



Rampage at Waterloo

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WINNER**
Best Young Adult
Novel

The first book of the Battlesaurus Duology

BRIAN FALKNER

Rampage at Waterloo

For Kathleen
Such a special lady

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Prologue
February 17, 1815

The Prisoner of Elba

The letter arrives by boat.

It arrives at night on a small schooner that should not be traveling those waters in the darkness, but the urgency of the situation has been pressed on the captain and he has reluctantly agreed.

The letter arrives in a canvas sack with other mail, for other residents of the island, and is handed ashore by a ten-year-old ship's boy who knows nothing of the contents. The sack is passed to a shore-hand, roused from sleep just a few minutes earlier and still bleary eyed from the after-effects of a half bottle of nut liquor. He likewise has no idea that simply by taking the letter, he is striking a flint that will set the world on fire.

Indeed the only person on the island with any idea of the contents of the letter has stepped ashore from the schooner just moments earlier. A major of the Imperial Guard, Major Marc Thibault is a veteran of more than seventy campaigns, with an earring of gold and handsome sideburns. He is armed with a short sabre and a flintlock pistol, and is an expert with both.

Few documents would warrant such an escort, and furthermore the captain is not alone, but is accompanied by two trustworthy grenadiers, with matching earring and sideburns, sound of heart, keen of eye and well-hardened in battle.

The ship has brought other provisions, perhaps to disguise the real purpose of its trip, and the three soldiers wait under the lamplights as these are loaded, along with the mail sack, into the back of the goods cart.

A rough-edged sign on the front of the harbourmaster's office declares the name of the town: Cavo, although in reality it is little more than a collection of ramshackle huts and trading posts, centred on a series of long wooden jetties. Those jetties are old and sagging as if melted by the heat of the island's summers, although the truth is rot and decay. By day, dogs fight over scraps and old fishermen snore under awnings. Even the winter sun is fierce on Elba.

There are bigger, more modern wharves at the island's capital, Portoferraio, but the arrival of the schooner there, at that time of night, might have attracted the eyes of the King's men.

Once loaded, the goods cart sets off for the residence of the island's reluctant ruler. The three soldiers follow on mounts that the harbourmaster has scrambled to provide.

The escape of Napoleon, the prisoner of Elba, the former emperor of France, has begun.

The world is about to burst into flames.

BOOK ONE
The Coming of the Beasts
March 10 - April 4, 1815

The Boy Who Brings the Bread

The boy who brings the bread is Willem Verheyen.
This is not true.

His name is Pieter Geerts, but neither he, nor his mother, nor anyone in the world have used that name for so long that it is just a distant reflection of a life that once was.

Willem was born on the first day of the first month of the new century. When he was just seven years old he saved the life of a village girl from a bloodthirsty raptor.

There are many dangerous animals in the forests of Europe. Wolves, bears, and boars among them. But these animals have learned to fear man and do not attack unless threatened. Only raptors, large, meat-eating saurs, regard man as prey. Of all the raptors, the largest and most terrifying is the firebird. A huge, vicious, beast, feathered like a bird. When stretched to full height it is almost as tall as a man. Few people have faced a firebird and survived. It can kill with its teeth; its talons, or the terrible claws on its strong hind legs. But seven-year-old Willem, alone, faced such a creature to save the girl's life. That is a secret that he keeps to himself.

Today, eight years later, Willem will again face a firebird, but he does not know that yet.

Willem quietly opens the gate to the house of the village healer, Madame Gertruda.

The girl he saved, Heloise, is sleeping in the garden. She uncoils herself at the base of a tree and hisses at Willem as he shuts the gate behind him. She is a scrawny thing with wild brambles of hair, wearing just a plain woollen smock despite the chill of the early spring air.

He steps warily. She once launched herself at him without provocation, scratching and biting, spilling his breads in the herb garden.

Heloise does not attack. She crouches in the garden as he knocks on the door of the cottage. He waits. Madame Gertruda is old and slow.

It is his second to last delivery. Only the schoolmaster's house remains, then he will be free to go and practice his act for the fête.

The basket is mostly empty and so is his purse. Those who cannot afford their morning baguette get one anyway. Those who can pay, will do when they have money. Those who cannot are still human beings, according to his mother.

