

Charlotte Ex-Tempora

by Brendan Peveril

Chapter 3

To Jump

With Mr. Harrington in tow, I left for town the next morning.

“I don’t know if I can let you leave the house unarmed!” Fenton had fussed about, insisting that Harrington carry a weapon, in case my honour or person should need defending. Harrington was completely unimpressed by the pistol Fenton produced, an ornate muzzle loader with an intricate flint igniter, and selected a stout ebony walking stick as well.

“A gun’s nice and all, but sometimes more than one person attacks at once, you know.”

“Not at all, Mr. Harrington. I’m glad to say that most of the assaults I’ve weathered have been verbal, and I’m more than equipped to hold my own in a battle of wits, regardless of my enemy’s numbers.”

I’d pushed Harrington out the door before he could offer Fenton a rebuttal. The day was grey and cold, a frost graced the grass. The ground crunched under our feet and the air was sharp in our throats. The grey sky threatened to send snow, but it wouldn’t make the frozen mud of the road any harder to deal with.

Before long we were at the farm. A makeshift stockade had been erected around the field, so we made our way to the main house. The family had been displaced and the yard was abuzz with the coming and going of the king’s men, as they finished loading another cart and securing the load, their heavy boots pulverizing the mud of the yard like hooves. I steeled myself and grabbed a young man’s arm as he led a horse past.

“I need to speak to the officer in charge.” The myth of the sensitive young man with a large vocabulary who enjoys reading and painting taking up soldiering for lack of options is alluring, but more often than not it stays mythical. This youth blinked at me a few times before gesturing toward the farmhouse and tugging again at the reins.

“I am an agent of The King, and I will inspect the site now!” I brandished the sealed letter as I threw open the door. Instead of the hardened military man I was expecting, I confronted a middle aged bureaucrat, paunchy and balding, amidst a sea of lists and letters on the table in a poor farmer’s kitchen. He wore the uniform of the other soldiers, though, his waxed great cloak pulled around his shoulders against the chill of the drafty house. He sighed deeply as he inspected and broke the seal. Another man, wrapped so completely against the chill that I couldn’t see his face at all, sidled in behind the officer to read over his shoulder.

“I don’t know what this is about,” the seated man said with another sigh, “any of it, nothing that’s happened for weeks has made any sense. You’ve been given permission to have access to the site, but I’m going to have to ask you to stay out of everyone’s way, and to not touch anything. We’ve put a great deal of time into cataloguing everything before hauling it away, and I’m afraid that any interference would be a disaster. Captain Chou will accompany you while you are on site. I assume this is fine with you?”

I stamped my foot self importantly. “I was told that you and your men would not interfere with my investigation! My assistant is here to provide any protection or assistance I might need, and no matter what I find, I certainly don’t need an extra pair of boots distracting me and trampling the evidence.” I glanced over my shoulder when I sensed Harrington moving behind me; he’d stepped to the side and pushed Fenton’s borrowed cape aside to display the pistol tucked into his belt. Captain Chou stepped forward, his hand on the hilt of his sabre. I put myself between them with my hands in the air. “Please. My companion isn’t

used to these situations.” I paused, looking back at Harrington, his square stance and clenched jaw. He looked ready to fight for his life, and I wondered, not for the last time, what greater mess I might have stepped in. “We do have leave from the King to access the site, though, and we will do so uninterrupted. If you find any inconsistencies after we leave, you can find me here, and I’ll give you my address in the city.” I hastily wrote out Fenton’s address and my own for the commander before ushering Harrington out the door. Captain Chou’s hand never left his sword.

“We’d better be quick.” Harrington started toward the stockade. “I don’t think they’re going to leave us alone.”

“Leave us alone? Are you trying to get us killed? What are you waving that gun around for.”

“We could be killed at any moment. Makes no difference what I do.” Harrington shot me a boyish smirk. I think it was supposed to be charming. “This is dangerous work. Our specialty is not getting killed, though. We’ll make it out of this one just fine. Now come on.” He grabbed my hand with untoward familiarity and led me toward the enclosure.

“Our specialty? What do you mean by that? We’ve only just met.”

“Oh, well,” he dropped my hand and looked trapped. “I don’t think I meant anything. Come on. We’ll be fine.”

