

REN-SHEN



Half Spirit

by Chris Milanko

REN-SHEN Half Spirit

Book 1 of the REN-SHEN Series

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## Book One - The Quickening

A thought became a ROAR.

## Chapter One - The Early Years

Steve Nedelkin always seemed a little older than he actually was. He physically matured early and had an intellectual maturity which older people would always embrace. Perhaps it was due to the fact that he lost his mother when he was just six years of age. It wasn't long before young Steve was doing the necessary tasks around the house for both his father and himself. He enjoyed reading, exercising and absolutely loved playing his guitar.

Born in Adelaide, Australia, the son of Macedonian immigrants who left poverty and a civil war behind in what is now part of Greece, Steve was always taught to be proud of his Macedonian heritage. "We Macedonians ruled the world," his father would sometimes say. He'd often remind Steve that his family used to be important once upon a time and say, "Even the mountains used to have our name!" Of course none of that made a great deal of sense to Steve because his people arrived in Australia penniless and worked as labourers for most of their lives. They only sought to measure themselves against their fellow immigrants and the suffering they endured from their endless toil seemed a badge of merit. Watching relatives compare employment related injuries seemed very peculiar to him.

His father was a lion of a man with immense strength and an enormous capacity to explode with a rage which others would fear. Steve vividly recalled seeing his father's violent nature when a local gangster made an uninvited entrance to a function held by his local Macedonian community. While most of the community members didn't want any trouble, Steve's father couldn't bear watching the criminal try and intimidate his family and friends. The tough guy

was removed from the community hall by the scruff of his neck. When he tried to square up and fight Steve's father, he was rewarded with a backhanded slap across his face. The kind which only a strong man who worked with his hands all his life could deliver. After he picked himself up off the ground, the gangster sprinted away to safety - never to be seen again.

As a young child, Steve quickly learned how his father's demeanour changed around what he called "shpioni" or spies. Those people were treated with caution and a sense of trepidation by his father. The "shpioni" were the people from the same region back in the old country who had ties to the new Greek government. They had the potential to make life a permanent misery for any relatives back home if there was any indication of Macedonian patriotism enthusiastically displayed in his warmly embraced new country. Words and actions were always measured carefully in the company of those people. The hidden agendas and purposeful double meanings conveyed in such meetings were often a source of intrigue to a young Steve who quickly learned to read between the lines.

School was pleasant enough for Steve. He had an uncanny ability to quickly grasp concepts and easily maintain a solid B+ average. He certainly wasn't the smartest in the class, but nobody doubted he could have given some of the brilliant student minds a run for their money if only he pursued anything academic with real vigour. A constant theme in his report cards was the potential ... the potential ... the potential.

He played numerous team sports yet didn't particularly excel. He didn't seem to enjoy the actual games very much and always wondered if he should enter the fray at the expense of another team member. All of the sports were about chasing after a ball and, quite frankly, it

didn't go unnoticed his pet dog Rover enjoyed chasing balls far more and would have been infinitely more up to the task. Nevertheless, Steve did enjoy the social interactions and the numerous sports allowed him to move effortlessly between a number of school cliques.

One notable event occurred at an Australian rules football training session when Steve was fifteen years old. The team was playing "Red Rover all Over". They were split into two teams with one team halfway along the football field and the other level with the goals. The other team had to run and tackle Steve and his teammates and drag them to the ground. One of the faster boys managed to grab Steve and tried to wrestle him to the ground. He did everything right, his arms managed to wrap around Steve with particular attention to his centre of gravity. He dropped and tried to drag Steve down with all his might. Much to his dismay, he was flung off Steve as though electrocuted. This prompted others to attempt the seemingly inevitable takedown. The first few were ejected in a similar manner, then finally all of the opposition managed to lay a hand on Steve. Yet he couldn't be dragged down. hilariously, the entire team then attempted to drag him down and they simply couldn't do it no matter what they attempted.

Steve glanced at the coach who couldn't understand what kind of crazy force was stopping this rather average team player from being dragged to the ground! Everyone, other than Steve, was perplexed. The physics was quite logical to Steve. In fact, the entire team pushing and pulling in every direction created a hedge of sorts. All of their frenzied physicality and desperation was there to be utilised and Steve let them all "help" him stand upright amongst it all.

Steve was rather nonplussed by the event, yet his colleagues seemed to treat him differently from that time on. It was simple and logical to him, the right kind of angle of deflection, a twist, a push and people could be controlled physically. One of his friends suggested he should develop his natural abilities further and join a nearby Karate school. It was 1985 and the film Karate Kid had been released a year earlier to huge box office success. Karate had enjoyed a phenomenal resurgence in popularity and finally managed to claim the crown from Kung Fu which the legendary Bruce Lee singlehandedly made famous in the 1970s.

The instructor, Sensei Mike Fergusson, was an ex-Vietnam army veteran. He was incredibly strong. A tall man with long red hair and what seemed a tattoo for every occasion painted over the exposed areas of his body. Long before tattoos were a necessary fashion accessory for the modern Millennial, the tattoos seemed to tell a story as they wound around his muscular frame. A glimpse of a phoenix, a snake, a dragon, a fish ... all of them oriental in design. Not even a hint of a bawdy sailor's tattoo on the huge man. The tattoos were impeccably done and only added to the mystique of Steve's second mentor. His first mentor was clearly his father.

Sensei Mike would command attention by his mere presence and all classes were conducted in Japanese. There was no choice. Not a single word was uttered in English. The language transformed Sensei Mike, as soon as he stepped into the Dojo and commanded his students, his energy infused everyone in the room. The Okinawan Japanese is regarded as a dialect and is constantly changing as it slowly continues to transform into the standard modern Japanese language. Sometimes Sensei would use more archaic Okinawan words usually reserved for

the elderly in Okinawa. Steve's enthusiasm for his karate extended to embracing the languages immediately and it would prove to be extremely useful in the near future.

In the early 1970s, Sensei Mike felt abandoned by Australia. The Vietnam veterans never received the appreciation and reverence that other returned war veterans received in earlier wars. In fact, they were often despised by the younger generations for their participation in what they believed to be an unjust war. He left his home country and moved to Okinawa where he quickly recommenced his training in Karate that had been abruptly curtailed by the Vietnam war. The style of Karate was Gōjū-ryū and was popular in the region. It was formalised over two generations under the eager and competent minds of the likes of Higaonna Kanryō and subsequently the spiritual founder Chōjun Miyagi. Sensei Mike was hardened by the war but found comfort in dedicating himself to his training. In the ten years he was in Okinawa, he managed to impress his masters with his ferocious strength and understanding of the complexities of the softer forms of the art. He earned his godan (or 5th dan level of black belt) in record time and was well known in many circles for his fierce combat style. However, events he was reluctant to describe forced him to flee his beloved and idyllic Okinawa and return to Australia.

Steve was enormously parochial about his martial art style. No other martial art could be better than Gōjū-ryū and no other instructor could possibly be better than Sensei Mike. Though it wasn't too long before Steve learned how the great founders had each travelled to China to learn such exotic Chinese styles such as Luohan and White Crane and how inextricably linked Gōjū-ryū was to the southern Shaolin Kung Fu styles. Indeed many Gōjū-ryū katas would exhibit the Chinese influence with their hard and soft movements.



These distinguishing features were often more akin to Shaolin Kung Fu styles than other contemporary Karate styles.

The training felt glorious to Steve. There was no room for doubt about what he had to do and no waiting for other team players to have his turn. He was blessed with strength and coordination and was “man-sized” at 15 years of age and close to six feet tall. The training comprised excellent body conditioning and strengthening exercises. Flexibility came quickly and practise was infinitely rewarding. While most students often had to train for years before they were even allowed to train the Sanchin Kata in the most traditional dojos, Steve left his Sensei no choice. He was allowed to begin learning it after two months. He had done everything asked of him and excelled - it was as though every essence of his being was created for the purpose of karate.

Sensei Mike would say, “Sanchin means ‘three battles’ and I understand this as a battle to unify the mind, body and spirit. The untrained eye sees the Sanchin kata as a sequence of extremely slow movements combined with a look of intense determination. Don’t kid yourselves. It’s a battle on all fronts. The entire body anticipates every defence and attack and the mind, body and spirit combine to create the perfect technique. It anticipates, it readies, it absorbs, it breathes, it lives, it sees and hears and smells and senses everything that is happening and is yet to happen. It is a meditative form of combat that only the mind’s eye can see, yet it manifests itself in such a way that an average person sees nothing particularly remarkable. Make no mistake, the essence of a man, his soul or spirit or reason for existence can be crushed with this kata’s intent and fervour.”

Steve understood the intent of Sanchin as a baby knows to suckle the breast of its mother. It was natural, it was the only way and any other way was indirect and futile. It simply made perfect sense to Steve and he was of the resolute belief he was born for this. Some students never fully mastered the Sanchin. It was the alpha and omega. Steve's form was flawless within six months.

Sensei Mike knew he had found someone special in Steve who was worthy and who would honour the style. Naturally, good students were good advertising for Sensei Mike and he needed every dollar after returning penniless from Japan. Classes continued to grow and it wasn't long before Steve was teaching some sessions and demonstrating his outstanding, remarkable martial skills. Two years later, Steve was awarded black belt status. His ability demanded the acknowledgement of the black belt and his respect and admiration and servitude to his Sensei made it a pleasure for Sensei Mike to bestow the honour on his prized student within record time. Most importantly, Steve had earned the respect from his hero, his Sensei.