A cat emerges from the side of the house and curls around his legs, rubbing its face on his shins. Two nervous microsaurs skitter among the herbs of the garden. Madame Gertruda is a magnet for sick or homeless animals.

Shuffling footsteps sound behind the door. The moment it opens, Heloise picks up the cat and slips past him, past the healer, into the house.

Madame Gertruda is old, far older than any other person he knows. Her face is ridged as if worms have nested under her skin. Her hair is thin and white.

She glares and spits at him as she opens the door. Madame Gertruda has good days and bad days. This is clearly a bad day. Last night was no better, if Heloise is sleeping in the garden.

Madame Gertruda is Flemish, like Willem, a minority in the village. But her position in the village is secure. The village cannot live without their healer.

She offers no coin for the bread. She never does. But nor did she demand any when Willem's mother brought him to her, blue in the face and gushing green phlegm. She asks for nothing, and wants for nothing.

He hands the healer a baguette.

"I do not want your filthy crust," she says, in French. Some days she remembers that he speaks Flemish, but most days she forgets.

"Good morning, madame, and good morning also to the mademoiselle," Willem replies.

Heloise's face appears in a wisp of morning twilight dancing in the shadows inside the house. She snarls at him like a dog.

Madame Gertruda snatches the bread out of his hands and slams the door in his face.

Today is definitely a bad day.

Willem passes the church on his way to the schoolmaster's house, across the road from the schoolhouse in the far corner of the village.

The village is old. It is small, just a strip of stone cottages alongside the river with some newer, larger houses around a communal square. It is surrounded, to the south and east, by fields of rye, oat, and barley, from which the village derives most of its income. To the north and west march the tall, dense trees of the vast Sonian Forest.

The saur-fence that protects the village is also old, and in need of repair. A series of high wooden poles, cross-braced by diagonal supports with sharpened ends that protrude through the fence to discourage nosy or hungry raptors. In more than one place the fence sags where the supports have cracked or rotted and have not been replaced.

Outside of the saur-fence, in the narrow strip that runs between the fence and the river, are long patches of lavender that, on humid spring days, waft a heady scent over the entire village.

Some say that lavender keeps saurs away, and that might be true, because there have been no raptor attacks in the village itself. But that might also be due to the fact that there are very few dangerous saurs left in Wallonia.

Jean and Francois are waiting by the gate of the schoolmaster's house. Cousins who look like brothers, with thick necks and arms from countless hours of cutting wood (Francois) or hammering in his father's smithy (Jean). Jean is the younger but larger of the two.

Francois looks as though he is ready for work, with a heavy axe across his shoulders, hooked with both arms. Jean carries a crossbow in a sling on his back. He made the crossbow himself, hammering the tempered steel of the spring on his father's anvil.

"You march to war?" Willem asks.

Jean laughs. "Of a sort."

"We're hunting eggs for the fête," Francois says.

"Saur eggs?"

"No, hens' eggs," Jean says, placing his hand on the stock of his crossbow. "But we are ready lest we encounter any angry chickens."

Willem laughs.

"Come with us," Francois says.

"Pierre says there is a raptor nest by the waterfall," Jean says.

"Maybe even a firebird," Francois adds, with a gleam to his eye.

"A firebird!" Willem says.

"You sound scared," Francois says.

"You should be," Willem says.

"Scared? We have axe and bow," Jean says

“And that is what scares me the most,” Willem says. “And I need to practice my act for the fête.”

“Ah, the soon-to-be famous magician,” Jean laughs.

“The festival is a week away. Perhaps it is courage that you need to practise,” Francois says.

“Come with us, Willem. You can practise on the way,” Jean says.

“This is my last delivery,” Willem says. “Let me think on it.”

He pushes open the gate. The door of the schoolmaster’s house open and Angelique Delvaux emerges, seventeen, bleary-eyed, tumble-haired, still in her sleeping frock. She comes down the steps with her arms wrapped around herself against the chill and presses a coin into his hand as she takes the last baguette.

She smiles through sleepy, blinky eyes and the touch of her fingers lingers. It is no accident, but nor does it signify anything deeper. Angelique simply knows, and enjoys, the effect she has on men, on him.

She turns back at the top of the stairs and waves.

Jean and Francois wave back in unison, gawping, a pair of fairground clowns.

The door closes, but Angelique appears a moment later at the window, opening the shutters to let in the morning sun.

