

**STRENGTHENING  
DEATH**

# STRENGTHENING DEATH

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## H.E.HRISTOV

## Dedications

For you, who along the journey made the path great.

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Also by H.E. Hristov *Death's Embrace*

# Chapter 1

*Watching another trace the steps I not long ago walked, fear plastered all over their face; only moments ago there was acceptance that termination was to come, but now, there seems to be a second chance. Walking along in a new and strange planet with the real unknown through the trees, is where the true fear spreads. As the newest agent walks past me, I remain well hidden in the bushes, all eyes are on this unknown factor, wondering who they are, what have they been through and will they be the asset we all need to help fight against the Superiors? I know what is to come for them. My experiences were not that long ago and they have only become bigger and more traumatic since. I shiver from my memories. They still have a hold over me. A sense of needing to protect the newcomer washes over me, but there is their need also, to prove themselves worthy of the battle. Are they strong enough? It is their time to show what side of the battle they will be on. The familiar ear-piercing sound strikes, though this time, it is only a slight hum for those of us camouflaged, unlike the flailing antics of the newcomer. The sound is piercing their senses, making them cling to themselves. I pity them, but this is just the beginning.*

What is fear? Is it something we can truly prepare for? The heart races, the blood curdles, the mind fades and the stomach lurches. Well, that is how I seem to be reacting. As I crouch, hiding, frozen in place, awaiting my commands. I ponder how I got into this situation in the first place. When the mist begins to fade and thoughts make their way through, *why me?* Appears on my mind. I followed my instructions; I followed the path that was set out for me by my Superiors; I did everything the protocols directed. So, why me? Why was I chosen by the Superiors out of all the other agents on Ganji to have a suicide mission placed upon me? I was betrayed by my Ganjian Superiors, tortured, and now banished to Sensusum to live with all previous agents. If not for Gha, the strongest, Sensusum would not be what it is today. As I run my fingers over my sweat-stricken body, the fear of what's to come hovers through my thoughts. My fate has yet again been decided by another. A loud roar shakes my body, releasing all thoughts from my mind. The sound carries through the bright trees that loom overhead covering any sign of the sky, as they aggressively sway with the anger of the unknown creature. I am not used to hiding; I have not seen a true battle, only studied it. My fear is rising. My closeness to the Himuryn behaviour, why can't I shake this away?

*Why me?* If only I had the Avi-Nilal here with me, would I truly feel safe? I need their claws, their strengths and ability to hide in plain sight. Searching my surroundings for any sign of the others, Gha is nowhere to be seen. Quartz though, who thought I was a Ganjian spy, now flanks to my side. He seems focused and well prepared. Nothing like I am. Further ahead, surrounded by shrubbery, a large hand appears, making quick, jerking finger movements. Quartz nods as he moves closer to me.

'The creature is preparing to move,' he whispers in my ear.

'How do you know?' the question manages to escape my mouth, though my voice begins to break.

Quartz, though puzzled, leaves me wondering if he is going to answer. With a roll of his eyes and a long sigh.

'Because it is stretching out. Feel the rumble on the ground?' I place my hand on the ground as he does. A small lingering tremor rolls beneath. 'Get ready, another is coming.' In the distance, like a wave, the furthest tree starts to shake, pushed forward by an invisible force, then, as the ripple

breaks free, the shakes come closer, until it hits us. I am knocked back by the energy, unable to hold my ground, though it is over quickly. Quartz grabs at my elbow and pulls me to crouch beside him once again.

'Hold your ground, Kalu!' Quartz demands. For a whisper, the command in his voice displays extreme displeasure. What is happening to me, and what is Kalu? I was ready to fight Gha to the death not long ago but now, I am almost paralysed. 'Get ready, another is coming. It'll take flight soon.'

'Flight?!' My eyes widened. My imagination is running wild with what this creature will be. Another wave is approaching. Quartz prepares his body to hold himself in place. I try to mimic his stance and, as we are hit, I only slide a few inches backwards. My knees and feet leave drag lines in the dirt. Quartz looks to me approvingly. I am a quick learner and the worry of him having to watch me throughout the battle eases.