I had, of course, been mulling the possibilities over in my mind, but I still had no idea what to expect. Even as more pieces of the puzzle fell into place, the king’s box, the carts, the enigmatic Mr. Harrington, I was no closer to understanding what I was looking for. After we rounded the corner to see the wreckage, I think Harrington was disappointed when I wasn’t amazed, or confused.

“That’s it? You’re not even going to do a spit take or raise an eyebrow?”

“I’m not sure what you’re asking me.”

“You’re not even surprised by this. You’re just taking it all in stride. You should be freaking out! This is crazy!” He pulled some sort of small gadget out of a pocket and began gesturing around with it and making clicking sounds.

The great shards on the scorched ground, the twisted metal and smashed bits of debris that I couldn’t identify; none of it held any meaning to me, and defied no preconceived notions. They appeared to have been part of, or perhaps contained by, a greater whole. The largest piece, like a shattered and burnt section of steel rib cage, was large enough that they would need a small team of oxen to drag it away. Many of the pieces littering the ground, ranging from the size of a knife blade to much, much larger, looked smooth and sharp, like fine pottery, or glass. None of it was like anything I’d ever seen.

“It’s about what I expected.” I paused, considering the blackened furrows in the Earth. “Hey. You’re not surprised either. This is exactly what you expected.” Harrington turned his device toward me. It had a lone dark eye. He smiled as it clicked a few times. “What are you doing with that ... thing?”

“You never cease to amaze me, Charlotte. This thing is a,” Harrington pitched forward toward me suddenly, knocking me over and pinning me under his weight. Captain Chou was behind him, gloved fists clenched, his gaze fixed upon us from the recesses of the scarf swaddling his face.

The soldier advanced toward us as I scrambled under my companion’s dead weight for the pistol. With no help from my senseless protector I wrestled the gun free, fought to level it in the direction of our assailant, and pulled the trigger. I’d seen firearms used before, but I had never fired one myself. It roared ferociously and nearly bucked out of my hand, and made a cloud of black, greasy, sulfurous smoke. Ideally, my marksmanship would have left Captain

Chou in a lifeless heap on the ground, but he was taking the chance to dive behind an old hand cart for cover, so it wasn't a complete failure. The noise and sharp smell of gunpowder seemed to help Harrington find his way back as well. He shook his head as he rolled off of me, scrambling quickly to his feet.

"Jesus. I can usually hear the damned clangers coming." He brandished the heavy cane and rushed toward Chou as the soldier awkwardly regained his feet. "Run, Charlotte!" He brought the stick down hard on Chou's back. The soldier stood deliberately anyway and drew his sabre, ready to embark on an earnest campaign to separate Mr. Harrington's head from the rest of him.

They exchanged blows for a few seconds. Harrington was quicker and knew what he was doing, but could not land a heavy enough blow with the black cane to stagger Captain Chou, especially while avoiding evisceration. I inspected the pistol, but I had no chance of reloading it without the requisite equipment. Without the sense to follow Harrington's order, and no other obvious options, I hurled the gun at the fighting men, hoping to give my companion some advantage.

"Ow! What is wrong with you?" Harrington couldn't even spare me a glance after the heavy gun bounced off the back of his head. "I told you to run!"

I had nowhere to run. If Chou had followed us, I could be sure I wouldn't be able to pass through the yard unchallenged. And could I, in good conscience, leave Harrington behind? I hadn't forced him to accompany me, but it was entirely my own machinations that had brought us here. I did not want to be responsible, on a legal or moral level, for the ill fate of this strange foreigner.

The tides turned quickly. Harrington was able to land a solid kick on Chou's groin, staggering him a little, and took the opportunity to grasp the heavy can in two hands and fetch

a heavy blow to the side of Chou's head. The cane sank a hand's breadth into the captain's skull with a muffled wet Whump!