At seventeen years of age, Steve had few peers who were able to match his fighting prowess. The way he embraced his katas allowed him to transcend the normal instinctual reactions most people respond to in violent situations. Steve understood the only true enemy was himself and it was essential to be able to harness every aspect of his being to make him the complete fighter he so wanted to be. Sensei Mike was the only fighter whom Steve could spar with, and be challenged by, with every move. Steve had a repertoire of moves which would work without fail with lesser adversaries. But Sensei Mike typically had an answer for every one of Steve's moves. On the rare occasion Steve managed to find a way past the fearsome

guard of Sensei Mike, the sheer elation of the “win” would end up being a Pyrrhic victory as it would distract Steve for a microsecond before Sensei Mike returned the favour tenfold. The little “wins” for Steve began to grow into more frequent occurrences and the joy from Sensei Mike was obvious. His protege was getting very close to being as fully trained by Sensei Mike as possible. Only further tuition in Okinawa under the great masters would help Steve realise his full potential to become a Gōjū-ryū master.

Sensei Mike knew Steve would honour him and stay with his dojo forever if necessary. Such was their bond and Steve’s dedication. But he saw so much potential in Steve and wanted to see how far this young man could go. He saw greatness in the young Macedonian warrior. Sensei Mike wanted to see how Steve would progress with a life free from the pain and suffering he himself had endured. He believed it would allow Steve to flourish and become one of the most enlightened masters in the style of Gōjū-ryū. But first there was one thing, a tournament! Steve needed to take away someone else’s right to win. He needed to take it from them. He would learn that things a man dreams of sometimes come at untold cost.

## Chapter Two - Whispers

The timing couldn't be worse. The tournament Sensei Mike had enrolled Steve in was only two weeks away. An event open to all styles of martial arts from anywhere in Australia. A national title!

There was a complication. Training for the event was not the problem. Steve was impeccable. His two years of single mindedness and commitment to his art was obvious. He was seventeen years old and had the muscularity and fitness most men would never enjoy in their entire lives. He was more than physically prepared to fight, he was made for it. The complication was the upcoming school exams, which were set to finish a day before the tournament began. The exams were weighted towards eighty percent of his end of year result and facilitated admission to university. That they were somewhat important was not totally lost on Steve.

Steve had coasted through his final year of schooling. He wasn't doing badly but his mind was clearly elsewhere. His martial arts training rewarded him with wins on a nightly basis and studies would only possibly reward him one day, if he got enough marks, if he studied the right course at university and then if he found the right job. Naturally his Macedonian father wanted him to be a doctor or a lawyer as if to counter the millenium of peasant farmers in his bloodline back in the old country.

Steve had indeed become smarter over the last two years of training. His mind was a sponge and he learned to sense everything about his environment. The training helped him in every way. Everyone could see it. Even his father!

He started furiously swotting for the exams. There wasn't enough time - but, to Steve's surprise, his training gave him a clarity of mind and focus so he could work his way through the syllabuses and gain the necessary understanding to tackle the exams. In fact, he did better than he expected in the exams. He was focused enough to complete them competently but his spirit was gearing itself up for battle!

After the exams, Steve sat down for yet another talk with his father. They used to be more akin to lectures, but as Steve grew older, the lectures became more a battle of minds. They would often talk until late at night about the future and about life back in Macedonia. Steve was indeed his father's son in many ways. He had the same ability to communicate with people and his strength was an obvious inheritance although he didn't have quite the same rage as his father. Perhaps the alcohol was a distinguishing factor. Steve abhorred any drugs and thought alcohol was just as wicked as any other substance people would consume to reduce the clarity of their minds.

After talking about the old country (yet again) with his father, Steve was curious about the family name, Nedelkin. "Dad, would we be able to trace our family history?" Steve asked. His father just waved the notion away. He then explained that the ending of the name was a clue about the difficulty of tracing anything. Having "in" as the ending of a name in Macedonian is indicative of an ancestor being a "domazet" which means a son in law who

takes on the family name of the wife's family. This often happened when the wife's family didn't have a son to carry on the name. So if Jack married Jill Smith in this example, Jack would then become Jack Smithin. The "Nedel" part was even less thrilling. This probably meant some ancestor was born on a Sunday as "Nedela" means Sunday. Steve's father laughed and said one of his aunties was called "Dosta" which means "enough". This was fair enough as she was the sixth daughter! "Besides, we were Ottoman slaves for five hundred years and then the Greeks destroyed our records anyway. Our lives begin here in Australia. Now it's up to you to make our name something to remember," he said.

Steve asked, "But what about the mountains with our name?" Steve's dad replied, "Ahhh, they're just myths mixed in with a bunch of half truths. But everyone knew our people back in the old country by the nickname Tsareto which is a cute way to say King. So I'd always joke about my royal lineage when I was harvesting or collecting the cow shit for fuel!" It seemed the further Steve wanted to go back, the worse it became for his lineage. "Shit! If I win this tournament, it's gonna all begin from here," he thought, as he allowed his mind to explore the thrill of such a thought.

Steve's father shared one of his own childhood memories with his son.

*"Stefche, Let me tell you about something that happened to me when I was a kid back in Macedonia. The Greeks called it the Greek civil war. But our people knew it as the Macedonian war for independence and our people were fighting for their freedom. A bunch of powerful men in suits decided to split Macedonia between Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia in*

*1913. Our people went from almost five hundred years of slavery under the Ottoman Turks to end up copping it for decades from the Greeks. At least the Turks let us speak our language!*

*“Anyway, after the second world war, Greece was a mess and our people thought they might have a chance to control their own fates. But nobody gave a shit about our people. They were terrible times. So many children were sent out of the region to live in other countries while the madness was happening. As an orphan, nobody gave a shit about me, so I just hid in the mountains. I was six years old and a little burned orphan girl showed me which plants I could eat. I’d come down from the mountains sometimes and try to steal some food at night. It was the scariest time in my life. I’d see these red eyes glowing at night and I felt like they were always looking for me.*

*“The Greeks or Americans were using napalm on us. It was the first time it was ever used. They knew people were hiding in the mountains and they used the napalm to kill or flush out the enemy in the mountains. Half of the mountain range was set on fire in seconds and the Greek army was coming up the mountain to pick off the poor bastards trying to get away from the fire. As I was running down the mountain, a Greek soldier caught me and dragged me down to his camp. The Captain wanted me to tell him where others were still in hiding. I was young and stupid and I told him to piss off. Even though I was young, I knew what happened to traitors. I could never let my people down. The soldiers took turns threatening and slapping me. Finally, I was on the ground and one soldier aimed his gun right at me. I don’t know what happened. I was so scared! I screamed as loud as I could and something strange happened. The entire mountains trembled and they lit up for a brief moment. I don’t know if it*

*was a bomb nearby or something else. But the soldiers ran away from me and not much after, I ran away from Macedonia.*

*“That changed me forever and, when I became older, all I ever wanted to do was have children of my own and protect and love them and save them from ever having to deal with the shit that I had to deal with. I will always support you son. I’m so proud of you. I know you’re gonna do well.”*

Steve had never heard the story before and he was finally able to gain a fraction more insight into where his father’s pain and rage had originated.

The night before the fight, Sensei Mike cancelled the training and invited Steve to come over to his place. Cancelling training was unheard of. It simply never happened and reinforced how important Sensei felt the tournament was. Steve wasn’t particularly nervous about the tournament up until that point, but that all changed with the invitation! It was the first time Steve had actually been inside Sensei’s house. Steve would often visit the house and offer to mow the lawns for his Sensei and ask if he could assist in any other way. But he never ever thought about going inside as he felt it was a violation of their relationship founded on duty and admiration and respect.

Sensei Mike invited Steve to sit down in his living room. Steve bowed as he entered Sensei’s home in the same way as he would when he entered the dojo. He was overwhelmed by the simplicity of the room. There was no television to be seen anywhere. There were the most exquisite prints and paintings of beautiful Japanese landscapes which seemed too nice for the



walls they adorned. There were some little Daruma dolls which looked like nice souvenirs from Japan. Books were everywhere and the titles didn't even seem to align with the kind of man Sensei Mike was in Steve's eye. Books on Shinto and Taoism, Japanese Kami, Nikola Tesla, a few about Kung Fu styles, books on spiritual transcendence, another with pictures of puppies .... "What", Steve exclaimed as he noticed what seemed out of order, "I can understand why you have the puppy book, but what on Earth are you doing with the Kung Fu books?" Steve exclaimed.

Sensei Mike laughed. He said "One day, in order to become the true Master of yourself, you will have to grasp the essence of the Five Ancestors of Shaolin and learn the real Kung Fu. You might consider going to China in the same way our spiritual fathers of Gōjū-ryū did over one hundred years ago." Steve was confused, he thought nothing could ever be better than Gōjū-ryū. Sensei Mike made it clear that a true warrior is simply on a path to enlightenment. A warrior must master himself and a pilgrimage to China under the tutelage of a great master would fill any gaps in the warrior's development. Sensei Mike reminded Steve he would need to learn more under the Okinawan greats first and he would know when he would be ready to receive the path to China.

Steve was flabbergasted. For the first time he saw Sensei Mike in a new light. He asked him: "Have you been to China and, errr, completed your path?" Sensei Mike replied: , "My sensei said, a person never completes his path and, if they're lucky, they might receive clues about their destiny and truly righteous path. Anyway, enough about that. My path was cut short a few years ago and maybe I've lost my chance to find it in this life!" Steve needed to know why and demanded answers. Sensei was his hero and he couldn't fathom why he hadn't

pursued the path with the same determination he'd shown through every utterance and action since Steve had met him.