The hand appears amongst the shrubbery once again, this time emerging between two glistening, large, yellow petals. Quartz, understanding the actions, leans closer to me. 'On the move.' He moves swiftly and without sound. I try to follow, though I do not possess his fluidness, due to my lack of control, but I manage to stay silent. My tactical instincts are slowly kicking in. We manoeuvre around the large flowers with ease. Every now and then, I see another soldier ready to fight. They move quickly and in pairs. Each pair moving as one, as if their mind is linked. As we move, there is the added challenge of keeping quiet while each wave hits us, and with time, they quicken. I am becoming familiar with holding my body against the force.

Quartz slows, raising his hand slightly, stopping my pace. We crouch together again. A pair, hiding in a nearby tree, each hanging by one arm completely still. Unless their surroundings move, their bodies mimic their coverings and they stay hidden. One catches Quartz's attention, again using the hand actions for communication. Quartz takes a large breath. 'It is time.' I try to question him, but a twitch of his body informs me now is not the time for questions.

The thundering roar bellows throughout my ears. The pressure within my head becomes deafening. I do not try to cover my ears, which would appear weak. I have finally gained respect and I do not want to lose it. The roars last a lifetime, the never-ending sound, until the trees move out of the

way. Many crash, snapping in half under the force. Another invisible wave hits us, this one more forceful than the rest. The time is here; we are here, and the unknown is about to become known. The trees release the sight and open the sky. For the first time, I finally see the sky. Before, the trees and flowers were in the way, with only small glimpses, but now with this creature forcing the land to open, I can see it all. It is completely pink, with a yellow tinge racing through, as if rays are shining in harmonious directions. The view of beauty, though the image is tainted by the doom awaiting us. The creature, my creature. It is large... too large to fight.

Two heavy-sized wings cover the sky, each black and covered in draping spikes. The body is skeletal, though it has a small layer of fur and four largely clawed paws that look like they could grab someone easily and squash them. But it is the head that worries me the most. An eye positioned at every angle on the face like a crown. No matter where I stand, the creature will notice an oncoming attack. This is complimented with a furious snapping jaw and two small ear holes, possibly its only weakness.

How am I supposed to defeat it? With shaking hands, my mind whirls. Images of different ways this creature will crush me in two. I am not prepared for this. This is the first time I will take on the Superiors and I do not know if I am ready. When will I be ready? It is as if I am on show to prove myself and I do not know if I can give everyone, including this creature, what they need. I am not weak, but I feel pressured, not just from the roar that rumbles in my head but pressure to not fail. Gha expects so much of me and I must achieve. There are no exceptions. My heart races. I want to scream but nothing will come out. I want to move but my body is stiff. This is just the beginning and I am already failing my own expectations. Another roar makes my body jump, my blood runs cold. I look at the bushes, searching and it seems too easy to be able to run. I can make it. My heart is pounding in my chest. Should I make it?

Quartz stands tall. He is nodding.

‘Interesting. They have really put some thought into this one.’ He is impressed by the challenge. Slightly, Quartz turns his face towards my direction. A small smile captures his face, a glint in his eyes. He is excited. ‘Kalu, let’s do this.’

Closing my eyes. *You must do this.* I take in a deep breath, the air thinning. Using all my might, I open my eyes and set my sights on **my** creature.

## Chapter 2

My earlier concerns to flee seem to be disappearing. Watching Quartz spring into action, his body moves swiftly and makes me want to mimic his movements. He has an infectious determination, moving with purpose. I follow each of his directions towards the battle. We leap over fallen plant life, and all around us others are advancing on the creature, who is still yet to completely gain control over its newly created limbs. The creature is sucking in deep breaths, though it is completely skeletal. The closer I get it becomes easier to see a tiny, exposed heart, pumping furiously. The creature does not appear to possess any other vital organs. It is clear the Superiors only designed this creature for a short-lived life. Quartz and I stop and take cover beneath a fallen tree branch. Ahead of us, crouching in the bushes, Heiz is accompanied by a new soldier, a long, bright, blazing silver-haired male. He is striking. He reminds me of a furry silver Lunkenshaire. It is best to describe them as an Earth wolf, only much larger. Heiz spots our position and the two make their way towards us. I do not see their path; it is as if they disappear in a blink of an eye and appear at Quartz' side, ready for action.

'Start,' Quartz orders the two newcomers and all three start to furiously dig their hands into the ground in random areas. Their movements are so fast that their holes become large quickly. 'Kalu, start!' Quartz yells.

