

WALTER BLAIRE



LINES OF
THUNDER

THE FIRST DAYS ON THE FRONT

A LINES OF THUNDER NOVELLA

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a Lines of Thunder novella

by

Walter Blaire



Selkie Grimm, USA

Lines of Thunder

The First Days on the Front

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First Edition
Printed in the U.S.A

To my children:
Audrey, Max, and Mollie

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PART ONE:
THE FIRST DAY

CHAPTER I

*In which Gole Naremsa, private in the
51st Fusiliers, makes a new enemy on his
first day on the eternal front.*

GOLE WAS DROWSING IN A PILE OF SLEEPING SOLDIERS AND only half aware when the troop train shuddered to a stop.

They'd been cooking for a day and a half in the windowless carriage, breathing each other's air and staring at the sliver of light around the sliding door. Earlier, when the sun was at its peak, they'd been sure they would suffocate. They tried to wrench the door open but it was heavy wood, banded with iron, utterly impervious. At the cost of several broken fingers they only added more pitiful scratches to the inside surface.

The carriage had no benches, which didn't matter: They were so many they only had room to stand. Later, when their legs gave out, they discovered they could sleep in piles like the dead.

The train gave a final jolt and the door slid open. The carriage flooded with blinding late-day sunlight.

"No more sleeping, ye scraggs," someone shouted.

They tried to unravel themselves but they weren't fast enough. The bright square of the doorway filled with figures. Gole blinked at them. The newcomers were soldiers, but these were lean and filthy, with torn uniforms. They weren't new replacements like Gole, they were actual *boots*, the soldiers who fought the eternal front. They began toss-

ing people bodily out of the train.

“It’s a mess, la, if the Southies barrage the train,” the voice continued. “So make all due haste.”

A pair of hands grasped Gole’s jacket and lifted him out of the sweaty, exhausted soup of men. Gole complicated matters by latching onto his twin brother, who was buried beside him. Grulle immediately clasped back with an iron grip. They were not going to be separated. The debarking lost its brisk rhythm.

“What delay?” the voice snapped.

“They’re sticking together, la,” said Gole’s handler.

“He’s my blood-fed brother,” Gole tried to explain. His tongue was so dry and swelled he barely understood his own words.

“Corphy, this one says he’s a bother,” the man relayed over his shoulder.

Laughter from the other boots.

Then the strap on someone’s pack snapped apart, freeing Gole’s leg, and he popped out of the pile. They slung Gole and Grulle through the door and into the waiting arms of—

No one. They hit the ground. Gole’s Tachba reflexes finally activated and he rolled to his feet. Grulle landed upright, making him look clumsy in comparison, as always.

The eternal front at last.

On shaky legs, Gole turned to take it in, screwing his eyes against the light. Not much to see at first. His new world seemed to mostly consist of young replacements who were already covered in dust and trying to get their legs back. Distinctly prosaic, not glorious at all.

In the distance, however, shimmering in the hot air, were some of the big beasts he’d heard about in stories. Gole’s eyes fastened on them and he momentarily forgot everything else.

The machines were over twelve feet tall but they looked

like men hunched under a burden. They weren't alive, but if the stories were true they could *seem* alive. They went where they were told and did as they were bid. The Haphan Overlords controlled them, called them *bots*. If the South ever overran the reserve trench, these beasts were the defense of last resort. What Gole didn't expect were the long square blades that fanned from the upper limbs. Three blades per side, each covered in dirt and longer than a grown man.

"They look more like locomotives, don't they?" Gole said, pointing. "Not scary at all."

Grulle started to look—but then lurched forward and collapsed to the ground. He'd been hit from behind.

Gole's Tachba reflexes took over before Grulle stopped sliding. He pivoted on his heel and flung out a fist. Even without looking, his backhand connected with his brother's assailant. A childhood of training, the way Grulle had fallen, *and the Pollution*—Gole knew precisely where the other's center of mass would be.

The other man was a Tachba too, however, and already dodging. Gole's backhand was a glancing blow, eliciting only a soft grunt—but now Gole had the man's height and weight. This one was big and solid. A full adult.

The Pollution shivered in Gole's mind, an unwholesome spurt of pleasure at the challenge presented by this unexpected enemy. *Full grown*, the Pollution seemed to whisper. *Experienced. Habit-ridden.*

The Pollution tried to turn him toward the enemy but that would be exactly what the man expected. Gole fought the compulsion, and instead spun the other direction, momentarily turning his back. *Never, never!* the Pollution howled. But the unusual move let Gole strike from a surprising direction.