“It seems only a few months ago that she was but a skinny sapling, all branches and twigs,” Francois says.

“Now the trunk is full and well-formed,” Willem says.

Angelique shivers in her thin frock, and wraps her arms around herself again.

“And the fruit is ripe,” Jean says.

Willem laughs but Francois says, “Take care of your tongue, cousin, lest it catch the ear of God.”

“I am sure He has more pressing concerns,” Jean says.

“Still,” Francois claps his cousin on the shoulder, “you would not want to reach the afterlife to find there is no place for you in His kingdom.”

“A god that would punish me eternally for a few words of jest is no god of mine,” Jean says.

Francois laughs, but Willem sees him make the sign of the cross behind his cousin’s back.

They cut across the schoolyard, back toward Willem’s house.

“So come hunting with us,” Jean says.

“Have no fear, we will protect you from any dangerous saurs,” Francois says.

“Or any chickens,” Jean says.

“I will meet you at the river bridge,” Willem says, making up his mind. “If you two fools do find a firebird someone will have to protect you.”

The cousins laugh loudest of all at that. Willem laughs along with them. But his words are not spoken in jest.

Jean and Francois are big, strong and well-armed.
But that will not be enough. Not against a raptor.
If they find one, they will need Willem.

Ascension

In 1807, on the eve of the feast of Ascension, Willem, just seven years old, wandered alone in the forest, his eyes red with tears that he wanted to hide from the boys who had waylaid him outside the church. His face bore the marks of their fists.

He had with him one of his father's illusions and his mood was dark.

They say that saurs cannot be trained. They are too stupid; too smart; too primal; too evil. But Willem's father, the Great Geerts, the most famous magician of his day, had found a way.

Geerts had discovered that a saur could be mesmerized, like a lizard, and in that spellbound state, they could be taught simple tricks. After years of refining his techniques, he had been able to include a trained microsaurus as part of his act, enthralling the audience with a new kind of magic. When Willem was old enough to learn, his father had taught him the techniques. Willem had used the knowledge on several occasions, making friends with the small saurs of the forest, at times his only friends.

He only ever used the skills for amusement.

But now he would find a saur. Nothing too dangerous, a microraptor or a groundhawk. He would

mesmerize and train the saur. Then he would set it loose on his assailants.

He found no saurs. Not even a dragonrat. But a saur found him. The largest and most dangerous of all the known saurs.

Some inner sense, or maybe an odd sound, warned him and he had just enough time to climb high into a tree, his heart pounding; a rush of blood thrumming in his ears, before the raptor bounded out from a patch of bush, its neck quivering, the air filled with a deep screeching sound.

A large, lizard-like creature, taller than Willem, with a long rounded snout and small, pointed teeth like long rows of thorns. A firebird. A sheaf of long feathers extended from each arm as if God had intended it to be a bird but had changed His mind. From each of its great feet protruded a terrible hooked claw. Plumage covered the body of the beast, in flame-like bands of red, yellow and orange. A comb of spiky rust-coloured feathers jutted back from its head.

It may have just been the imagination of a young boy, but the eyes of the creature seemed to radiate evil. Bright yellow with pure black pupils, those eyes watched him as he scabbled for perch in the slender high branches of the tree. It twitched its head from side to side like a bird, staring at him. But unlike a bird, unable to fly, or even climb the tree to get at him.

Willem dared not try to mesmerize this beast. To do that he would have to climb down from the tree and the firebird would have him before his feet touched the ground. There was nothing he could do, but wait.

For hours he was trapped in the tree, the firebird circling below.

Around him the forest was silent, as if the usual birds and small creatures that roamed the area were aware of the predator and had moved to safety.

Then the firebird cocked its head, hearing something that Willem could not. It stood on one leg for a moment, then perhaps seeking easier prey than the boy, it moved slowly away, blending with the brush of the forest.

Willem's first thought was that of relief. While the raptor was distracted he might be able to slip away unnoticed. But then he heard voices. It was not a deer or a boar that approached. It was people. Even so he was saved. While the raptor attacked them he would be able to escape.

Even as this thought passed through his mind he felt a deep shame, revulsion at his own cowardice. He opened his mouth to warn the approaching people of the terror that lay in wait for them. But he had hesitated a moment too long. He watched with horror from his high vantage point as a mother and daughter came strolling along the path. The mother held a

basket, perhaps gathering flowers, or berries, for the next day's feast.