Steve saw Sensei Mike change in that moment. He wasn't the superhuman Steve looked up to and aspired to become. He was normal and not unlike his own father. Just another man trying to make sense of the world. Sensei looked older and less assured in that moment. As if some memory was taunting him and running its blade across him, just enough to draw blood. At any point, the blade would surely kill him. Sensei Mike said, "Yeah okay, I'll explain why, but first we must drink tea."

Sensei brought the tea into the room and looked extremely sombre. Following etiquette was not difficult for Steve. Sensei Mike had already shared the necessary rituals with the senior students in his classes. Knowing when to bow, when to consume the traditional sweets served with the tea, how to pick up the bowl, which hand to use when placing the bowl and the precise ninety degrees clockwise turn of the bowl. The occasion was extremely serious and poignant precisely until Steve realised Sensei Mike was wearing a T-Shirt emblazoned with the cutest little puppies you could ever see. He couldn't believe he hadn't noticed it before. Perhaps it was the solemnity of the occasion or merely because he was actually inside his Sensei's home. It wasn't often he would joke with his Sensei, but seeing this huge man with his long red hair, muscles, vascularity and exquisite tattoos juxtaposed against the cutest puppy T-Shirt one could possibly imagine - well, it was too much for Steve! He laughed out loud and almost dropped his tea. Sensei immediately understood why Steve was laughing and briefly smirked as he washed the tea utensils and returned them to their appropriate place.

Having concluded the ceremony, Sensei asked Steve if he liked his T-Shirt and whether everyone should wear them to Karate classes from now instead of their Gi. Steve wasn't used to Sensei being humorous and began to wonder if he had offended him. He apologised, "I'm sorry Sensei, it's a cool T-shirt but I think it's probably best if it is only worn at home, I think it would probably be better if we just keep wearing our Gi at the dojo." Sensei Mike laughed louder at Steve's serious reply and said "Perhaps this would be better." He took off his T-Shirt and it was as though the room shrank and Sensei Mike grew in every direction. The full picture of his tattoos was revealed for the first time to Steve. His body was in fact a work of art, tattoos full of intricacies, exquisite colours and, on the middle of his chest, that tattoo of a severed head with a knife in its mouth. It was utterly gruesome, offensive, frightening and yet Steve couldn't look away from it. He was gobsmacked. It felt like minutes before anything was said.

Sensei Mike broke the shock of silence in the room,

*"You've seen some of my tattoos before and now you see the rest. You asked earlier about my path. I haven't told anyone before but I might as well confess to you, my best student, in the hope you never make the same mistakes and learn from my tragedy. These tattoos are my Japan. They are my pinnacle, my regret, my love, my despair, my brother, my enemy, my shame, my destiny, my failure, my direction, my undoing, my win, my loss .... my life.*

*"I was lost before Japan found me. I was like you before I went to war - eager, optimistic and full of determination. But the war changed me. I did terrible things in the name of war and I lost myself in Vietnam. I couldn't accept what I did in the name of a war I didn't need to be*

*part of. I came back to Australia and was hated for it by the people I cared about. The country rejected me and I just left it all behind. Karate was once my only source of joy so I thought I could go to Japan and try to find some happiness. I did, for a while. It was idyllic in so many ways. Okinawa was beautiful and uncomplicated. My Sensei was amazing, a diligent and thoughtful man. He mastered the gentle way and found his path.*

*“I had a training partner, Hiro, and although we didn’t have much in common to begin with, we both honed our art together and became the closest of friends. Hiro was as tall as me with a lean physique. Whatever extra strength and muscularity I had to my advantage, he countered with speed and grace. He was so charismatic, liked and feared in equal proportions. He could have been anything with his charming demeanour and intelligence but he was always attracted to the dark side. His associates or friends never seemed to look appropriate around him. When I arrived, I think he enjoyed the temporary change of scenery in his life. He enjoyed the purity of our training and our idealistic pursuits during those times. I’m sure they were an uplifting distraction at a formative time in his life.*

*“He introduced me to his sister, Chiasa, and I fell for her the moment I saw her. He told me how they were left to fend for themselves from an early age as their parents died in a car accident when they were young. He grew to love me as a brother but told me he could never accept me as a brother in law. Too many Japanese conventions would be violated and his sense of honour forbade it. Love being love, I had no choice but to pursue Chiasa. Her name meant “a thousand mornings” and every day I saw her it was a blessing in my life. I felt if I could have those thousand mornings with her, all my past would be washed away and replaced with her gentle beauty and warmth.*

*“Hiro and I progressed through our ranks at precisely the same pace. We were training partners and brothers in our Gōjū-ryū family. My secret from my dear brother was the love that was blossoming between Chiasa and myself. I was willing to do anything to endear myself to my brother Hiro. I thought that time would be my friend and he would accept me as his brother in law. He would call me in the middle of the night and ask me to help him drop off some boxes. I would help without question. Sometimes we needed to sort out some lowlife thugs who were harassing some important people of Okinawa. I did all of this without question. Nothing was questioned. I thought he would understand that I was necessary in his life and his sister would be blessed to have me as a husband.*

*“By this stage we were both extremely competent in our martial arts. I was the fittest I’d ever been and we were both so finely tuned with each other’s abilities that nobody dared to question us on our beloved Okinawan island. It was then that Hiro introduced me to Kumicho. It didn’t take me long to figure out we were already serving him and he was the leader of the most powerful Okinawan Yakuza. I knew precisely what was happening and I was powerless to stop it, I was being inducted into this mob of gangsters with my brother Hiro. I just could not disappoint Hiro, I was almost ready to ask him if I could marry his sister again. But it just wasn’t the time to create any new tensions. I gave myself to Kumicho willingly.*

*“The same feelings of war dread started to enter my spirit. I had almost forgotten how damaged I was thanks to the warm love of Chiasa. I did terrible things to undeserving people and it seemed my body wore the mark of all of those terrible deeds. Each time I thought my*

*shame couldn't be worse, I was rewarded with another tattoo. My body became a diary documenting my atrocities. By the time this severed head, the Namakubi, was tattooed on my chest I was the same war machine I was back in Vietnam and my karma was permanently damaged. Yet this beautiful woman still loved me, she believed in my goodness, she welcomed me and washed my soul time and time again.*

*“My Sensei was less forgiving. He saw me for the man I had become (again) and it was not long before both Hiro and I were banished from the dojo in the most degrading way. We were both stripped of our fifth dan grades and our names were wiped from all records held at the dojo.*

*“As anyone who knows the ways of the Yakuza, my devotion to Kumicho was absolute, I had no choice. Nothing was more important than Kumicho and everything else was secondary in comparison to Kumicho. I was resourceful, capable and useful as a foreigner in my often specialised role within my clan. Hiro and I became quite important within the clan and we both had managed to retain all of our fingers, such was our strict devotion to Kumicho. Others in our clan were less lucky. Offending Kumicho was a grave matter and surrendering a finger or two was often necessary for atonement and to affirm loyalty.*

*“My world crashed around me when I was ordered to kill my Sensei. My Sensei had been causing problems for Kumicho by undermining his authority in the region and making the drug issues on my beloved island prominent to the local government. That lovely man who showed me the beauty in our martial art. The man who showed how a pure life can create*

*harmony and positive energy with the power to heal. I knew I couldn't do it but I bowed without hesitation to Kumicho.*

*"What would I do? I'd call Hiro and tell him. I thought I would have his support and we would work out a solution. If I was truthful to myself, Hiro and I were not as close as before. We were both capable men who did terrible things. I was doing things I wasn't proud of but I was robotic in comparison with Hiro. He seemed to relish the power and pain he inflicted on the recipients of his poisonous ways. We were equals in our Karate but he had surpassed me in his desire to inflict misery and seemed to grow with every act of evil.*

*"I was shocked with his reaction. I was sure he'd support me. Our Sensei used to be a breath of fresh air in both of our lives and always tried to shine the light on our paths. I was positive he'd understand why I couldn't do this. Instead Hiro grabbed me and questioned my allegiance to Kumicho. He pulled me close and spoke in the old Okinawan language when he told me he would kill both me and Sensei if I couldn't do it. He said 'because we are friends and brothers, I will pretend you didn't disrespect Kumicho. Just do it and don't question Kumicho's authority again! That old man deserves to die for what he took away from us anyway.'*

*"I knew I wasn't going to do it. I wanted to leave, I needed to warn Sensei and I needed to hurry Chiasa away from this madness. I rushed to Chiasa and told her my intentions. My sweet love wept so deeply. She was ready to flee with me but she knew she would never be able to see her beloved brother again. I went and gathered a few necessities and took Chiasa with me to warn Sensei. I was uneasy, something wasn't right. If I searched a moment longer*

*within myself, I would have known Hiro was tracing my every step. When I reached my dojo, my Sensei was standing alone in the middle of the dojo looking calm and peaceful as always. It gave me a warm feeling of comfort just being in his presence again. I was holding Chiasa's hand and pulling her along with me as we were running inside. I managed to quickly bow as I crossed the threshold to the dojo and, as I raised my head, I was horrified to see Hiro was already there with a gun pointing at our Sensei. Hiro looked crazed, his eyes were black and his voice was screeching as he spoke in a combination of old Okinawan and Japanese and every word was nothing more than hatred and pure evil. I knew that look, war had taught me one thing, this man was too far gone and somebody was going to die that day. I shouted at Hiro to draw his attention to me and hopefully stop those possessed demonic ramblings of his. He turned his pistol towards me and Sensei began to whisper to Hiro. It was a whisper but it was as though he was summoning the wind around him. We were all inside this vortex and Sensei drew the attention of Hiro once again. The gentleness had left his eyes and was replaced with a look I had never seen on his face before. In fact, it was a look I had never seen anywhere before. His gaze was fixed upon Hiro and it felt like he grabbed us all by our souls when he commanded Hiro with his deep whispers .... 'Hiroooo, today you choose to show yourself? Today you get to decide? People who love you must see the path you choose for yourself? Who is your master, Hiro? Who will you kill first? I am ready to die, but are you ready to kill? Leave now and find your true and just path.'*