He landed a roundhouse in the middle of the man's face.

Gole himself was not big and solid, but the punch

stopped the man dead. He teetered, giving every impression of astonishment that he'd been clocked by a raw youth. He'd been unprepared for Gole's follow-up, or really for anything from Gole. He even held an open canteen in one hand, as if he'd taken a drink before he hit Grulle and started everything.

Gole plucked the canteen out of the man's hand and watched him sit on the ground. He landed hard.

"Stay down," Gole said. "This is over."

He took a deep draught and the water unclenched his throat. When he lowered the canteen, he found it wasn't over.

The man was back on his feet, grinning like a maniac. Gole could guess what his Pollution was telling him, and it wasn't favorable. Even worse, with a longer look, Gole could also see something he'd missed before: a small, mud-colored patch on the man's dirty green collar.

Gole had just knocked over a sergeant.

Striking a superior! It wasn't done. His Pollution turned off like a switch.

"Let's call it even," Gole suggested.

He had just enough time to toss the canteen to Grulle before the sergeant's fist eclipsed his vision. The rest of the fight was more predictable than the beginning. Size and experience made trivial work of everything Gole tried.

CHAPTER 2

GOLE'S NEW ENEMY TURNED OUT NOT TO BE THE RAVENING horde of primitive southerners filling the trenches only a hundred yards away—though they probably didn't like him either. It was the noncommissioned officer of his own unit.

"Typical luck," Gole said, through cracked and bloodied lips.

"Very typical," his twin brother mumbled. "Not worth the fight."

Grulle was essentially mute except around family. For a moment, Gole forgot his anger and simply marveled that Grulle had spoken aloud while surrounded by strangers.

"He knocked you over for no reason," Gole said, then grinned. "That's *my* job. Of course I had to fight him."

Grulle shook his head and looked away, unamused. Grulle's profile always bothered Gole, and not just because it was his own. Seeing it every minute of the day made it impossible to escape himself. He invariably noticed how *almost* normal they looked: the sharp jaws, the heavy eyebrows over blue-green eyes, the unruly thick black hair. All of it was promisingly average, but the features somehow didn't mesh. Grulle also lacked Gole's wrinkles around his eyes and across his forehead, the lines that came from thinking and worrying. Grulle was the blood-fed twin; he never frowned and rarely smiled. All the troubles of the world accumulated on Gole alone. They were finally old enough that Grulle had started to look younger than him.

Grulle noticed him staring and added, "You *are* an angry little scrag."

"I'm friendly but challenging."

Grulle rolled his eyes expressively.

“So you’re a chatterbox, now?” Gole snapped. “I guess that means you’re scared.”

Grulle only answered by shifting his gaze again. Beside the staging area where they had mustered was the black, damp bulk of the earthworks. It was the edge of the empire. The beginning of the trench system that would bring Gole and his brother into the eternal front.

Gole hadn’t noticed the earthworks earlier. He hadn’t had the chance, distracted first by the bots and then the significantly one-sided episode with the sergeant. Now, it dominated his vision. They were well and truly at the front.

This is the real war, he thought.

For a moment, foreboding thrilled through his body—in the very meat and bones that knit him to existence. A surge of animal fear that nearly washed rational thought from his head.

The fear immediately dissipated, as he knew it would, replaced by a warm, competent excitement. The overlaid emotion felt alien in his mind, a saccharine flavor that didn’t taste right for several long seconds. For once, he was grateful for the wrongness. He leaned into the Pollution and accepted its clumsy substitutions. Still, his people’s genetic tampering would be easier to accept if he didn’t have to notice it every time.

This is our new world. This grime, noise, and stultified air would be their existence from now on. It should have been exciting. It was, finally, the start of his real life. He’d trained for this war since the age of five, and he was finally about to feed himself into the insatiable trenches, one soldier among millions. So why did all of this feel wrong in its core? Why was he resisting it, turning irritable, and shooting his mouth off?

Why had he punched the sergeant and gotten himself beaten to a pulp?

The soldier next to Gole elbowed him. “The lieutenant, and pass the word.”

Gole glanced at his twin, knew Grulle wouldn’t pass anything if he could help it, and told the next soldier down the line.

Alert now, the replacements saw the lieutenant when he appeared: a handsome, squared off officer with brown thatch hair, a deep front line tan, and heavily-patched trench gear. He was making his way through the chaos of the staging area where the fresh replacements had marshaled to meet their officers.

