

The story of Chi Si Chen (Autumn Silver Reed)

Chapter 40: Choices in Darkness (midsummer 1370)

Nethander was furious. And what was more, he was right to be. Poison is not evil. It has no mind, no reason. It would like killing all foxglove because it is unhealthy to eat. The true edge in meaning was that he did not believe his own words, that I saw he did not believe them, but still accepted them as truth. When a poison can save a person's life, give him a chance to reflect, perhaps chance his Karma, isn't that good? Like always when I reacted like a proper T'u lung maiden Nethander looked in wonder, derision, guilt, and several other emotions. He taught me a lesson, one that I will take to heart. Do not blame the weapon. The black lotus had to go, as signal, statement of failure, but the rest we should have kept until analyzed.

We need to rescue those farmers. Getting the keys to the lower mines because we solved the wood problem was the right thing at the right moment, but we need to decide if we are going to follow the trail, or if we are going for an intercept. According to Grimwald the kobolds are experts in traps and they would have protected their retreat carefully. So we planned to go to the second abandoned area and hope we could find their lair. Kendalan's and my morning prayers healed some, but not all, of the wounds Zhae and Cuura had sustained during the fight, and then there was the problem of the missing butler – Nethander has discovered the man was missing. We decided that Felina was most suited to dig up any information available while we went to the mine. We left the village uncertainly preparing for the days festival.

Kendalan wasn't happy at all, but still he and his wolf joined us.

Nethander took the lead, he is the only one who truly understands the concept of traps, while Zhae guarded the rear. Only 30 yards behind the last door he found the first pit trap. He tried running over it, but it opened even under his light weight. The ring of feather falling he had loaned from Kendalan and the safety rope meant he was only scratched, but that weird trap door kept closing on us on weird moments. Now knowing its width, Zhae easily jumped over it and using rope and the wooden fixtures we managed to get across without great difficulty.

Next problem was a cross road. The left was a rather narrow and rough corridor – a trial route according to Grimwald – but still we went there. Clearly the kobolds have been here for some time, because this time we Nethander found another trapdoor. This one was much deeper with something on the bottom. Likely an ooze of some kind because he mentioned it started crawling up. Again with Zhae's help we crossed, the door closed tight enough Grimwald wasn't worried about it getting out. Kendalan was, but he just disliked being underground.

Finally we reached a wall of some kind (unstable slate said our dwarf) with the corridor both going up and down. Nethander carefully looked down, as the rough route was so tight that it was close to impossible to pass, let alone stand next each other. Suddenly he pulled back, not from something below, but from a black blob that came from above. How he knew, and how he managed to react in time I didn't know, but he fell back before it. I pushed in some fire, which seemed to help, but it came on, acidic fumes filling the route. We clamoured for Grimwald to identify it, but our dwarf was silent, likely because he wanted to give the exact right answer. We moved back as the creature pursued, fire exploding, Nethander trying to get past me as his rapier style would do nothing against such thing, yet we got entangled in each others limbs.

The blackness touched me, burning through my clothes with a hissing, bubbling noise. Again I used fire and finally Grimwald spoke. Fire was indeed effective, as was bludgeoning. Cold was best as it slowed the creature. At this Cuura wrestled forward and swung her hammer twice with great precision. The black ooze stopped moving and, after Grimwald created water to clear the acidic mess, we went on.

It turned out that the way up was a dead end as well, but the route went on below through ever deepening 'water'. Nethander complained he felt his boots rot away as he checked it out, but Grimwald went down and concluded that it was possible to continue. There was some discussion if we should go on, but finally Nethander just went on because he thought he spotted some light. I really should pay more attention to Grimwald's expertise, as he was right to point out the kobolds liked traps but would not make such exquisite ones in any corridor.

Finally we got some some space, as we entered a large cave. We kept our light at the dimmest mode, which meant we were depending on Nethander's and Grimwald's vision. They told us there was a hole in the ceiling, but climbing seemed impossible. The smell told us this was likely a cesspit. *Ugh!* Nethander then created some extra *darkness* over the hole to protect anybody climbing out against darkvision. I used my *air mastery* to fly up with a rope, quietly *transpositioned* myself and Grimwald, then flew up again. Zhae, then Nethander climbed up, followed by Cuura, Kendalan, and finally his wolf, who endured the indignity with more patience than a normal animal.

As we came out of the darkness we found a guard. Dead. Nethander's work and I'm a bit disappointed although I can image his options were limited. I should not have destroyed those drow poisons! A short distance later Nethander found another trap, this one filled with a kind of deadly gas that had even Grimwald worried. After a short deliberation we decided not to wait for a change of the guard, but our trapfinder used a potion of gaseous form to pass it unharmed and deactivated it from the other side. A large cave opened to our eyes, even if it was dimly lit with green fluorescent toadstools. Nethander was already sneaking towards the biggest tent which likely held the kobold leaders, while we planned to let Zhae charge to get a concentration of kobolds so Grimwald could use his single area spell.

The plan worked as well as it usually did, because Nethander was discovered mere yards away from the tent, and Zhae was so effective – he killed seven(!) kobolds in one sweep – that the rest scattered and started throwing javelins, shooting arrows and whatnot at him. A rather impressive spell from our dwarf took out a score of Kobolds. The rest of us moved forward, trying to get to the slave pen on the other side, but both Zhae and Nethander (did I sense a pattern here?) got more than they could handle. A *glitterdust* blinded at least one of Nethander's opponents, and Kendalan, relaxed as this cave was rather big. shot another just when he wanted to put another magic missile barrage in our rogue. Grimwald healed Zhae, and Cuura and the wolf swept away the leaders. I had been trying to convince the remaining forty odd kobolds to leave, and, after some demonstration of my fire magic, they left, leaving us with the enslaved farmers and the leaders tent.

Grimwald just shrugged when the kobolds left. Is he accepting this?!