*"The whispered vortex shook me also and I felt my own guilt well up within while Hiro's ramblings also ceased. Perhaps he also felt guilty for a moment. This man had shown us nothing but compassion and gave himself willingly to us. And this was his reward? But Hiro managed to collect his thoughts, he stepped forward towards Sensei and fired. In the same*



*instance, Sensei whispered something incoherent and performed what was the simplest move in our style and the vortex seemed to amplify and somehow the impossible happened. The bullet missed Sensei. Hiro seemed as surprised as myself and Chiasa were. I launched myself at Hiro and managed to kick the gun from his hand. We fought for an eternity. He was faster before, when he was training every day and wasn't drinking as much, and I managed to find him a few times. I was always a bit stronger than Hiro but his rage helped balance the ledger this time. I had never seen him like this before. I attempted a take down so I could control him and talk to him yet again, but he managed to evade me and jumped completely over me to reach Sensei's family sword. A beautiful and deadly heirloom which had been in his family for more than 400 years.*

*"Chiasa ran crying and pleading towards Hiro and I ran to pull her back. My arms managed to wrap around Chiasa and I started pulling her back. Hiro turned around with the blade in his hand looking at me with blind rage. He didn't even see his sister in front of me as he moved forward. Before he realised, the blade had pierced his sister through her heart and pierced my lung.*

*I fell to the ground on my back with my beautiful Chiasa lying on top of me as she drew her last breath with Sensei's sword lodged in both our bodies. I don't remember what happened after this. But I vaguely recall the whispering vortex and Hiro's shrieks as my world faded.*

*"I was hidden away in recovery when Sensei came to see me. My lung was doing fine but my spirit was broken. Sensei had been checking on me for weeks, he would place his hands on my chest and whisper words I never could quite understand. I could feel his purity of spirit*

*enter me through his hands, it humbled and shamed me. He told me he had tried to summon Luohan (one of the Shaolin Kung Fu Five Ancestors) to counter Hiro's demonic rage. Sensei was despondent and equally inconsolable about the death of Chiasa as I was but he also felt the same about Hiro. He said, 'I have not fully mastered the Luohan and I'm sure I damaged Hiro during the summoning. And I am damaged now also. They are inside me and are growing. I feel them.' None of this made sense to me and none of it mattered. All of my clan would try to kill me and there was nothing keeping me there. I soon left Japan. Perhaps now you understand more about why I lost the path and why I can never return there to finish my training."*

Steve was not ready to hear his Sensei's life story. It was too much. Yakuza, Luohan, Chiasa, Hiro .... Whispering Vortex??? It was all too much for him and he remained speechless. Sensei Mike said, "That's enough for one day and maybe a lifetime! Steve, your first real test is tomorrow at the tournament and it's time for one last thing before you should go home and rest." Sensei Mike walked over to the kitchen benchtop and returned with a large envelope and gave it to Steve. "What's this?" Steve asked. Sensei Mike looked quite serious and said, "Well, it's definitely nothing to worry about, please open it now." Steve carefully opened the envelope and extracted the contents. A very official document or certificate written entirely in Japanese, an airplane ticket to Japan and another smaller envelope addressed in Japanese. Steve could recognise a few characters but none of it made sense. He asked his Sensei what it all meant.

Sensei Mike said, "Steve, I've never had a student like you and I have never seen someone with your ability to learn such concepts with the ease you have shown. Your path must

continue in Okinawa. You must find my Sensei and beg for his instruction. The small envelope contains a letter to my Sensei pleading for him to accept you. I have also given you a certificate for your grade. Please show it to my Sensei. It means nothing in terms of your formal level. In fact, it is a certificate confirming I have nothing else to teach you. You have learned all I have and taken my best instructions, I am honoured to have you as my student and I know you will be a great man in the future. You've helped me cleanse my spirit. I'm finally ready to try again to find my path. I am very grateful to you for this. I will organise my affairs here and then go to China and try to find the way of the Five Ancestors.

“Steve, If you want to wait and go to Japan after University, I understand and we can change the ticket. But I just think now is your time while you have such momentum in your training. My suggestion is for you to go as soon as possible. I expect you will win the tournament tomorrow. I'd almost prefer it if you lose because you might learn something in the process, but I can't imagine anyone equal to your ability. Please go home and rest and be ready for some fun tomorrow! Actually, there's no way I want you to lose! Oh, and take this Daruma doll for good luck and perseverance.”

Steve bowed deeply to his Sensei before accepting the gifts but Sensei Mike would have none of it. He hugged Steve and they both thanked each other. Steve had no idea why Sensei Mike thanked him but he did notice a lightness in his master that he had never seen before. Steve ran home without even touching the ground.

This night was a revelation. Steve had absolutely no chance of sleeping that night. There was a whole new dimension to Sensei Mike that Steve could never have imagined. There was a

future in Japan that Steve had not anticipated. Numerous thoughts played through Steve's mind, "How can I leave my father alone? How can I leave my friends and dojo brothers? But Sensei Mike believes in me and says now is the best time! Let me think about it after I win the tournament! But I want to go! But Dad?"

## Chapter Three - The Tournament

It was 6:00AM, Steve had barely slept all night. So many thoughts competed for attention. Sensei Mike's tragedies, the upcoming fights, Japan .... too much to think about and he needed to focus. His uniform, mouthguard and groin guard were ready. Most importantly, his Walkman had fresh batteries and his favourite mixtape was ready. It was 1987 but Steve was still lost somewhere in the 1970s with his choice of music. From Deep Purple to Led Zeppelin to Black Sabbath and Free, if there wasn't a guitar tearing it apart with some wicked licks out of a Marshall stack, then it surely wasn't worth listening to! He did make one concession to the 1980's though, a new band called Guns & Roses had taken the world by storm and he could feel the adrenaline rushing every time he heard the guitar solo in Sweet Child O' Mine. The mixtape was masterfully created and no matter where the tape was up to, a blistering guitar solo was always nearby and ready to prime Steve for a fight!

Steve's father usually slept in on Saturday mornings. His working week was tough and he usually needed the entire weekend to recover. But he was also awake on this occasion. Steve sat down with his father and told him about some of the things Sensei Mike had done. He was careful about what he told his father. Steve's Dad didn't like men with tattoos, he thought they were all criminals. And he certainly didn't like anyone who had that much influence over his son. But he had a healthy respect for Sensei Mike. He saw how his son had transformed under his tutelage. Steve wasn't ready to tell his father about Japan. He thought perhaps after he won the tournament his father would see his son's potential and let him pursue his dream.

Steve's father talked about some fights he had in his youth, "It wasn't easy coming to Australia back in my days. I was picked on because I couldn't speak the language when I first got here. But I didn't take any shit from anyone, even as a kid." He was convinced the mountains made him strong back in Macedonia. He never lost a fight. He looked Steve in the eyes and said "I don't know what that tattooed hippie has taught you, but listen to me, you've got my blood and you're as strong as a bull. Control their balance and keep hitting them until you only see the white of their eyes!" Steve couldn't actually disagree with his father's approach. He thought to himself, "Sensei Mike always talked about taking away the opponent's balance. Everyone's on the same page today. It's gonna be a great day!"

Steve and his father could barely eat. A bit of toast and some juice. Steve's dad insisted on a drink together before they left. The drink was a Macedonian staple called Rakija. It probably wrecked more lives in the Balkans than any war in the region. They toasted to each other's health "Na Zdravye" and Steve's dad smiled and shouted "Stefo Tsareto" or Steven the (little) King! The liquid fire burned Steve all the way down and, according to his father, he was finally ready for battle. Steve hated the alcohol, but he enjoyed bonding with his father.

With his Walkman playing his favourite music and his Dad driving, Steve could feel the adrenaline pumping through his body. He was completely ready to fight! Ritchie Blackmore, Jimmy Page, Tony Iommi, Paul Kossoff and Slash all agreed. Their guitar playing was the soundtrack for the mayhem Steve was about to unleash on his opponents.

They arrived and quickly found Sensei Mike and proceeded to the registration area. The tournament organisers had a problem. This was an adult's tournament and Steve would not turn eighteen until a few days after the tournament. Technically he was underage and he would need authority from a parent or guardian in order to fight. That was solved quickly as Steve's father authorised his son. There wasn't much else to do but get ready to fight!

Numerous martial arts clubs representing all styles from all around Australia gathered in their groups around the stadium. There were more than two hundred fighters registered for the event. Formalities were completed quickly and it wasn't long before the fighting was ready to begin. Steve had a couple of his club brothers who were also competing and they all sat together with Sensei Mike wondering who they might face in the first round.