Confused, I start to dig where I am. Heiz sighs and shakes his head.

'Not there,' the patience is running out fast. Heiz points his nose towards the ground behind them all. I move and before I begin, I look to Heiz for guidance and he nods, indicating I am now in the correct position. I begin to dig. The ground is soft, nothing like I have felt before. The dirt is fluffy to touch but rough to look at. The more I dig, the brighter the dirt becomes. On the surface the ground is brown as I found on Earth, though the lower the dig, the dirt becomes almost white and the feel becomes softer. I want to lay my head down, I'm becoming mesmerised. I dig quicker, forgetting the task, forgetting my surroundings yet again. This planet is enticing. My hands grab at the dirt. I regret throwing it to the side, though there is a pull in my mind to place my hands back in the soft ground. Continuing to plant my hands, I repeat the action. My head feels light, my thoughts begin to drift away. Slowly I feel my body lowering for my head to lay down, I am almost there.

'Kalu!' Quartz slices through my bewitched state and I blink. Quartz slowly gains my attention. 'Don't listen to it,' he instructs. Before he can explain, another blast from the creature catches us all off guard, knocking us to the ground. The others' angered expressions are focused on me as they gather themselves and continue to dig. How am I to blame?

'If you listen to the land, it'll take you, just dig, do not listen,' I am confused by Quartz' words, but this time as I look down to where my hole has been dug. It is then I notice for the first time; the ground is not what I first saw. It has changed. It looks just like normal dirt and the feel has changed also. It is now rough against my skin and digging is not as easy as before. I look to Quartz questioningly, but it is Heiz who interrupts.

'You will start to learn this planet was not created to cater to us. We were all sent here to be terminated.' I nod understandingly. It makes sense, why would the Superiors just let Gha and everyone live harmoniously? There must be more to this planet that even Gha does not know about.

'Found it!' Heiz, Quartz and I look at the silver-haired male.

'Well done, pull it out, Chiro,' Quartz instructs him. He places both hands within his hole, bracing his body with his legs, and using all his effort, begins to pull out a large, long black box. He struggles with the tree roots that have intertwined themselves on the box, though Heiz helps rip the roots away to free the movement. What feels like too much time is passing,

the two have the box free and open. More soldiers begin advancing on the creature. They are all holding long black rods. From my position, I can already see the strategy taking place. Those hanging within the trees are now also holding onto these black rods. A high-pitched whistle echoes above our group. Above us, there are two more soldiers hanging by one arm in the trees. Quartz nods to them. He leans into the box and pulls out the same black rods. As he stands, he throws a rod high. It flings straight up, slicing through the air and is caught with little movement by one of the hanging soldiers, and just as quickly, Heiz throws a second rod, which is easily caught by another. Quartz thrusts a black rod into my grip. It is light for its size, though it is shorter than I am. It feels uncomfortable going into battle with a creature this large and a small weapon.

‘Press here when you have a good position,’ Quartz instructs, pointing to a tiny fingerprint golden dot. The rod is rough, as if it has been burned. They could not possibly think this is going to do any damage to the creature. Quartz joins the others and they all dart towards the creature. I race after them, trying to catch up to the silver-haired Chiro.

‘What happens when I press it?’ I frantically ask whilst trying to avoid contacting fallen tree branches and others running around me. Though I am ignored.

To our left, Heiz yells, ‘Chiro! Cone side!’ I have no idea what that means, but I follow. We meet up with a new group, each sharing the same determined, ready for battle facial expression. The large group begins moving forward, running at a pace that shows my inexperience. The group splits in all directions. I stay with whom I am closest to. I have lost all my original group, though I am advancing on the creature. It is now the creature has come to all its senses, hovering in the air with ease, watching us scattering beneath it. The creature’s crown of eyes, viewing us in every direction. The pupils are homing in on each group on the ground, darting in all directions. The head does not have to move to continue its preying gaze. From all around me I hear screeches of directions, words I do not understand. I see hand actions I cannot follow. Hands grab at me to propel me in the right direction, but I never seem to be in the right position. Shouts of ‘Kalu’ along with frustrated directions that I try to understand. I see it

in their eyes. They do not have to say anything. I know they view me as a failure. I cannot keep up.

