

An excerpt from WYNNE'S WAR by Aaron Gwyn

HE SAW THE horse before the rest of his team and thumbed the selector on his rifle to SAFE. There were eight of them hunkered behind the row of HESCOs, eight Rangers in digital camo, black kneepads, and vests. Rifle rounds from the insurgents snapped against the wire mesh of the barricades, and he'd been watching, through a crack, the quadrangle of marketplace between him and the hostiles—sandstone, pottery, a dry concrete fountain—and then the horse emerged from behind the burnt husk of a Toyota and walked toward the center of the square. Left hind leg, left front leg. Right hind leg, right front leg. No hurry in its gait. No saddle or blanket. Just a bridle and a set of split leather reins. Russell had seen plenty of mules in this country, a disheveled pony, but never a creature such as this. It was a varnish roan, dark brown on its cheekbones, elbows, and hocks, and if it was startled by the noise of gunfire, it certainly didn't show. The horse walked to the center of the quad and stopped. A hush descended over the square, and for several moments they didn't take any fire. The men behind him were peeking over the barriers and examining the animal through their scopes. Fifty meters away, the horse snorted and stamped. It took a few more steps, ears pivoting left and right. Russell got his feet under him and rose to a crouch. His squad leader was a Texan named Cairns, and the man clapped a hand to Russell's shoulder and gestured.

“They’ll shoot that thing,” he told him. “You see if they don’t.”

Russell shook his head. The sun sat on the edge of the horizon, and the sky was suffused with a warm crimson light. Stars were beginning to show. He couldn’t see a single cloud. It would have been a lovely evening but for the half-dozen men trying to kill them. He looked at the ground a moment and then he raised his rifle and stared through the scope. Caught in the center of his reticle, the horse looked to be about sixteen hands, and its conformation was very fine. He studied the horse’s face and then walked the gunsight down its neck and across its shoulders and back. It wasn’t a horse yet, just a year-and-a-half colt. How it got here and who it belonged to and why it had walked toward the shooting instead of away from it, Russell had no idea. He lowered the weapon slightly, blinked the dust out of his eyes, and then raised it to look again. He’d not gotten the scope to his eye when he heard the first shot.

Just to the left of the crosshairs was a puff of gray talc where the round had struck, and he thought he could see the small cavity it had made, but he wasn’t really sure. The horse took several steps and then stopped and turned to look in his direction. Russell felt his pulse quicken. The scope mounted on his rifle was a Trijicon ACOG with a magnification level of four, and through it he could see the horse’s eyes. He could see its lashes. The horse seemed to be staring straight at him, and before he’d lowered his weapon he knew what he was going to do, and if it didn’t get him killed, he couldn’t imagine what would.

He glanced at Cairns.

“What’d I tell you?” said the sergeant. “That’s how dumb they think we are.”

Russell nodded. He slipped a hand in his pocket and touched the silver dollar, then unslung his rifle and propped it against the barrier. He had two grenades in the pouches of his chest rig, and he took these out and laid them alongside the rifle’s stock. He double-knotted the laces of his boots and then he unsnapped his chinstrap, took off the helmet, and set it on the ground upside down, placing the grenades inside. Cairns watched in confusion

and then vague comprehension and then horror. The first words out of his mouth were, "Don't you even think about it," but it was already too late. Russell was around from behind the HESCOs and moving at a sprint.

Later, he'd not remember the gunfire. There'd be plenty of it, but he'd never recall a single round. There would be the feel of dead September air on his cheeks, the packed earth against the soles of his boots: it seemed to muffle your footsteps as you ran. He'd remember the shouts of his teammates at the barricades behind him, Sergeant Cairns's voice deeper and slightly louder than the rest. Russell had only lowered his head. The blank odor of desert surrounded him, and then, of a sudden, there was the scent of horseflesh, and the moment he smelled it, there was no team screaming for him to get down or insurgents firing their rifles on automatic. There was only him and the colt.

The animal had turned to watch his approach and then shuffled sideways a few steps. Russell slowed several feet from the horse, wanting to hunker but knowing how the colt would respond. He stood straight as he could, face to face with the animal, and they began to rotate, the horse stepping to its right and Russell likewise stepping, like wrestlers circling for advantage. He extended a hand as slowly as he could, presented his palm, and began to make the clucking noises he'd first heard from his grandfather. "Whoa there," Russell said, then gave the series of clucks, and the horse released a whinny and shook its head. The ground beneath their feet was a steel-colored powder, a few broken bits of sandstone, a few rusted metal shards. A half-demolished building stood two dozen meters away—ancient stone walls, baroque wooden shutters, a minaret. The horse backed toward it. Russell thought if he could back it completely behind the walls, he might get them out of the lane of fire.