Sergeant Corphy took his place in front of the formation and braced with his arms behind his back. He was a big man with a face set in a permanent sneer. Gole had only landed that first punch on it, to his regret. As the lieutenant walked up, Corphy cleared his throat and addressed them.

“You useless scrag,” he shouted, and shot Gole an acid look. “You’re only good for dying. You stop a bullet before it hits a real soldier, then you’re worth what we paid your mommas. La, you’ll die like a pile of corroaches in the rain. Welcome to the 51st Ville Emsa Fusiliers, I hate all of you.”

Gole waited for more, but no, the sergeant only had that one message. Corphy turned to salute the lieutenant, but spun back.

“Who laughed?”

“That was me,” Gole said. “I’m sorry, sergeant, I thought you were going a different direction with that.”

“What’s with the squeaker, Corphy?” the lieutenant said. His tone was mild and invited a direct answer.

Gole opened his mouth, but Grulle slammed a fist into his ribs, behind his arm, where neither the noncom nor the officer would have to acknowledge it. Gole emitted only a whistle at the edge of hearing.

“Some talky scrag which don’t know he’s dead yet,”

the sergeant answered. “Wanted a fight first thing off the train. Now he dislikes my welcoming speech.”

“The one that goes, ‘you’re all going to die?’” The lieutenant had a ready smile, which he turned on the replacements. “My name is Lieutenant Panthan Elyseuran, and that’s the only name you need to know.” He jerked his thumb at the towering earthworks, which loomed like a dark future behind his head. “When you walk in there, that’s the end for you. Maybe you expected Sergeant Corphy to tell you some tricks for staying alive. Don’t even try to stay alive. If you live through today, you might learn a little, but you’ll die tomorrow. If you live through tomorrow, you’ll learn a little more, but you’ll die the day after that. And so on, and so forth, *et cetera*, for days and weeks and months and years. You will never have love, nor family, nor hope ever again. Learn that now and you won’t be a burden to your fellow boots.”

“Sir, then why speak to us at all?” Gole said.

The lieutenant didn’t answer directly. He turned back to the sergeant, who said, “He’s the one in this batch, I expect.”

In Gole’s peripheral vision, Grulle slumped.

“My name is Golephan Naremsa, sir,” Gole said.

“Wrong,” the sergeant snapped, “you don’t have a name. You just wasted three seconds of everybody’s life, drawing attention to yourself. Do any of you scraggs disagree with me on this point?”

None of the other soldiers indicated disagreement, which Gole accepted equably.

“I’m wasting time on you because it’s expected of the officers,” the lieutenant said. He tipped his head at the parade stand, the platform on timber stilts that rose thirty feet above the staging area. On it, a collection of officers in clean gray uniforms watched the proceedings.

The Haphans. This was Gole’s first look at the over-

lords, the ones who had subjugated half the planet and ran the war. The overlords for whom Gole and Grulle had been brought into service, and for whom they would probably die.

They looked small.

Small like twelve-year old children, only five or six feet tall. They were fully as human as the Tachba, but they lacked the height, the heft, and the speed. Their very cleanliness above the mud made them seem insubstantial, as if they'd been painted onto the real world. Which, Gole supposed, they had. Over a hundred years earlier, they'd landed in ark ships from space. Using advanced technology and fabulous weapons, they had dominated the native race of gene-twisted Tachba for their own safety. When they could expand no further, they sent their servitor Tachba to fight against the free, unconquered Tachba of the south.

Gole turned away from the Haphans and noticed the lieutenant's gaze on his face. The officer had collected Gole's general lack of admiration for the Haphans and now wore a straight-lipped smile that only reached his eyes.

"So by all means," the lieutenant said in general, but, Gole felt, for him specifically, "stick out in all your unique specialness. The rest of us will think about snipers and take cover behind you."

Gole started to reply, but Grulle punched him again.

The lieutenant's eyes shifted to Grulle. "Thank you for your initiative, soldier. Are you his blood-fed twin?"

Grulle stared back impassively, which was the only answer the lieutenant needed. The lieutenant nodded, then suddenly shook his head, exasperated. "And that's how it starts. See how insidious it is? One mouthy squeaker has a blood-fed twin. I've learned another piece of information which will do me no good. I should be sleeping, la. I've been here a good two minutes, enough to satisfy those..."

He didn't bother to finish. He spun on his heel and

stalked back to the trenches.

So there's my life, Gole thought bleakly. A childhood spent fighting the Pollution to become a useful, high-function part of the war. Yet all the while, I was already as good as dead? And all in the service of—Gole took another look at the Haphan officers, elevated above the field of Tachba replacements—of them.