I leap, propelling myself. Soon I will be within reach of the creature. I duck behind a bright orange petal that has been ripped to pieces by force waves. I peek a look to the sky; the creature is larger than I expected, sucking in a large breath, ready to roar and it is now that I hear the battle calls. The sound is squeaking compared to the creature’s earlier booms; I find it hard to adjust. Many soldiers are taking cover as I am. Finally, I have gotten a direction right. They all have their rods laying across a shoulder, pointed at the creature, a strange high-pitched siren echoes, and within moments dull sparks emerge from the rods. The weapons are powerful. I copy and place my rod onto my shoulder, pointing it towards the creature just the same. Placing my shaking finger over the gold, I press the fingerprint, as instructed. As I do, I am slightly knocked off guard by the force. Though I hold my ground, a technique I have perfected. I must close my eye closest to the weapon as small sparks alight as the firepower leaves the weapon. All shots hit the creature but leave no damage. How *do we destroy it?* I begin to panic. If firepower cannot penetrate it and this is the only weapon we have, how are we to terminate it?

Soldiers around me stand and begin to run at the creature while it is distracted, I join the advancement. Before I reach it, soldiers around me leap and try to make contact. As if by intuition, the creature moves itself higher with one flap of its wings, the movement only slight but for us on the ground, it completely knocks us all down, and hard. The air leaves my lungs and I am hit with the biggest force I have ever felt. My body is knocked down and I am stuck on my back. A male to my left has been left crushed in half, not lucky enough to fall flat as I. He struggles, waiting for his body to regrow. Cries of pain instinctually scream from him. Soldiers from the treetops swing from long spiral vines. I now understand. Those of us on the ground were the distraction. The first attackers are always the distraction.

The treetop soldiers are flying in on their vines from all directions, wrapping themselves around the creature’s skeletal body. They have managed to hook one of its wings within the vines and are trying to pull it back into its own body. Though lopsided, the creature is putting up a good fight. With its imbalance, the creature is slowly moving towards the ground. One



wing cannot keep it in flight. As it gets lower, those of us on the ground are now presented with a closer leap. I stand and pick up my weapon, readying myself. I brace myself mentally and prepare for what I am about to do. I prepare to jump with my full force, pressing my lower body into the ground and pushing all my weight upwards. I fling into the air, gaining distance quickly. I stretch out my arms and legs, hitting a rib bone as I latch on without dropping my weapon. I start to climb, though it is hard while holding the rod. I must hang on and climb the rib bone, with the added challenge of doing it upside down before I get to the body. Wrapping my legs around the bone, grabbing the fur tightly with my hands. As I move, other soldiers are leaping and missing, or leaping and latching on as I did.

Up ahead, Gha perfectly fights the head, making sure he stays clear of the chomping jaws. His motions are fluid and swift, landing many nonfatal blows. He encourages the others to join in the battle and he is met with loud war cries in reply.

I take my time as I climb, ensuring I do not drop my weapon and that I do not fall. It will only take one misplaced hand or foot and I will be sent to the ground, hard and fast. I move my head backward, exposing my neck. Something that should never be done in battle. I feel I am safe enough to do so as others are fighting a leg each, trying to tie the paws together and the battle against the wings is still going strong. I must climb by feel. I watch a male with bright red hair swinging his vine towards the head; he shoots his weapon at the eye in his line of direction and it is a direct hit to the eyeball. Though the creature is being attacked in all directions, it still manages to take the blast of the shot, closing that eye but moving its head slightly vertical to gain connection with the incoming male. It is at this moment I witness the creature's full force. Its mouth opens, as do the eyes of the male. Trying to change his direction of the swing, but it is useless. The creature lunges its upper body forward, making everyone fighting its other body parts lose contact as it exerts its energy in that direction. We all watch the large jaws open and snap down. A piercing scream smashes against us all with more force than the earlier roars. I hear the crunch as the bones from the male are crushed under the creature's jaw strength. The sound of teeth on bones is blood curdling, but it is not until the realisation that I am hit with grief. The creature has no stomach. Moving my head, I am met with the sight of the chewed body leaving the mouth. A small, exposed tube

connects to the throat of the creature, and this is where the remnants of the body are splattered out through the ribcage. I hang on tightly and watch as my fellow soldier is scattered beyond repair out into the open space and all over those still trying to make contact. I did not know that could happen to our bodies; I thought we could not be terminated. I have always been told there is no way for a Ganjian to be terminated. Is this wrong? What did I just witness? The rib bones, including the one I am holding onto, begin to pulse, as if from the digesting parts of the crushed body. Is this why there is no stomach? Do the bones consume part of what the creature inhales? I begin to feel the shock. My body starts to numb and mentally I am fading. I press on, willing my arms and legs to move on.