But he couldn't get them out of the lane of fire. The horse continued to turn, angling them toward the square's center, back into the open, and the sand popped at either side, craters erupting in the ground as the bullets struck and caromed back behind him. He reached for one of the reins and missed it, and he reached

again and caught hold of the leather, doubled it around his left hand, and drew himself against the animal's face. He figured the colt would try to jerk loose from his grip, but the colt just continued to circle, Russell tethered to the animal now, and he could see for the first time the terror swirling in the horse's eye and he himself reflected, distorted as in a funhouse mirror.

They kept turning, Russell trying to seize hold of the other rein so he could lead the animal down a side street, get it far enough from the fighting that it wouldn't return. He was seventy-five meters from the nearest hostile, and he thought if the men who'd been firing at them were better marksmen, he and the colt would be dead already. He'd decided to release his grip on the rein and try to swat the animal to get it moving, when something exploded behind him and he was lifted on a warm cushion of air and slammed against the horse's side.

When he came to, he was being dragged across the ground and his left arm felt like it had been jerked out of its socket and was numb to the shoulder. His vision was blurred and there was a loud ringing in his ears, and his entire body had the jangled sensation you get when you knock your elbow against a wall. There was the strong metallic taste of explosives in his mouth. His teeth hurt. He spat several times and then craned his neck to look behind him. The horse was walking sideways, its head cocked and its body crooked. It would take a few steps, tugging at Russell, and then stop and try to shake free of the rein. Russell could see the white of the animal's teeth, lips pulled away from the bit and working furiously. He was dimly aware of shouting, and when he brought his palm to his face, it came away wet.

The horse took another step, jerked its head, and a sharp electric pain traveled the length of Russell's spine. He scrambled to his feet before he even had time to consider the action, and the horse immediately straightened itself and took off at a trot, Russell shuffling as quickly as he could, turning to run alongside the colt with his left arm still tethered to the rein. There was a stabbing behind his shoulder blade, and he reached with his right hand, grabbed a palmful of the animal's mane, and heaved himself onto

its back. He forgot the pain momentarily and let the astonishment of what he'd just done wash over him. He was in northern Iraq, seated on a magnificent roan, and when his vision cleared and the world righted itself, he saw he was moving toward the enemy at a gallop. He fumbled his right hand down and took hold of the bridle and began tugging, trying to turn the horse. He'd never ridden with body armor, and he had no pommel to lean against, no stirrups to keep himself upright. He thought at any moment he'd be thrown.

But he wasn't thrown. The horse sped slightly, and Russell flattened himself against the colt's neck and held fast to the bridle. He began to hear the gunfire now—the only he'd ever recall from the incident—and the horse dropped to a canter and turned down an alley between two partially destroyed buildings, ancient and massive. They went to the next street over and across that to another alley and then to another beyond. They emerged into a courtyard where several Humvees sat, U.S. soldiers with rifles at the ready, and the horse slowed to a walk, brought them into the center of the convoy, and then came to a stop. Russell eased himself upright on the animal's back. Stunned American faces stared at him from beneath their helmets. Iraqi interpreters watched cautiously, Iraqi policemen shaking their heads. Then a man walked toward him with a second-lieutenant's patch on the Velcro strip above his sternum. He came to the horse's left side and looked up at Russell.

"Corporal," he said.

The ringing in his ears had receded to a low whine, and the word echoed twice. Russell cleared his throat to respond, but the rush of something came from down inside him. His last memory was the nicker of the animal as he collapsed against its neck.

When Russell was released from the aid station ten days later, he dressed in the clean uniform laid out on a folding chair beside his bed, gathered his belongings into a small plastic bag, and made his way across base to his squad's barracks, stepping carefully along the gravel walkways, his boots untied and the laces tucked behind

the tongues. It hurt too much to bend over. His torso was an enormous bruise.

He reached the Quonset hut, and when he stepped up the short cinder-block flight and into the building, the men were waiting for him in a semicircle around the door. Someone threw on the lights and a cheer went up, and there were hands slapping his back and sides. Russell tucked his elbows to try to protect his ribs, but the men left off, took him by either arm, and ushered him to his bunk. They fetched a laptop and placed it on his thighs. Cairns was standing there over him.

“Man of the hour,” said the sergeant.

“Yeah,” Russell said.