A late arrival entered the stadium. It was a group of ten fighters all dressed in black and their trainer who was wearing a hooded top and sunglasses. They were all noticeably muscular, with one even more muscular fighter who was as tall as his hooded trainer. Compared to the others in the stadium, they looked infinitely more serious! Even Sensei Mike seemed to reposition himself trying to get a look at them. Steve managed to read their club symbol. A simple Kanji character meaning Sakura or cherry blossom. Steve, perhaps to comfort himself and his team, said "Look at those losers, other teams are called Karate Warriors and Kung Fu Dragons and Taekwondo Knights, and those guys in black are the Cherry Blossoms, hahaha." Sensei Mike quickly changed the mood and reminded everyone, "Cherry blossoms are a very powerful symbol to the Japanese. They symbolise many things but often mean 'Life is short' and have a whole lot more meaning than some of those other silly names." He pulled up his sleeve to remind his team of the cherry blossoms tattooed on his arm. The black team was

already in Steve's head and Steve's father also noticed them and pointed them out to Steve with a simple raise of his eyebrows and tilt of his head toward them.

Three of Sensei Mike's team were to fight and, as luck would have it, Jake was in the very first fight. Jake was almost Sensei Mike's age and had practiced other martial arts before starting with Sensei Mike. He was a strong man and good fighter but sometimes he would lapse back into his older styles which were inferior to Sensei's style. He was up against one of the Cherry Blossoms! Steve and Sensei Mike were both eager to see how the "Cherry" style would measure against their style. Judges sat in each corner of the designated fight area. They held two flags of colours which matched the belts given to each contestant. Jake was given a blue belt to wear and the "cherry" was given a red belt. The referee in the middle gave clear instructions;

*"This is full contact, no gloves are worn, kicking to the head is allowed but punches to the head are not, no kicks to the groin and fighting must stop as soon as the referee yells stop. You will fight two 4 minute rounds with a 1 minute break in between. "*

The fighters understood and bowed to the referee and took their positions. The referee instructed the fighters to bow to each other. Jake assumed the normal bow and his opponent who was simply called "Cherry Blossom 7" did an unusual bow. He was already in his fighting stance but his bow was nothing more than a momentary drop of his hands to his sides while lowering his head. His eyes never left Jake. The referee ordered the fight to begin and Jake was amazing. He charged forward with a perfect front kick which crashed through "Cherry 7's" defences which seemed to surprise him. He bounced right out of the designated area and the judges in the corners held up the blue flags to unanimously award Jake the point.



Jake's entire team was elated and even Sensei Mike seemed to look a little more relaxed. The fighters were brought back to their starting positions and ordered to fight again. Jake attempted the same front kick and this time Cherry 7 simply moved to the side and did a roundhouse kick straight to Jake's head. The judges all raised their red flags to acknowledge the point. Jake was a strong man and he managed to stay upright but he looked a little shaky. At that point, Cherry 7 was well aware of Jake's condition and proceeded to pummel him with a fury of punches. Jake seemed to lapse back into his old styles and lost the ability to absorb and deflect. The fight finished quickly, Cherry 7 prevailed and was awarded the win when Jake could no longer continue.

Jake returned to the group and apologised to his entire team. He knew he let the team down. Sensei Mike comforted Jake briefly and said "You did well in the beginning Jake, that fighter was very good. Don't be too hard on yourself, learn from this." Jake was despondent and the team definitely lost a little enthusiasm and confidence for a few minutes. Steve put his headphones back on and tried to regain his focus. It didn't help seeing the Cherry Blossoms dominating the ensuing fights.

Soon enough it was Max's turn. He was an excellent fighter. He only started training one year earlier and was showing great promise. He was a Polish boy from the same neighbourhood as Steve. Even though he was a couple of years older than Steve, he was Steve's younger brother in the dojo. They got on very well, even outside of the dojo. The Polish and Macedonian boys were often surprised to learn their languages shared many similar words. Steve would jokingly call Max the "Crazy German" when he wanted to annoy him during

sparring sessions. Nobody understood better than Steve how upsetting it was to have doubt thrown at you about your own identity.

Max's kata was not so well developed and Steve wondered if Max's fighting form would hold up when placed under pressure. He needn't have worried. He was fighting against one of the "Karate Warrior" fighters. The fight went the full two rounds only because Max was enjoying it too much. His skills were far too advanced for his opponent. Even though he had only been training for one year, he fought like a seasoned professional. He finished the fight without even a scratch. Sensei Mike, surprisingly, was not completely pleased with Max's effort. He said "you wasted techniques on your opponent and you were lucky he wasn't fitter. If you started to get tired, he might have actually had a chance to beat you." He still patted him on the back and said "Well done though, a very good effort, especially for someone who has only trained for one year!" Steve was ecstatic for his "Crazy Polak" dojo brother.

They were all sitting together in a group when a Cherry Blossom fighter was up. He was Cherry Blossom 1 and he was scheduled to fight against one of the Taekwondo fighters. Both were tall men and looked equally matched in muscularity. This fight was going to be fun! The fight started and the Taekwondo guy was amazing. He jumped in the air and completed a perfect spinning kick. For any martial artist, it was a delight to watch. His foot landed perfectly on Cherry 1's face and knocked him straight on top of one of the corner judges. The chair broke into pieces and the judge needed some medical attention. Cherry 1 didn't look too bad after the hit. In fact he looked the same as before the fight started. He was menacing. The Cherry Blossom trainer moved out of the shadows for a moment and motioned over to Cherry 1 to whisper in his ear. It was still impossible to get a good look at the trainer and it started to

irk Sensei Mike a little. He thought it was somewhat disrespectful to be covering his head and wearing sunglasses inside the stadium. The fight was ready to start again. The referee started the fight and the Taekwondo guy went straight in for another kick. He chose to deploy a roundhouse kick. Cherry 1 immediately stepped in towards his opponent, blocked the kick as if to swat a fly and punched his opponent in the chest. It didn't look particularly amazing but everyone in the stadium heard the hit. The reaction was immense. He seemed to knock the will to fight out of his opponent. He dropped to the ground clutching his chest and, unable to breathe, he was carried off on a stretcher to the medical room for attention. Cherry 1 proceeded to the next round.

After a few more fights it was Steve's turn and, if normal people had butterflies in their stomachs when they were nervous, then Steve had an entire butterfly farm inside his stomach. He had so much nervous energy and Sensei Mike grabbed him to help him centre himself. He said "Steve, this is just another lesson, you'll be fine. Just don't stray from our way. If you follow what I've taught you, you'll be fine. The other guys didn't follow our way fully. I know you will."

Steve was up against a Cherry Blossom. Cherry Blossom 2 was almost as big as Cherry 1. Jake and Max both encouraged Steve to finish him fast. Steve was impressed with every single one of the Cherry Blossoms. They were militant in the way they dealt with their opponents. The precision and power they displayed looked like they were trained by Sensei Mike himself! Steve managed to squeeze in a quick listen to one more inspirational guitar solo by Ritchie Blackmore of Deep Purple and had "Smoke on the Water" playing in his head before making his way to the fight area. Sensei Mike walked with him and Steve saw his

father following closely behind his Sensei. Steve said “Dad, I’m not sure if you’re allowed to come to the fight area. I think it’s only for the fighters and instructors.” His father surveyed the area and looked at Sensei Mike and said “Son, I’m pretty sure nobody would dare try to stop me!” Sensei Mike smiled and seemed to enjoy the obvious love and connection between father and son.

Cherry 2 was closely followed by his hooded trainer. It looked as if his trainer was floating next to him and whispering instructions. Previously the trainer always stayed back away from his fighters and away from the strong lights, but this time it seemed as though he also wanted to be part of the fight! Sensei Mike noticed this also and seemed to grow increasingly uneasy and Steve was feeling the tension from every angle.

It was time to fight. Steve had been training so hard and Gōjū-ryū had been his waking thought every day since he started .... and that was after dreaming about it every night! Steve lined up and Cherry 2 faced him with a menacing glare. Steve, in contrast, returned a humble look and what may have even been a hint of a smile. There was no point in giving his opponent any indication of his intent. If Cherry 2 knew Steve’s intent, he would have long gone out of the stadium already! They bowed to the referee and then to each other. Cherry 2 didn’t even lower his arms from his fighting stance, he just bowed his head ever so slightly at Steve as if only to comply but certainly not respect the rules.

The fight started and Steve unleashed in a way that shocked everyone in his club, including Sensei Mike. They had never seen such ferocity in Steve before. Steve was always kind and respectful in the club. He meted out his attacks with precision and humility in the dojo. There

was no point in getting angry with his fellow students and there certainly wasn't ever going to be any sign of disrespect to Sensei Mike. But the fight was different, Steve allowed himself to unleash that power within him. He charged forward with nothing more than a simple sidekick but his kiai, the short shout made during an attacking move, created a virtual tidal wave. A normal kiai would come from the diaphragm and attempt to connect the martial artist's energy to his technique. In this case, it seemed to come from somewhere even deeper and everybody in the entire stadium reacted to it. Steve even looked like he was riding on that tidal wave when he kicked Cherry 2. Steve's opponent didn't just fall backwards. He was propelled into the stadium seating where all the spectators were. The referee stopped the fight and waited to see if Cherry 2 could come back to the contest. He was helped back into the arena and looked pale, yet stable enough. The referee gestured in a way to indicate the fighters should return to their starting positions. Steve turned away from his opponent and, at precisely the same time, he heard the Cherry trainer spitting words he actually understood from Sensei Mike. These were some old Okinawan words that Sensei would joke and say when they were sparring together. But in this case, they sounded utterly evil and almost demonic. Before he realised what was happening, he heard a shriek and felt a slap to the side of his face and he couldn't see out of one eye. His opponent had attacked him from behind, before the fight had even recommenced. It was highly illegal and all the corner judges immediately thrust both flags in the air in a crossed formation. Cherry 2 was disqualified for his action.