Finding myself with a newfound determination, the realisation of the possibility of termination, this is now life and death. Though now, I find myself not caring about my own safety, but all those around me. Whatever happens to me is deserved, but everyone else, they do not deserve to be terminated because of my arrival. This is my creature and it is up to me to terminate it.

I climb higher, almost onto the back. By now, all the eyes are occupied by one or several soldiers. We are taking over its body. It is rapidly flapping the one wing that is free; it has become completely lopsided as its other wing is almost tied into its own body. I stretch out my arm holding the weapon and try to use it to hook a nearby vine. I miss and hit it. The vine swings in the opposite direction. *Great.* This is not going to work. I climb higher again and manoeuvre my body off the rib bone, shuffling myself towards the creature's body. Bracing myself, I begin the outward climb onto its back.

Once I reach the top, I hunch in with the fur and wait. It is almost conquered, but it needs more to completely take it down. I hear more crunching of bones and wonder if it has taken another life. The sound of spurting and the same pulsing of the rib bones indicates I am correct. Another vine is swinging in my direction, the soldier who was previously occupying it has been hit by a paw and is flying towards the ground at full force. This is my chance. The vine is coming towards me. I take the chance and release my free hand and hope my other hand can keep hold of the weapon and a grip on the fur. Bracing my legs, ready to spring. Again, I push all my weight into my legs and burst off the creature, catching the vine in one hand.

I shimmy down one-handed until I am in place. The vine shreds layers of skin from my hand and pain surges through it. I was not prepared for the feel of the vine, which is hard, but sturdy. I swing it in a circular motion and it hooks around the ribcage. The more I swing around, the tighter the vine wraps. The creature lets out a loud screech. Other soldiers witness my efforts and join in, spiralling more vines around the ribs. Once my vine can swing no more, I see the efforts of the vines combined. Slowly but forcibly, the ribcage is closing in on itself. With no other organs or fat protecting the abdomen, it is completely unprotected from the attacks.

The more vine attacks, the more the bones are crushing together. Finally, we see some pain illuminating from the creature. Throwing my weapon to the ground, my hands find fur and I hold on tight. I try to kick at the bone to help the process along until I start to hear a crack form. It is like a tree splitting in half. The cries are deafening, but it is different this time. Unplanned and natural. More bones begin to crack until several break free and snap in half. The creature lifts its head in raw agony, falling to the ground. All soldiers hanging on latch to the creature with all our might and when it is safe, those of us who can leap far enough, avoid hitting the ground. We fall fast and heavy. A loud thud erupts as the creature makes contact with the ground. It sends shimmers throughout the island. The creature is withering in pain. Quickly, those of us who were not affected by the crash gather ourselves and make our way towards it, ensuring it is tied down with no way to escape. Its cries are crushing. Eventually, it closes its eyes and becomes silent. Only small whimpers indicate it is still alive. Convinced it is no danger, I move towards the middle and peer through its broken ribcage to see the tiny, beating heart. The beats are not regular, but it is pumping quickly. The creature's bones are vibrating, not like before when it ate. This is different. I place my hand on a cracked bone and find it is not vibrating like the rest.

'It seems the bones that are broken are cut off from its power source, which is why they are not doing the same as the rest of the body.' I jump, not realising Gha had followed me.

'Where have you been? I saw you at the beginning and then you disappeared.' I stare at Gha, who appears to be amused.

'I saw you; we all saw you. You had us worried that you weren't going

to take it down.' A crowd begins to gather around us, some studying the creature and some listening in on our communication.

'Kalu, you did well,' Quartz comes to stand beside Gha. For the first time during this encounter, Quartz appears to be satisfied and does not look at me disapprovingly.

'What is that? I thought I chose my name,' I say to them. Kalu is something I have heard them call me since the creature arrived.