A soldier they called Wheels—Russell’s battle-buddy and a Texan like Cairns—lifted his hand to quiet everyone. He was very short with a scar that went up his forehead, and pupils that quivered perpetually back and forth. Pale skin sunburned a bright red. Hair bleached almost white.

“Let’s see,” he said, “if he’ll tell us how it feels.”

Russell looked around at the expectant faces. He asked what was going on.

Wheels bent over, palmed his knees, and stared at Russell. Then his brow went slack and he began to nod.

“He doesn’t know,” Wheels told them, glancing at the others, then back at Russell. “You don’t even know.”

“Know what?”

Several of the men chuckled. Watching someone return from the infirmary with a concussion and bruised ribs was apparently very funny. He wondered where they’d gotten their hands on liquor.

Wheels clutched him by the shoulders. “You’re famous, son.”

“You’re drunk,” Russell said.

The men had crowded behind him on the bed, positioning themselves so as to see the computer screen. YouTube was open on the browser, a rectangle of video and below it the caption “Soldier Rescues Arabian.” Wheels reached down and clicked a button,

and the footage began to play—a man running along a street, the distorted chatter of gunfire. The camera followed the man until a horse appeared in the frame, and it took Russell a few moments to realize the person in the video was him.

He sat there shaking his head. He asked where it was from.

“Film crew on a balcony across the street,” Wheels told him. “BBC.”

Russell watched as his image took one of the horse’s reins and then as he and the animal began to turn. He could see the puffs of dust kicked up by the insurgents’ rounds. He hadn’t recognized how close he’d come to getting shot.

And then the blast of the RPG—the rocket’s vapor trail and the explosion that sent him crashing into the animal’s side—and then, briefly, a shot of him being dragged beside the horse. This was obscured by a building, and the camera searched left and right, and you could hear the cameraman asking where he’d gone. When the horse reemerged, Russell was on its back, and the camera tracked him until he went out of frame. There the video stopped.

Wheels said, “Been playing it on the news every fifteen minutes.”

“They did a thing on your granddad,” said a specialist named Bowen. “Guy on CNN.”

“CNN,” said Wheels with contempt.

“Talked about his being a Ranger, your granddad. World War Two. Talked about his training horses.”

“Communist News Network,” said Wheels. “Fuck they know about horses?”

Bowen studied the floor a moment. He was a goliath from South Boston and had dominated the New England Golden Gloves circuit before joining the army.

“They had pictures,” he said, shrugging.

“Everyone’s got pictures,” Wheels said.

Russell ignored them. He clicked the button to replay the video, and when it was over he just sat.

“That’s not an Arabian,” he finally said.

“What’s that?” Wheels asked.

“It’s not an Arabian,” Russell told him. “The caption says ‘Arabian.’ ‘Soldier Rescues Arabian.’ It’s an Appaloosa.”

“Jesus,” said Wheels, “I want you to listen at him.”

Cairns shook his head. He turned and made for the other end of the barracks.

When the men tired of discussing the incident and went back to their evening routine—poker, e-mail, a few of them reading a series of novels in which the dead became animate and rose to feed on human flesh—Cairns came back around. He had very blue eyes, jet black hair, and his Texas accent gave his voice a strange authority. He pointed at the edge of Russell’s bunk.

“You mind?”

Russell was lying on his back with his hands at his sides, trying to breathe as shallowly as possible. He opened one eye and squinted up at the man. He told him to be his guest.

Cairns hitched his pants and seated himself, turned toward Russell, crossed his left leg over his right, and sat with his fingers interlaced, cupping his knee.

“You feeling good, Corporal? You feeling satisfied?”

“I feel all right.”

“Lord knows,” said Cairns, “we want our Rangers happy.”

Russell stared at the man. He asked if there was something wrong.

“*Wrong?*” said Cairns, affecting a theatrical look. “Why would anything be wrong?”

The blood in Russell’s body seemed to slow. He’d known he was going to have to listen to this at some point, he just wasn’t sure when that point would be.

“Let me ask you something,” said Cairns.

Russell nodded.

“What do you think the proceeds of your little stunt would’ve been if that grenade had gone off about ten meters closer?”

“I don’t reckon I’d be laying here,” said Russell.

“No, I don’t reckon you would, either. Fact, I reckon you’d be

laying someplace else. Maybe half a dozen places.” Cairn’s face had gone red, and veins stood out on his neck. “Am I boring you, Corporal?”

It wasn’t a question and Russell didn’t answer it.

“You pull another maneuver like that, you’ll wish you’d deserted.”