Meanwhile, Steve was on the ground cupping his eye with his hand. The audience started to boo him, they thought perhaps he was dramatising the event a little too much. He stood up with his hand over his eye to see the audience turn on him. By that stage he had collected his

thoughts and the pain had subsided. He removed his hand covering his eye and then became increasingly concerned after the audience's boos and hisses turned into oohs and ahhs. He saw all the blood in his hand and realised his face was covered in blood. His eyebrow had been split apart.

He was taken to the medics immediately. They laid him down and cleaned up the wound. He heard two people nearby talking and one said stitches would be required. He then heard another say he wouldn't be allowed to fight if he had stitches. Steve screamed "no stitches, no stitches!" He needed to fight and redeem himself! The medics had a solution, they taped the wound together and bandaged him up and said he would be able to continue to fight.

Steve was truly devastated. He had too much to prove and wasn't allowed the chance to show his sensei and his father how strong and capable he was. The combination of adrenaline and shock and disappointment was too much for him. He couldn't return to his group and he couldn't even look at his father. He felt ashamed. He shouldn't have turned away from his opponent and he should have understood that trainer's hateful intent immediately.

He sat quietly in the auditorium and quietly cried to himself for a moment. He couldn't understand why he was feeling so bad. The last time he felt so bad and empty inside was when his mother died. Such a long time ago. It was almost as terrible to him and he couldn't understand why.

A little girl whom he hadn't even noticed before poked him in the leg. She was sitting on his right hand side next to him. She asked him "What's wrong, why are you crying?" Steve

looked at her, initially he saw only the left side of her face and remarked to himself “So cute, she looks like a little angel!” She had blond hair and was tiny and her voice sounded like a little bird to Steve. He summoned a smile and said “Oh forget it, I’m just a little upset with myself, I should’ve done better and I shouldn’t be injured now and I think I let everyone down .....” So many words fell out of Steve’s mouth. The little girl kept poking at his leg and Steve stopped. She said “Listen, I saw you fight and you looked so strong. Everyone said you looked like you would win the entire tournament. You have no reason to cry. I cried for years when this happened to me.” She turned her face fully towards Steve and showed her burn marks on her face. It almost looked like she had been branded. The entire right hand side was disfigured and certainly not pretty as on her left side.

She continued, “I cried because this really hurt, my whole family cried because they couldn’t help me. I was trying to help my family and I got burned. It really hurt a lot. It still hurts. So I don’t think you should cry. I think you should be proud of how strong you were in that battle of good versus evil. And I think the people that love you will cry if you cry. So please stop. I’ve always thought .... I mean, I think you’re going to be great!” Steve was so humbled and he felt completely elevated from his physical self for a brief moment. He had grasped this little girl’s true beauty. Something that would last forever in his mind. He told her she was right and thanked her profusely. The last time he felt so comforted was when his mother was still alive. It felt exactly the same as his mother’s warm words of encouragement when he was a child. It was so beautiful that it felt like they were in a bubble of serenity for an eternity, even though it was no more than a minute. She helped him more than perhaps she even realised. He asked her name, she said “I am Temyana and I can’t wait to see you win this tournament!” Steve was genuinely pleased to meet this little angel. He said goodbye and

started heading back. He turned around looking for little Temyana and she was already gone. He went to his father, sensei and teammates and they welcomed him warmly. They told him how amazing his kick was and they had never seen him show so much ferocity. Steve felt so grateful to that little girl and kept turning around to find her in the audience but could never spot her.

The Cherry Blossoms were either winning or cheating (or both) and they were the ones to fear on a number of levels. Cherry 1 had won two more fights with nothing more than a punch in each of them. Steve had never seen such a display of power like that before.

Steve and Max completed a couple more fights each against some other Karate clubs from interstate and managed to win easily. They were not wasteful with their techniques and didn't receive any injuries. Sensei Mike looked much more pleased with his students.

Later in the afternoon, it was Max's turn again. This time he had to face a Cherry Blossom. Cherry Blossom 5 had been technically fighting within the rules but he wasn't doing it within the spirit of the event. None of the Cherry Blossoms were likeable but Cherry 5 was particularly despicable. He would aim at the joints of his opponents and try to break them at every opportunity. The fight started and Max had the perfect reply to every one of Cherry 5's attacks. Max saw a chance and went in with a sweep to Cherry 5's leg. It was so powerful. Cherry 5 immediately shrieked and held his knee. He was hurt and it was a shame the round had finished because Max would have had a chance to really finish him off.



During the break between the rounds, Sensei Mike was rubbing Max's legs and keeping him motivated. He told Max what a great job he was doing and how he couldn't fault his fighting in this fight. Cherry 5 now had a weakness, his left leg was going to be a problem for him and Max knew he must take advantage of that.

Steve didn't take his eyes away from Cherry 5 and his trainer. The trainer looked like a bat flapping its wings around Cherry 5. He looked angry and it was obvious he wasn't encouraging his student at all. He was admonishing him and he even slapped him across the face. It was disgusting to watch and Steve *almost* felt sorry for Cherry 5. Steve noticed something quite odd. The trainer reached inside Cherry 5's Gi and it looked as though he gave him something. Steve ran over to Max and Sensei Mike and warned them. He wanted Max to know that his opponent might do something illegal and to be ready for anything!

Cherry 5 limped to his fighting mark and Max the Crazy Polak bounced to his mark. Round 2 started and Max immediately went for Cherry 5's injured leg. Cherry 5 sidestepped effectively and managed to hit Max with a few punches. But Max's skills were nothing short of sensational, he intercepted the strikes, performed a takedown of his opponent and then slammed him on the ground. Cherry 5 held on to him and Max was almost on top of him. The referee ordered a stop to the fight and went to separate Max from Cherry 5 and, at the same time, Max let out a scream. He stood up and his eyes were bleeding and his mouth was frothing. Steve saw Cherry 5 put his hand inside his Gi as though he was returning something there. Steve lost all his sensibilities and ran into the fighting area to protect his brother and with a blind rage, he grabbed Cherry 5. He tried to reach inside Cherry 5's Gi to see what he used to make Max so violently ill. While this was happening he heard the same hissing in the

old Okinawan as previously. Cherry 1 stepped forward and tried to grab Steve. Steve was much more ready this time and easily evaded Cherry 1's attempts to grab him.

Cherry 1 came back at Steve but Steve's father had already arrived. He grabbed Steve and pulled him back behind him. He glared at every Blossom with particular attention to the trainer and Cherry 1. Sensei Mike let the medics take over looking after Max and turned his attention to Steve's father. He knew that look, he knew what a strong and angry man was capable of doing and quickly stepped next to him ready for anything. The referee and a few other officials entered the area and quickly diffused the tension. The corner judges congregated and made their decision. Cherry 5 was disqualified, Max was awarded the win and Steve was issued a stern warning.

It was indeed a Pyrrhic victory for Max, he won the fight but would not be able to continue fighting. His vision was blurry and the poison he was given seemed to drain his energy. Sensei Mike thought it was best for Max to go to hospital. Even though he could barely see and he was slumped over his chair, he flatly refused "No way in the world am I leaving, Sensei. I'm not going anywhere while those sons of bitches are here," he said. It was abundantly clear Max was not going anywhere. It was less clear why the officials had not noticed the full extent of the Cherry team's skullduggery. It seemed the only ones who could grasp the magnitude of their mischief were the fighters and trainers who had faced the Cherry Blossoms.

In no time, there were only four competitors left and Steve was one of them. He was eager to learn who he would be fighting. By that stage, everybody was a good fighter and had

something unique that enabled them to reach the semi-finals. Cherry 1 was there, as expected, and so were two other competent fighters. One was from the Kung Fu Dragons and the other from a very unique Indonesian style called Pencak Silat. Every one of them were very good fighters and Steve knew he couldn't take any of these fighters lightly. They deserved his respect and he would need his best abilities to win.

Steve was up against the Kung Fu Dragon and the Blossom would be fighting the Silat guy. Everybody used to joke about the Kung Fu fighters. They would call them the Bean Curds! Bean Curd can look like polished stone, so solid and hard. But slapping it will cause it to disintegrate. Well, that was the case with many of the earlier fighters in the tournament, but this guy was different. He was so light on his feet and almost elegant in the way he won his fights. Sensei Mike was quick to instruct Steve about him. "This guy knows the soft way, but he can hit also, don't let him get you off balance."

Steve spent the previous two years thinking nothing was better than his style and, much to his genuine surprise, he saw other fighters who were actually quite amazing. Deep down Steve remained sure his style was the best, but the world seemed a little bigger than it had before the tournament.

Steve and the Dragon would be fighting first. Sensei Mike was pleased and reminded Steve he would have more time to recover for the grand final. Steve was happy with that information but then thought to himself, "Yeah, well, I still gotta win this fight first!"

The fight started and Steve didn't hesitate, he unleashed his frightening kiai and attempted a front kick against the Dragon. The Dragon barely moved but avoided the kick and, at the same time, managed to push Steve's hip and land a powerful punch to Steve's rib. He got him good! Steve was sore and a little shocked. He moved back to the starting position and managed to glance at both Sensei Mike and his father. He knew and they knew the Dragon had messed with his balance and won that contest. The fight started again and Steve went in for a punch, the Dragon just waved his hand around and managed to control Steve's arm and almost lift him off the ground at the same time. The Dragon then used both hands to bounce Steve out of the fighting area. Another point awarded to the Dragon! He could hear the Blossoms laughing at him. Steve was going crazy, he was not going to lose! Then it occurred to him Sensei Mike would often infuriate him in precisely the same way when they would spar. The more angry Steve became, the stiffer his body became and the easier it was for Sensei Mike to control him. Steve needed to go soft, not harder!

