograph the herd, for the *Smithsonian*, he had a camera around his neck...

Mr. Tuul grew silent, and he squeezed his eyes closed tightly.

“Did you take the man to see the horses?” the Senior General pressed.

Silence fell for a moment and the only sound was the clicking of the wall fan, its tired motor barely driving the rotation of the rusted metal blades. Mr. Tuul pushed back against the table and looked up toward the exposed beams of the roof. The villager regretfully said, “I took him to see Sarnai.” He hung his head, leaned forward, and slumped down into his chair.

“What is this... Sarnai?” asked the Senior General.

“Sarnai is the foal born to the head mare of the Takhi herd. She is the first foal, the first to be born in our land. We named her Sarnai, which means *rose* in our language. So, when this man came, I was proud. I was proud to show him our *desert rose*. And when he first saw Sarnai, he smiled too large. His big white teeth were gleaming in the sun. It was then that I was reminded of the Uylak, the werewolf, and the stories my mother told me. ”

The Senior General tapped his finger impatiently on the table. “Ok Mr. Tuul, you took the man to see the horses, so what happened that sent you here, so many miles from your village?”

Mr. Tuul cast his eyes down again to the table and continued weakly, “The worst part, the worst thing.” He hesitated briefly, then said, “After I showed the man Sarnai, the little foal, I bid him goodbye, and thought that was then end. Yet the next morning, I was woken by the most horrible sound, a sound straight from the gates of Hell.” Mr. Tuul was now visibly tortured by

his memory, and his words came just above a whisper, “The sound, Sir, was the mother of Sarnai, who had come to camp to give me a message.”

“Wait a minute,” the Senior General interrupted incredulously, “are you telling me that the horse spoke to you?”

Mr. Tuul looked up directly into the eyes of the Senior General. “Sir, an animal can speak. These words do not come from the mouth; they come from the eyes. These words do not go to your ears; they go to your soul.”

The Senior General raised his eyebrows and asked, “Ok, Mr. Tuul, so what was it that this animal said to you?”

“She told me that the man, the German, had stolen Sarnai. She told me this before she died in my arms.”

“Died?” the Senior General questioned.

“Yes, I believe the Uylak had gotten to her. It had to be a monster. How else can you explain an action of such inhumanity? It was the worst thing to see, Sir, this beautiful animal, dying and desperate. She had traveled miles across the sand, a trail of blood in her path. And the sound, oh, the sound was the worst part. She was raising her noble head to the sky and crying for her Sarnai. It was the most mournful sound I have ever heard, it was the sound of her heart breaking. When she walked into the village, her golden coat was drenched in crimson. Yet she kept walking to find me, to tell me to find Sarnai. When she finally reached me, she lay down in my arms. She looked at me, straight to my soul, and it was then that I saw the whole thing clearly. I saw it there in her unwavering gaze. She left it to me, Sir. She told me to bring

back Sarnai, to return her to the golden dunes, to return her to her home.” Large tears had pooled in the upturned corners of the villager’s eyes.

The Senior General, though typically a pragmatic man, was having difficulty maintaining his unfaltering detachment. The truth was that, a very long time before, almost beyond his memories, the Senior General himself was a part of the village. And while it was true that the Senior General had made decisions that took him far away from the golden dunes, they still lived within him. He knew the villager spoke the truth. He felt a strong connection to this simple, honest man. He knew that, to these people, the Przewalski horses were a symbol of ancestry, of history, and of pride. They were a symbol of hope.

The Senior General had one final question to ask the man. “Mr. Tuul, I must know, Sir, how did you arrive here just minutes after the German, when he traveled by vehicle and you by foot?”

The villager wiped at his cheeks and looked directly in the Senior General’s eyes. “It was the spirit of Sarnai’s mother, Sir. As I cradled her head in my arms, I saw her spirit leave her. It filled the sand around us and with a great thunder, and transformed into a great dust storm, which lifted me up and sent me across the desert. It was her spirit, Sir, which brought me to you.”

The Senior General stood abruptly and nodded to Mr. Tuul. He said, “I will return momentarily.”

Then, he walked directly to the other holding room where a German man sat quietly in a huff of self-importance.

The Senior General began, “Sir, why don’t you explain to me why you wish to cross the border?”

With an impatient air, the man demanded, “I am with the *Smithsonian Institute*, and it is very important that I get the animal in my vehicle to the airport immediately. I know you are only doing your job, but it would not be wise for you to detain me here much longer.”

The Senior General barely contained a smile as he leaned over the table inches from the German’s face.

“You say you are with the *Smithsonian*? Mr. Tuul said you were from *National Geographic*, a photographer.”

The German recoiled, his voice taking on a high pitched squeal, “Mr. Tuul? You mean the villager? To be sure, Sir, you cannot possibly be listening to the ramblings of a Mongolian villager.”