Now he found his voice, but it was already too late.

With two quick steps the firebird emerged from the bush and blocked the path.

The mother was Madame Libert, the wife of a farmer.

The daughter was Heloise, then a puff-cheeked six year old, her hair yet to lose its baby blondness.

Again came the deep screeching sound.

The mother stopped, her eyes filled with terror that quickly turned into a haunted resignation. There was no way to fight, and no way to flee. On this day, at this time, she had taken a path that led only to a bloody, violent death, for both herself and her daughter.

There was no hope, and yet with a mother's instincts she pushed the girl behind her.

"Run," she whispered, and when the little girl did not move, she shouted, "run!"

Heloise turned and took a couple of stumbling steps down the path. Willem watched her run. He saw the mother swing the basket at the raptor as it approached, and how easily the beast dodged it, with rapid, darting movements. He watched Heloise freeze in horror as she looked back to see the body of her mother jerking on the ground, her throat in the jaws of the meat-eater.

Not content with the mother, the raptor released her, dying but not yet dead.

Lying on the path, looking up at the trees, her throat torn out, Madame Libert's eyes met Willem's.

The firebird was distracted, and it had other prey to chase. Willem could have escaped.

But her eyes would not allow him to.

Now Heloise turned and tried again to run, but her legs were small, she was young and slow. The firebird was quick and vicious. It would be a bloody, violent death.

Until a shaking, terrified seven-year-old boy jumped from his tree in between the raptor and the girl. The raptor slewed to a halt, surprised at this sudden appearance.

Neither Willem nor his father had ever attempted to mesmerize a meat-eater of this size. They were simply too dangerous.

Nevertheless, on this most terrible day of days, Willem stepped into the path of the firebird armed with nothing more than a simple conjuring trick.

He expected only to die, and hoped he was spending his life wisely, buying time for the girl, to allow her time to escape. To survive.

But God must have been watching this place, at this time, for He gave the firebird pause, and in those few heartbeats, face to face with the creature, Willem was able to produce the illusion, the mesmerizing technique. And in a strange kind of miracle, it worked.

With the beast motionless on the path in front of him, Willem stepped even closer, doing nothing to rouse it from its trance-like state.

Close enough to touch the thorn-like teeth he took a small pouch from around his neck. A pouch his father had insisted he always wear in the forest.

He emptied it into his palm and leaning even closer to the snout of the creature he blew sharply.

A cloud of fine pepper enveloped the beast's head and Willem leaped backward as a thousand tiny grains stung the delicate membranes of the creature's evil, yellow eyes.

It bellowed in agony, thrashing its head around, trying to shake away the pain, wiping at its eyes with claw-like hands.

Blinded and enraged it lunged once, twice, three times at Willem but its jaws only snapped shut on air where Willem had been.

It turned and ran, stumbling from the path. It disappeared into the forest, careering from tree to tree in blinded rage.

Amazed that he was still alive, Willem took off after the girl.

He couldn't find her.

Afterward he returned and held the hand of Madame Libert as the light faded from her eyes. It was the light of gratitude and unbearable debt. He told her the truth as she was dying. That he could have saved

them both. If he had not been selfish. If he had been braver. She must not have understood him, because there was no anger, nor condemnation in her eyes. So he told her again, tearfully apologizing for the cost of her life.

Still the light of gratitude shone.

A few days later the firebird was seen near Brussels, on the other side of the forest, and killed by a hunting party.

Heloise was not seen for more than five years, and it was assumed that she had died, alone in the forest. But one morning she had returned, standing silently at the saur-gate, dressed only in rags, almost unrecognizable. Her father had left the village by then, and no-one knew where he had gone, or how to find him. Madame Gertruda, the healer, had taken Heloise in, but she was not the same girl she had been. At twelve, she was more like a wild creature of the forest than a girl from the village. Snarling, scratching, biting, untameable, like the saurs.

She spoke little at first, but slowly, with the healer's patient help, her language returned. When asked about the missing years, she was silent. Question her further and she would revert to the wild form, hissing and baring her teeth.

Some said she had lived among the animals.

Some said she had been found by residents of a neighbouring village, and kept as a slave.

Some said she had lived underground, in vast secret caves that were thought to underlie the forest.
Only Heloise knew.