Steve made his way back to the starting position. He didn't dare look at his father or Sensei Mike. At the starting position, Steve took a moment to quickly perform a breathing movement and centre himself. The fight began again and Steve did not initiate an attack this time. He waited for the Dragon. The Dragon moved forward and Steve forced himself to relax. His feet were hanging on to the ground like an eagle holding its prey, but the rest of him was gentle and calm and ready to absorb and deflect. Dragon initiated a flurry of punches and Steve used a round movement with his hands to catch them all as though he was collecting fireflies in a net. He then punched back in combination with one of his powerful kiais. Dragon received the full force of it. He was an excellent fighter but was not ready for Steve's power. Steve kept going, punching and kicking and, mindful of the boundaries of the

fighting area, he made sure he kept the Dragon within the boundary. He would even pull him in sometimes so he wouldn't go outside the boundary. The Dragon instructor threw a towel into the fight and the fight stopped. Steve had won!

Steve admired the Dragon and went over and wished him well. Dragon was very noble in defeat. He said "It was like you became a different fighter. You completely changed styles halfway through the fight. You were better than me. I learned something today and I thank you for this. Good luck!" Steve was humbled by how gracious and polite his adversary was, he thanked him and also thanked Dragon's trainer.

Steve was elated and quickly went back to his team. Sensei Mike said he saw the change and was confident Steve would adapt to defend against Dragon's style. Steve's father looked concerned, he said "How is your rib?" Steve had forgotten about it right up until then. He checked himself and "... ouch, it hurt," he thought to himself. At the same time as he winced, he glanced over at the Blossoms and they were all looking at him. "Oh brilliant, now "FrankenBlossom" is gonna go straight for my injured rib!" Steve said. Sensei Mike reminded Steve that Cherry 1 was going to have to win his fight first.

Cherry 1 and the Pencak Silat guy quickly assembled in the fighting area. The fight looked uneven, Silat was half the size of Cherry 1. It was not going to be good! Silat went over to shake Cherry 1's hand and Cherry 1 just pushed him away and snarled at him. Silat just smiled and went back to his fighting position while everyone in the audience booed Cherry 1. The fight started and Cherry 1 stepped forward and launched one of his trademark punches that had been used so effectively up until then. Silat was amazing, he literally jumped

*towards* that punch and held onto it while he launched both his feet into the midriff of Cherry 1. He looked like an angry monkey and the only thing better than that double kick was the look of shock on Cherry 1's face.

Silat landed gently on his feet crouched down looking like a cobra ready to spit its venom at Cherry 1. Cherry 1 was enraged, he tried to stomp his foot on top of Silat as if to squash a bug. But Silat jumped out of the way again and managed to steal some punches between those tree trunks (arms) of Cherry 1. He was incredible, so light and fast. Steve even began to think about the best strategy he would need to use if he was going to have to fight him! Silat initiated an attack this time, he sprung up from a coiled snake position and aimed his fists at Cherry 1's abdomen. Cherry 1 anticipated the attack. He swatted Silat in an upward motion and his open palm struck Silat to the chest and slid up to his face. Silat looked like he was electrocuted as he flew out of the fighting area. His face was covered in blood as he wearily stood up and made his way back to the start position.

Two corner judges held out their flags to disqualify Cherry 1 for an illegal hit to the face. The fighters waited at their start positions and the judges and referee met together to confer. The referee then advised everyone Cherry 1's hand appeared to slip up towards Silat's face due to the way Silat had moved and therefore it was not illegal. Cherry 1 was awarded the point. Silat looked a little shaky after that hit to the head. Cherry 1 was immensely strong and he usually only needed one good hit to win a fight. Silat was doing very well but Steve began to wonder what would happen after he took that knock. The medics cleaned him up a little and managed to stop his bleeding nose. They allowed the fight to continue as there were no other obvious injuries.

Silat luckily had a little time to recover before the fight recommenced. When the referee ordered the fight to start again, Silat was moving around very well. He managed to evade Cherry 1 every time he made a move towards him. But Silat seemed reluctant to initiate an attack. Perhaps he began to fear being hit like that again. He kept moving around and evading his opponent. Soon it began to be a game for him and the crowd was cheering his evasive abilities. Cherry 1 couldn't seem to get close enough. Finally, with Silat's confidence restored, he became the cobra again. Coiled up and hissing he was preparing for attack! This time Cherry 1 feigned another foot stomp. As soon as Cherry 1 raised his knee, Silat jumped upwards to spit his venom. Cherry 1 dropped his foot to the side and punched downwards with the most evil and guttural kiai. Silat's snakelike hands were no match for this massive display of power. Cherry 1's fist crashed through Silat's defences and crushed through Silat's collarbone snapping it as though it was a piece of chalk. Silat was splayed on the ground in a mess. Everyone heard the crack as Silat was hit and it was clear he wasn't going to get up.

Impressively, Silat stood up immediately. He walked straight to his starting position and assumed a fighting stance. He went to raise his arms and only one arm went up. The referee seemed to be wondering if the fight could continue. Silat managed to stand upright a few more seconds before the adrenaline seemed to wear off. Then he just dropped to the ground and everybody in the stadium (except the Blossoms) sighed with a mixture of concern and disappointment. Cherry 1 had won and it was going to be Cherry 1 versus Steve in the grand final. The Blossoms all seemed to shriek at the same time and looked over at Steve. "They're such an ugly bunch of pricks!" Steve thought to himself, "Especially FrankenBlossom!"

The grand final would be held after the kata and weapon finals. Steve had developed excellent weapon skills under Sensei Mike and his kata were perfect. But the test for Steve was for fighting. He had no desire to compete in the other events.

The events were interesting to watch. Every style had their specialties and some were truly remarkable to watch. Steve couldn't focus on them. His mind remained focused on the impending fight. Cherry 1 was a fierce opponent and Steve was trying to think of what he could do to beat him. "You have an answer for anything he will try on you, you know that, right?" said Sensei Mike. Steve paused and seemed less than confident in that moment. "FrankenBlossom is a beast of a man. But I'll try my best. If I lose, I'll hopefully learn something and if I win, I'll have only you to thank Sensei Mike. In fact, I can't even believe I made it this far. Thank you Sensei Mike, you've changed my life forever. No matter what happens in the next fight, I am so grateful for everything you have done for me." Sensei Mike just patted him on the shoulder and said "Remember, this is just training. Another lesson for you. Losing can sometimes mean you win in the end."

Steve didn't even want to hear the "L" word! He didn't want to hear anyone mention losing again. Of course, Jake and Max were next to come up and congratulate Steve. "You did so well to make it to the final Steve. Don't worry if you lose, FrankenBlossom is a full grown man and you're only seventeen years old! You'd smash that ugly bastard by the time you're twenty-five! It wouldn't even be a competition," said Jake while Max wholeheartedly agreed. Steve was starting to get really annoyed.



Steve's father put one of his strong hands on his shoulder and it strangely seemed to energise him. "Don't forget, you're a lion and if you want to win, it's waiting for you," Steve's father said. They smiled at each other for a brief moment. So many years together and they could just look at each other and understand every word *not* said. Steve grasped all of his father's intent and wishes in that moment. He never wanted anything more than this in his life, he would give it his all.

Steve sat down and put his headphones on. Luckily he brought some extra batteries because he was getting his money's worth out of his Walkman during the tournament. On came Black Sabbath with the song "Sabbath bloody Sabbath". When the guitars came screaming through after a defiant Ozzie Osbourne vocally gave "the finger" to his oppressors in the song, Steve was ready to punch holes through walls .... Maybe even through time dimensions! Losing was not an option. Not at all. He threw off the headphones and started stretching and warming up. He was ready for anything.

The displays and katas had all finished and the fight area was ready. It was time! Sensei Mike asked Steve's Dad to come with him. Sensei Mike knew he had no choice, so he made Steve's dad carry some towels to look official. Steve walked ahead and had almost reached the fight area when he looked up and saw Cherry 1 and his trainer. Steve was horrified, the trainer had pulled down his hood and taken off his sunglasses and his eyes were just plain black and his face was hideous and his hands were long and they looked like claws and his teeth were sharp. He didn't even look human! Steve turned around to see if Sensei Mike and his dad had seen that hideous creature.

Sensei Mike sprinted towards Steve. Steve had never seen his Sensei look so agitated before. Sensei Mike said “Steve, listen to me carefully. I don’t want you to fight. We must leave immediately. We must not, you must not fight. This isn’t right. This can’t ....” Then some wicked amalgam of thunder and whispers emanated from that hideous creature for all to hear. “Brother Mike, you don’t want to play with your brother Hiro? Let us see who made the strongest fighter. Let us see who walks out of here.” Steve understood immediately, this was Hiro, Sensei Mike’s former training partner.

Sensei Mike was pale. He looked sick. Nothing normally phased him, but this wasn’t nothing. This was horror personified. Sensei Mike’s mind was racing. “Is this what my Sensei was talking about? He damaged Hiro when he summoned Luohan? What the hell has Hiro become? A demon?” ... as if his thoughts were interrupted, that hideous creature whispered again. “Yes, brother Mike, I have indeed changed. Maybe I still even have some human in me. I’ve missed you and I want you by my side, the same as before. Let us be together again, I promise you will enjoy it when I make you the same as me!” Sensei Mike grabbed Steve and said “We must go!”