'Oh, you do. Now that you have defeated your creature we will celebrate it, hope to tame it and after seven sundowns we will have a ceremony welcoming you into the Sensus clan and this is when you inform us of your chosen name,' Gha explains, 'unfortunately, we cannot eat this creature with its skeletal structure, but with its ability to fly, it will be of use to us. There is so much more of this planet for us to explore.'

'That's great, but you still did not explain what Kalu is,' I remind Gha. His reply is a loud but short laugh. The others all smirk at each other, a joke I am not part of.

'Kalu is something we call soldiers who do not bring their strength,' Heiz says bluntly, 'but you proved yourself in the end.'

'Taking down the creature does not make up for your weakness in the beginning. A soldier who must be guided the entire battle is a weakness. No one needs to be looking behind them. When you can't look ahead of yourself, that is when your head will get taken.' Quartz is stern, though I understand. In the beginning, I didn't know how to react. I was a weakness to the battle. I could not pick up the signals or follow the commands. In a real battle I would have gotten many terminated, I deserve the Kalu name.

'Give him time,' Gha encourages, 'remember back to your first creatures.' Gha is stern but cares for his soldiers.

'What will happen to the creature now?' I ask.

'We will learn its traits to tame it. It will become part of us, just like the others,' Gha explains. 'It was not the strongest they have sent. It lacked hearing, which put off its balance. Something I am sure was deliberate. The Superiors are the most intelligent, but they lack common sense and are quick to create without really thinking all the details through.'

'How did the creature terminate those soldiers?' I ask, the splatter of the bodies shine on the ground around us. I try not to look down to where my feet are, but I know I am standing on their remains.

Gha looks around, pain etches his face, the memories of his fallen soldiers all around him. 'We are not indestructible, Agent. It is hard, but there are ways to terminate us and the Superiors know this information. You are not created as strong as I, but you are strong. It is our birthed Sensumonians that need protecting.' Gha places an arm over my shoulder and steers me away from the creature. 'Come on, we need to get cleaned up and ready for the celebrations at sundown and you are the main attraction.' Gha clicks his fingers and soldiers run around us, picking up thrown weapons, some gathering what they can from the splatters onto large leaves.

As Gha leads me away, my thoughts are broken, everything I have been taught, all my knowledge must be questioned. We walk through the destruction the creature left behind, the fallen plant life and trees snapped in half, destroying all in its path. I feel just as broken.

Gha, sensing my displeasure, stops me. 'Agent, turn, be quiet and watch.' Confused, I do as he says. We wait, and what feels like wasted moments, before I can ask what exactly we are waiting for, it is then, to my amazement, the trees and plants begin to move, move on their own. They shake, roll around on the ground, as if picking themselves up. Gha is proudly smiling. The largest tree ahead lifts its branches, holding itself steady. The body places itself back to its snapped roots. Both ends start to intertwine themselves, blending and meshing their edges back together, forming a whole tree once again. Time and time again, we watch all the flowers gather their petals, emerging together, some plants help others to ensure our surroundings are back to their previous living selves.

'Amazing, isn't it?' Gha breaks our silence, he is entranced by the beauty, as am I.

'I have never seen anything like that before. How do they do it?' I am in awe. I want to rip apart a flower just to see it put itself back together again. 'Are they living like we are?'

'No,' Gha breathes out a small laugh, 'They have been created by the Superiors. We have our theories, but you have to look at it this way, we were never meant to survive past our encounter with the creature. So once a creature is dropped here, the Superiors think that it does its duty, therefore anything that is destroyed in the process must go back to its natural created state, ready for the next agent to arrive.'

We turn and leave. Our surroundings gather themselves, fixing the destruction caused by my arrival. The Superiors are capable of power and control, and I need to help those back on Ganji. I now understand why Gha has made it his life's mission to form the resistance and save them. How it is possible though? No matter how much we prepare, there is still no way for us to get back to the planet, the technology is not available on Sensum.

I turn to Gha, 'I'm in.'

'What?' puzzled by my sudden outburst.

'I'll join your resistance. I cannot sit by and watch all this destruction. What they have done to us needs to change. No other agent should live their life like this. Things need to change on Ganji,' I am confident about my choice.

'Good to know you made the right decision. I knew you would. Now let's go celebrate.' Pleased, Gha pats me on the back and we move in knowing silence.