“Roger, Sergeant.”

“I’ll see you charged with insubordination. I’ll see you in Leavenworth.”

Russell lay very still. He could feel the headache coming on.

“Are you a Section Eight?” Cairns asked. “If you’re a Section Eight, just tell me.”

“I’m not a Section Eight, Sergeant.”

“Why’d you do it? Don’t tell me you don’t know.”

Russell came up onto his left elbow, but that was as far as he got. The headache was very sharp, and the pain in his side was like needles and pins. He took a few moments and then he said, “I couldn’t watch them shoot the horse.”

Cairns just stared.

“Corporal,” he said, “why are we here?”

Russell shifted his weight, repositioned his hips, and lowered himself back against the mattress. ““To provide overwatch,”” he quoted, ““for our operators and support assets in direct contact with hostiles.””

“Anything in there about rescuing horses or kittens or whatever the fuck else?”

“No, Sergeant.”

“Are you a Section Eight?”

“Negative, Sergeant.”

“Are you going to pull any more ridiculous shit?”

“Sergeant, that’s the first horse I’ve seen since I left home. I doubt I’ll see another.”

Cairns scooted closer.

“Corporal, are you going to fuck up my squad with any more of this dumbass behavior?”

Russell took a short breath and released it.
“Negative, Sergeant. I think that I’m done.”

Russell laced his boots in the half-light and the cold of the barracks and stood from the narrow aluminum cot. The lieutenant was waiting at the end of the building, her silhouette in the doorway, black against the purpling sky. He glanced at Wheels in his rack—the man’s face slack now and blank as a child’s—took the tan beret and the jacket from his footlocker, and went up the aisle. The woman nodded to him when he reached the door, and he followed her into the courtyard and then along the sandstone corridor that went curving against the inner wall. The air prickled the skin on his arms, and he threaded his hands through the sleeves of his jacket—left and right—shrugged into it, zipping as he walked. The lieutenant went on before him, her steps almost soundless and the hair at the nape of her neck in an intricate bun.

The mosque at Qara Serai was calling worshipers to prayer, the sounds traveling in the predawn chill with their own peculiar lilt, alien to his ears and yet familiar in the way of dreamspeech, the way of song. They reached the colonel’s quarters at the end of the passage, and Russell closed the storm flap up the front of his jacket, smoothing a hand across the Velcro fasteners. The woman motioned him through the doorway and took up a post outside. As he passed, he peeled the beret from his head and tucked it beneath an arm. He forced a smile at the woman, and she gave him just the slightest one back.

The hallway looked to have been carved from granite. He passed two doors on his right and three on his left, and at the next door he paused, straightened his jacket, and knocked lightly on the wooden jamb.

A voice told him to come in.

The room was small with very high ceilings, and there was a west-facing window that had been cut into the wall by hammer and chisel a hundred, maybe two hundred, years before. Stars were visible in the sky just beyond. The colonel sat at a mahogany desk, and when Russell entered, the man pushed his chair back

and rose. He was in his early sixties, hair gone silver, the flesh beneath his chin just beginning to sag. He wore a precisely trimmed mustache whose bottom had been clipped so it didn't touch his upper lip or extend beyond the edges of his mouth. He returned Russell's salute and motioned him to one of the chairs in front of the desk, which was too large, Russell decided, to fit through the doorway. It would have been taken apart and reassembled, piece by piece.

Russell lowered himself onto the thin metal seat. His heart had begun to race. He tried to slow it, but that only made it faster. He focused on his posture: feet together, back straight, hands resting palm down on his thighs.

The colonel seated himself and scooted closer to his desk, glancing through his reading glasses at a sheet of paper, which he fingered briefly and set aside. The eagles gleamed on his collar. He interlaced his fingers.

"Morning," he said.

Russell told him good morning.

"Lieutenant Wilkins get you up?"

"No, sir," said Russell. "I was awake."

"Watch how you sit in that thing," the man told him. "Leg wobbles. We had it taken over to supply; they sent it back with the same exact problem."

Russell said he'd be careful.

The colonel nodded, brought a fist to his mouth, and cleared his throat.

"Dr. Halpern tells me you're recovering."

"Getting there," Russell said.

"He tells me there was a concussion?"

"Yessir."

"But you're feeling better?"

"Much better. Yessir."

The colonel rubbed his palm along his jaw and repositioned himself in his chair.

"That was a hell of a hit you took."

Russell nodded.

“Watched the video on Fox. You’ve seen it?”

“Yessir. Just last night.”