At first the Senior General did not reply, as he was momentarily distracted by the instantaneous likening of the portly German to a large swine. To be sure, the German had a pinkish tint, and his blonde hair bristled around his head quite comically.

Then, the Senior General smiled roughly at the foreigner, and replied, “Sir, I may not know a lot of things, but I do know, with certainty, that a representative from the *Smithsonian* would have documentation of his travel, and of the export of this animal. Do you have this documentation?”

The German’s eyes jumped about, and he stammered, “The documentation is at the airport, if you would simply let me continue on my way, I will be sure to have the paperwork



sent to you at once. I must remind you that detaining me is not in your best interests.” The man sat back in his chair with a faltering look of confidence.

Folding his arms across his chest, the Senior General countered, “The *Smithsonian* has just returned the horses to Mongolia. Why, Sir, would you then be taking one away?”

The German’s porcine eyes narrowed to slits, and his fists bunched on the table. He finally said, incredulously, “Listen, do you have any idea how much this animal is worth to a collector? Let’s just cut to the chase here. I have money, lots of money, how much do you want to let me through?”

The Senior General hesitated and his eyes glistened, “Money, you say, let’s see this money.”

The man produced a wad of folded bills, and the Senior General was taken aback. He looked at the large stack of bills, entranced by the wealth before him. For a moment he considered, then he took the entire lump from the man and said, “Well, in this case, maybe something can be arranged.” Stuffing the money deep into his pocket, he instructed, “Wait here,” then he relocked and closed the door.

Once again he returned to the villager’s holding room, where he unlocked the door and entered. Mr. Tuul was still sitting miserably at the table, lines of moisture marking their paths of sadness across the old man’s face. The Senior General walked to the table and placed ten of the bills from the German’s wad in front of the villager. Then, from his other pocket, he retrieved the key to the vehicle; he placed it on top of the money and said to the villager, “I can guarantee you that it was not an Uylak that took your Sarnai.” The Senior General paused and then added, “Sometimes, Mr. Tuul, a man is much worse than any monster. So, while it was a dishonorable

man that took your Sarnai, it will be an honorable man taking her home.” The Senior General placed a hand on the villager’s shoulder tenderly and whispered, “Take her home, Mr. Tuul, she’s been gone long enough.” Then, with a lighter heart, the Senior General left the room, leaving Mr. Tuul, the money, and the key behind him.

The Senior General sat at the large wooden desk and put his feet up, removed a cigarette from his desk drawer, lit it, and inhaled luxuriously. In the distance the roar of a vehicle engine and tires moving across the sand could be heard.

The Senior General continued to smoke his cigarette with a gentle smile on the corner of his lips. After the first cigarette, he lit another. A half hour passed, and the day settled into night, before the Senior General rose and walked down the hall. He opened the door to the holding room and said to the impatient German,

“Ok, sir, it is all done. Please, follow me and you are free to go.”

The Senior General led the huffy foreigner to the exit and threw open the door to the emptiness of the desert, the golden sand illuminated only by the rising moon. “Goodbye, Sir,” the Senior General said with a smirk as he waved his hand outward to shepherd the foreigner away.

Seeing the empty parking lot, the German turned on the Senior General with confusion and bellowed, “Where is my vehicle.... and my animal?”

The Senior General only smiled and said patiently, “Sir, I am unsure of what you are referring to, but I do know that if you are implying that you had an animal, something like... let’s say a Przewalski horse, which is protected by law, and with which you had intended to cross the border, that would be a capital offense, a consequence of which would be exorbitant fines.

Furthermore, the trade of exotic animals is internationally forbidden, and a person participating in this action is subject to imprisonment. And, if a person were to acquire this foal through an action such as the heinous murder of the animal's mother, while that would be a crime against nature, it is also an act punishable, in this country, by death. Now Sir, please tell me, were you implying that you had acquired such an animal, in such a manner?"

The foreigner glared at the Senior General, balling his fists at his sides. The German's face darkened into a red hue and he swelled up toward the officer. The Senior General continued his passive smile, but casually placed his thumbs in the holster of his belt, which housed his semi-automatic weapon.

Seeing the action, the German man relented, slightly, backing down and scowling.

Looking out the door of the office, the German whined, "How am I supposed to get to the city from out here without my vehicle?"

Both men then appraised the wide expanse of sand and endless vacuous space.

"Oh," said the Senior General with a grand smile, "that is very simple, Sir... you... run."

And the Senior General's eyes sparkled and spread, his irises glowed a fiery red, the bridge of his nose elongated, and his mouth grew wide. Then, emerging from black leathery lips, his creature tongue licked white teeth, which glistened in the extraordinarily full moon light.