"Whump?" The surprise on Harrington's face was clear and he made no immediate move to pull the stick back out. "All this time, I've never heard a whump. Why would you make a whump?" His reverie was cut short, though, when the captain brought the basket of the sabre up suddenly and punched Harrington in the face. The dark skinned man reeled backward, stumbling and falling to the mud a second time. Sabre raised, the soldier stepped forward quickly to end the fight. Harrington raised his hands reflexively, helplessly, to ward off the impending blow. Captain Chou's arm fell to the ground, severed near the shoulder, and his torso slid to the mud as well. The great shard I'd picked up, dark, long as a curved scythe, had been sharper than I'd expected; I'd managed to cut right through the man with one swing. Harrington looked just as surprised as I was.

"That should slow him down." He picked himself up, his borrowed clothes covered completely in mud. "You're full of surprises too, aren't you? I didn't think you could do that."

"I wasn't sure until I tried." I dropped the scrap and inspected a shallow cut it had left on my palm. "Now, I don't know if I could do it again. I've never killed a man before. I don't know if it's something I'd like to make a habit of."

"Well, if it's any consolation, I don't think you can really say you have, yet." He prodded the remains with the dropped sword. "Well, if that's not the damndest thing ..."

"What are you talking about? You were down! I stepped in and took another person's life for you, and I can't say I've killed? What is wrong with you? I don't slice people in half every day! Maybe if you do, we should end our relationship right now!"

"Relax, Charlotte. Look for yourself." He kicked the fallen man's head, still carefully wrapped against the cold, and it rolled clear. "This one's full of cabbage."

The vegetable bumped unceremoniously against my boot. I returned to my comfortable state of bewilderment, beyond shock or amazement.

“After a while you think you’ve seen everything, but I’ve never seen that before.” He picked his gadget up from where it had fallen and made it click a few more times.

“Hey, you!” The commander’s voice pulled me back to reality. He and three more men came through the gap in the fence that led to the farmyard to see us standing over their fallen comrade. This could not look good.

“How are we going to explain this?” As if in answer to my question, the men following the commander drew swords and pistols. Harrington grabbed my shoulder and spun me away from them.

“Run! Why aren’t you running?” He caught me by the wrist and started pulling me toward the far side of the enclosure, toward the blank fence. The rough, muddy field wasn’t an ideal running surface, and I fell almost immediately. A shot rang out and I could hear the ball striking the ground near me. The ringing in my ears and the lingering smell of powder in the air was motivation enough to get back to my feet. My skirts, now completely caked in mud, had given up on doing anything to keep me warm, and now seemed intent on dragging me to the ground.

Harrington was waiting for me at the edge of the compound. The wall was over ten feet high, hastily lashed logs and poles. He threw the sabre over, to the other side and reached for me.

“Quickly! I can boost you up and you can help me over.”

I brushed his hand away and drew my knife. “Harrington, you need to look for the simplest solution. Climbing over a fence in a dress is rarely the simplest solution.” Our

pursuers fired another shot in our direction, but two quick slices freed up one of the logs enough that we were able to squeeze through before the soldiers were upon us.

Some trees provided us cover as we ran down a slope toward a brook. The brook had carved an embankment that Harrington gracefully ducked below when he reached the bottom of the slope. My own arrival a few beats later was less agile, but my fall was cushioned by yet more mud. It splashed around me and I scrambled back to where he was crouched, examining another gadget. This one was flat, and seemed to be made of black glass. It fit into his palm and had a flat cylinder, the size of a bun attached to the bottom.

“Which way should we go?”

“Charlotte,” he didn’t look away from the device, “stay there.”

I could hear the guards bashing at the fence, and thrashing their way through the underbrush. “Harrington! They’re almost here! We have to move!”

“I don’t have time to explain. Hold on to me as tightly as you can and brace yourself.”

“Brace myself? For what?” They were getting closer to us.

“For the jump. Don’t let go!”

He grabbed me and scrambled to his feet, dragging me with him. At that moment, one of the soldiers slid over the embankment and into the icy water at our feet. He drew his pistol and leveled it at us as Harrington pulled me against himself and turned me away from the weapon.

And then we jumped.

Note from the Author:

Hello. It looks like you've just made it through another chapter of Charlotte Ex-Tempora. Specifically, you've read a free copy. I have, of course, made each chapter available for anyone to read. In fact, you can visit my website right now and download this, and every other chapter I've made available for free. I'm going to do that with the whole book.

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Thank you. I hope you enjoy the next one and stick with me through this thing.