The colonel leaned back in his chair and regarded him a moment.

“Kind of crazy, aren’t you, Corporal?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

The colonel stared at him. “You don’t know?”

“No, sir.”

“You were that Ranger in the video riding an unsaddled horse through a firefight?”

Russell shifted in his chair. He glanced at his hands on either knee, the knuckles white.

“Yessir,” he told the colonel, “that was me.”

“And you won’t own up to being crazy?”

Russell looked down at his hands again and then back up at the desk. He tried to speak but nothing came.

“Corporal?”

Russell closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, he said, “Sir, I never done anything like that before.”

“Never done anything like that?”

“No, sir.”

“So your position is this craziness is kind of new to you?”

“Yessir,” Russell told him. “Pretty much.”

The colonel wiped the crease of a smile from the left side of his mouth. He reached and took up the sheet of paper he’d set on a stack of manila folders and held it at arm’s length, squinting.

“Message came through last night,” he began, his voice shifting into a formal cadence. “You been attached to us six months now, so you’re acquainted with the protocol.”

Russell nodded.

“You know about our sister company in Afghanistan?”

“I know we have one,” he said.

The colonel blinked several times. He glanced at the paper in his hand and then seemed to study a spot on the wall just behind Russell’s head.

"You also have to know that there are officers in this task force way up the food chain above me."

"I assume so, yessir."

The colonel opened his mouth to continue and then closed it. He exhaled a deep breath and tossed the paper back onto the stack of folders.

"Let me be as direct as I can."

Russell nodded.

"I have received an order to release you from my command next Tuesday at nineteen hundred hours and put you on an overflight to Bagram. You'll be reassigned to a Special Forces element operating in Nuristan Province, mountains of eastern Afghanistan. Captain by the name of Wynne. I assume you've heard of the man."

"No, sir."

"Haven't heard of him?"

Russell shook his head.

"Do you know the region? Nuristan?"

"Sir, I do not."

"There are loud voices," said the colonel, "who don't believe we should be anywhere near this area, and to be frank with you, Corporal, it chaps my ass to send one of my men on some Green Beret bullshit, but I have protested your transfer and have been kindly advised to fuck myself." He stopped and shook his head. "I fought it hard as I could."

Russell sat there a moment. His home was seven thousand miles away in northeastern Oklahoma, and for the first time in months, he wanted to be there very badly.

"May I ask a question, sir?"

"Ask it."

"Do you have any idea why they want me?"

The colonel's mouth tightened. He tapped the desk three times with the knuckles of his right hand. He said, "Captain Wynne's made a bit of a name for himself. He's the one got those marine snipers out during that clusterfuck in Fallujah. Almost died doing it, but he's got balls, and he's not afraid to stand up to the Agency."

“Which agency?”

“CIA.”

“How’s he get away with that?”

“He gets away with it,” said the colonel, “the way anyone gets away with it: he gets himself a different idea than the spooks and then he convinces the head-shed that it’s right.”

“Where do I fit in to all this?” Russell asked.

“Hard to say,” the colonel told him. “My guess would be that our captain got a look at your highlight reel and figured out a way to make use of it. Has himself some slick friends in higher.” The man shook his head. “Can’t say I envy your position.”

“No, sir,” said Russell. “I’m not all that envious myself.”

“Your grandfather was Second Rangers?”

“Yessir.”

“Normandy?”

“Yessir.”

The colonel nodded.

“And he trained horses for a living?”

“Yessir, he did.”

“That’s where you learned it?”

“That’s where I learned everything,” Russell said.

The colonel watched him a moment. Then he said, “I’ve been able to get your battle-buddy attached.”

“Sir?”

“Corporal Grimes. He’ll be coming with.”

“Wheels?”

The colonel nodded. “I got them to agree to that much. Kind of solves two problems at once.” The man cast Russell a knowing look, but whatever he’d meant to convey was lost on Russell entirely.

“You’ll have about a week to rest up,” said the colonel. “I assume you’d like some downtime.”

“Yessir. I’d appreciate it.”

The colonel looked down at his papers a moment and then back up at Russell. The smile creased the left side of his mouth again, but he didn’t bother to wipe it away.

"Can I ask *you* something?" he said.

"Of course."

"Why in the name of God did you take your Kevlar off?"

"Sir?"

"In the video. You aren't wearing your helmet. What possessed you to remove it?"

Russell took a moment to think about this. He said, "I guess I was afraid it'd scare the horse."

The colonel's eyes widened momentarily and then they narrowed. "Scare the horse."

"Yessir," Russell said.