Steve had so much adrenaline racing through him at this point. He wanted to fight and he begged Sensei Mike for the chance. Sensei Mike said “Steve, this is not training now. Please understand, you, all of us, will be fighting for our lives here. We need to get out and make plans ...” He was interrupted. “Son”. Steve’s dad had the most gentle smile as he looked upon Steve, “Son, you are a King with the heart of a lion. Show him who we are. Win the fight and together we will do whatever needs to be done after.” Steve’s dad never looked so huge to him before. He seemed to radiate power and confidence and Steve seemed to be

nourished by it. He looked like a King! Even Sensei Mike seemed to calm down after Steve's dad talked. Steve turned to Sensei Mike and said "Sensei Mike, I've got to do this. You said I will learn about myself when I take away a win from someone else. I must do this for myself."

Steve turned and surged forward and stood on his fighting position. Cherry 1 thumped his hulking frame to his fighting position. Cherry 1 was a head taller than Steve and his body seemed twice as thick. The referee seemed oblivious to what was going on at each end of the fighting area. He asked his fighters to fight fair and they bowed in their own ways to him. Cherry 1 bowed like a disrespectful thug and Steve bowed in his traditional fashion. They both bowed to each other from a fighting stance this time. Steve didn't care about tradition at that point, "The thug doesn't deserve my respect and I'm not gonna give him even a microsecond of advantage!" he thought to himself.

The fight began and Cherry 1 pointed at Steve and told him he would kill him. Steve didn't waste any time. He summoned all of his power and kicked a sweep into Cherry 1's leg. This was usually the kind of attack that left an opponent limping around and would drain the opponent's desire to continue fighting. In classes, Steve's training partner's would hold three pads next to their legs and Steve would still make them limp away when he kicked them. Well, on this occasion Steve landed the perfect hit and it seemed as though time stood still for a moment. Then Cherry 1 merely took a step forward and roared as though nothing happened. The hideous demon Hiro squealed with delight and hissed and shrieked at the same time. Steve was demoralised. He didn't feel doubt, but he felt scared and he knew his job wasn't going to be easy.

Cherry 1 launched his fist at Steve and it sounded as though Demon Hiro's hisses were fueling his attack. Steve's combination of adrenaline, speed, strength and, quite frankly, fear were the perfect mix. He managed to block the punches unleashed upon him and started to feel his confidence return as his well trained body and mind adapted to the monster in front of him. But he very quickly realised Cherry 1 would eventually get through if he didn't begin his own attack. Cherry 1 was big and had a longer reach than Steve. If Cherry 1 was in range to punch, Steve would need to find a way to move even closer before he could return a punch. In a split second he realised what he needed to do. He would kick, and when he finished one kick, he would kick again. He would not stop kicking until the fight was over and the fight was not going to be over until Steve won!

Steve didn't even give a moment's thought to the physicality required for this strategy. A single kick probably drained as much energy as four punches. He decided it was the best option. At worst, the kicks would keep that monster away from him and, at best, they would hurt him and give Steve the win he so desperately wanted.

At the same time as Steve launched his barrage of kicks, Cherry 1 was managing to make it through with his trademark savage punches. One of the punches hit Steve precisely in the injured rib from the previous fight and even Steve was expecting it to hurt. Curiously none of the punches hurt as much as Steve was anticipating. In fact, some simple physics was at play. Steve's kicks were hitting Cherry 1 at the same time as some of his punches were landing on Steve. They were negating each other. Steve was landing almost twice as many kicks as Cherry 1 was punching. Any observer would have logically thought Steve would tire soon.

But he kept going and between the frenzy of kicks an occasional punch would thread its way through and send Steve back one metre only to have Steve charge back in with even more kicks. The timer sounded and it was the end of the first round.

Steve sat down and Sensei Mike was doing everything in his power to help Steve regain his breath. Steve looked over at that disgusting Demon who was furious at his protege. He was shrieking at him and hissing and weaving around Cherry 1 as if to imbue more of his evil into him. Steve turned to look at his father, he was leaning forward and smiling in a deep discussion with somebody. Who was that person? What? Temyana, the sweet little angel who humbled and encouraged him. This time she was wearing a golden half mask covering her burns. He thought to himself, "What the ...? They look like they know each other. This is crazy," as he focused his mind back on the war about to recommence.

Sensei Mike reminded Steve with a tap to his face. "Listen." He said, "That demon will not let his fighter lose. He will do anything for the win. You saw what they did to Max. They will try something, anything, whatever it takes for them to hurt you. Please be careful." Steve assured his Sensei that he understood the gravity of the situation and wouldn't let his guard down.

The fighters were called back for the second round. Steve was ready for anything but he wasn't ready for what he saw. Cherry 1 actually bowed properly to the referee AND to Steve. Steve bowed from his fighting stance and, for a moment, felt he was being disrespectful. But as his opponent rose from his traditional bow, he noticed something which horrified him. The hands he held to his side were changing as they raised into a fighting position. They darkened

and, by the time they moved that short distance to their fighting position, transformed into hideous black claws. The referee seemed oblivious to this and the spectators didn't even seem to notice either. Steve was incredulous. That disgusting man/mountain was mutating before his eyes and nobody else seemed to be able to see it.

The fight started and Cherry 1 thundered towards Steve. His feet were thumping the ground and his talons were waving in front of him. One managed to reach Steve's blocking arm and ripped through his Gi and drew blood. Steve was acutely aware of everything around him. He could feel Sensei Mike's concern behind him and he swore he could hear that little girl behind him talking to his father. He thought to himself "Why are they still talking, can't they see I'm fighting for my bloody life against this fucking monster?!" Steve was kicking furiously again. He was trying to avoid the talons of that man/monster but sometimes his foot would be intercepted by those claws and his feet were becoming increasingly bloodied.

Cherry 1 wasn't even looking tired. He seemed to enjoy seeing Steve's blood and the hissing from the Demon Hiro seemed to be congratulating his protege. Steve refused to even think about losing. He was fighting for his life here! Cherry 1 managed to shoot forward at an uncharacteristic speed which shocked Steve. Cherry 1 grabbed him and pulled him close with those evil claws. Steve had excellent flexibility and, from such a close position, executed a perfect roundhouse to Cherry 1's head. Something peculiar occurred. Steve's feet were an absolute mess of blood due to those talons ripping them apart. His kick to Cherry 1's face left some blood on his face and eye and they started to emit a foul smoke. It clearly gave Cherry 1 some pain. He let go of Steve and stepped back and wiped his face with his claws. His face had deformed slightly but he regained his composure soon enough.

For the first time, Steve actually noticed his own breathing. He was a machine operating on pure adrenaline, but even that would run out eventually! He remembered an old trick he used once with success against Sensei Mike. Steve pretended to look tired. He lowered his hands from his regular fighting position and slumped his shoulders and sucked a whole lot more air in. All the tell tale signs of someone reaching the end of physical capacity.

Cherry 1 saw Steve's diminished condition and found himself some new vigour. He charged towards Steve with his claws ready to rip Steve's head off. Steve didn't waste a moment, he yelled his kiai and launched his sidekick. The kiai was even more impressive than the one he did in his first fight. It looked like he directed an earthquake straight at his opponent. The sound reverberated throughout the entire stadium like an explosion and the kick was a missile launch. Steve flew through the air and Cherry 1, with his wicked smile, was moving forward with his claws up and ready. But Steve unleashed a power that seemed beyond human, his foot was shredded as it crashed through the claws and landed on Cherry 1's upper chest and then slid up to his throat. Such was the power of the kick, Cherry 1's throat seemed to collapse and he was left gasping for air. He wrapped his claws around his throat to try to understand why he couldn't breathe. Steve kept going. He hit that man/monster with a barrage of kicks and punches until he was knocked out of the ring.

The fight was over and Steve had won. The judge awarded Steve the win and he was sure he jumped as high as the auditorium roof with his fist clenched in victory. He did win. He took away that win from that man/monster and he made his Sensei Mike and father proud of him. Most importantly, Steve was proud of himself.

Sensei Mike, Steve's father and Jake and Max came to congratulate him. It was completely surreal and Steve didn't hear a word they said to him. Among all that frenzied excitement, Steve asked his father if he actually knew that little girl he was talking to earlier and his reply was "I haven't seen her for a very long time, I've known her all my life." Steve was perplexed, but he didn't have time to think about it as they all lifted him in the air and pronounced him the winner to the auditorium. They paid particular attention to turning Steve around to face the Cherry Blossoms who were all hissing and scowling at him.

Sensei Mike still looked uncharacteristically agitated and quickly calmed the group. He said, "This is not over yet guys. Keep your wits about you because anything is possible. The trophy presentation is about to happen so stay close and be careful. We can celebrate later." With that message, the group made their way to the presentation area and sat down. Steve's dad wasn't even a step away from the group when Steve turned around and grabbed his old man and pulled him in for a hug. They were laughing and they walked the rest of the way with their arms draped over each other's shoulders.



Well, THANK YOU so much for reading this excerpt. Feedback has been phenomenal to date.

You just completed 3 out of 20 chapters in this first instalment of the REN-SHEN series. I hope you enjoyed the fights and hints of destiny so far. REMEMBER, our Steve will end up a GOD by the end of the book. BUT, so much needs to happen before he gets there. At the end, you might ask yourself, “WAS IT WORTH IT?”

But DESTINY has a way of making decisions for us all!

Please keep up with the latest news at [www.ren-shen.com](http://www.ren-shen.com) and stay strong. The INFINITE needs YOU!

Chris Milanko