

The Dark Destiny

A Novel by Alan I'Anson

*For anyone who ever had a brother...
and lost him.*

Prologue

November 1968

Doctor Richardson lurched against the drinks cabinet, his hands trembling and his face pallid with fright. The cabinet slid back a few inches, its stubby feet shrieking across the wooden floor as lead crystal jangled in alarm. He groped for the brandy decanter, fumbling with the heavy, diamond-cut stopper until it fell out onto the silver tray with a resounding *clang*.

Richardson froze and looked cautiously about him. In the dim firelight, the study harboured many shadows that draped the corners of the room like black cloth. Richardson tried to calm himself, but in his panicked state of mind, even the most innocent of objects seemed to loom and threaten.

The wind cried out, its shrill voice rising like a woman's scream through the eaves of the house, and Richardson knew it was true: *he was coming*.

You knew this was going to happen sooner or later, he told himself as he ran quivering fingers through his silver hair. *You always knew*. But something had broken loose inside him, something that tore around in fear like a terrorised rat seeking an escape.

He sloshed a generous shot of brandy into a glass and threw it back quickly, hardly registering its fire. The neck of the decanter clinked nervously against the rim of the glass as he poured a second. This one scorched his throat and hit the spot. He closed his eyes and slammed down the glass, grimacing at the liquid heat firing his insides. The panic slowed and spots of colour flared in his ashen cheeks.

He tried to think his way out, as he had before. He

imagined himself climbing through a back window, or hiding in a cupboard, trying to still his breath. It was pathetic. He was too old now for that kind of foolery. The time for running and hiding was over; he had known it two years ago when...

He closed his eyes and shook his head. He didn't want to think about that, about what he *did*. But now he'd given the thought space it wouldn't let him be. Once again the demons danced to the heavy beat of his shame.

He fussed with the glass and decanter, but his gnarled hands refused to do his bidding. He shoved the tray away in frustration, scattering the glasses, and stifled a sob with the back of his hand.

He knew he shouldn't have done it, that monstrous thing. He should have waited, found another way.

But they had been so close, a cowardly voice cut in. And the Enceinte had been like a beacon for them. You did what you had to do. You found a way out.

Except it hadn't been a way out at all. The moment had only been delayed - two years - a mere blink of the eye in the whole scheme of things.

The face floated like a ghost of memory, haunting him again as it had so many times over the last two frightful years. The voice, so young and innocent scratched at his mind: *Where are the puppies, Dr Richardson?*

He closed his eyes tightly, squeezing out hot tears of shame and remorse.

Too late now, he told himself, too late now to be sorry.

A sudden rush of cold air chilled his old bones. The flames in the hearth grew brighter, flickering shadows dancing like devils across the walls and ceiling.

Richardson turned.

The front door stood wide open. Three men waited in the hall, hands buried deep in the pockets of their heavy overcoats.

Fallen leaves blew in across the hall, making their dead, scraping sound along the tiled floor.

A fourth man stood inside the study entrance, a small Oriental man, whose posture suggested youth, but whose face spoke of age and wisdom. His jet-black hair grew long and wild, his skin like smooth white alabaster. His broad, flat forehead over-shadowed flat black eyes, and his high, wide cheekbones gave way to a strong jaw and thick, worm-like lips. Not an attractive man by any means, but a man who seized the attention and held it.

Richardson's mouth flapped loosely for a moment, as if he was suffocating. "Meng Lei," he managed at last, "so you've finally come."

"*Ni ming zhi wo yi ding hui lai,*" Meng Lei said. Then in perfect English: "You always knew I would." His big mouth stretched into a shark's smile. He closed the door behind him, shutting the others out in the hall.

Richardson laboured over to the old armchair by the fire and eased himself into its comfortable leather folds. He gazed into the flames, thinking, not for the first time, about the fires of damnation.

"You were difficult to find this time, Richardson," Meng Lei said, pausing by the desk to examine a silver letter knife.

Richardson cast a furtive glance and shifted uneasily.

"Or are you Donald Page today?" Meng Lei wondered as he ran a thin finger along the blade's smooth edge. "Or perhaps it's Dr Mann?" He replaced the knife and waved his hand. "No matter. You were incompetent enough to leave a

paper chase of names and places that brought me here to you this night."

He took the chair opposite Richardson's, dragging it a little closer.

"This is nice," he said, holding out a palm to the fire's glow. "A winter's night, an open log fire, old friends together again."

Richardson saw the fire dancing in those black, humourless eyes. The silence stretched out between them and the screaming panic began to whirl around inside him. It was all he could do to stop himself from running with it. But he couldn't allow that cowardly voice to speak tonight. If he did, all would be lost.

"I won't tell you where it is," Richardson blurted. "No matter what you do to me, I'll never tell you where it is."

Meng Lei turned from the hearth, half his face lost in darkness, the other lit with orange fire. He leaned forward, the chair creaking intimately. "We'll see," he whispered.

"I won't," Richardson insisted. "Nothing matters to me anymore. I'll never tell you where it is. Never."

"Brave words," Meng Lei said, "from a man who hid behind a child."

Richardson stiffened.

Meng Lei nodded slowly. *Oh yes. I know all about you. I know all about what you did.*

Richardson turned his face in the heat of shame. "I... have done things I would change if I could."

"We all do what we have to," Meng Lei said, "and live with the consequences. These years have been difficult for you, I know."

He turned his attention to a poker wedged between the

burning logs, levering them up so that air could feed the fire's appetite. He slid the poker from the fiery glow and raised it near his face. The metal tip shimmered, yellow and smoking.

Richardson shrank back.

"I have come to release you from your pain," Meng Lei said. "You know the Enceinte belongs to me. Give it to me now and I will make your end quick and painless."

Richardson swallowed hard, unable to tear his gaze away from the heated tip. *Tell him!* the cowardly voice screamed. *Tell him now before you feel the poker's heat searing your skin.*

But Richardson steeled himself instead. "Two years ago I did something terrible," he said, "and I did it for myself. It was a terrible thing...sinful...deep down I've always known that." He straightened his back and looked defiantly into Meng Lei's merciless eyes. "I won't ever let it happen again."

Meng Lei let the smoking poker hover an inch from his face, his features swimming in the heat-shimmer. "How many times have you awoken from this nightmare?" he whispered. "How many times have you stared frantically into the darkness, a scream rising, the bedclothes stinking with fear?"

Richardson shivered - the times were countless.

"Only now the nightmare is real and there will be no awakening...unless you tell me what I want to know."

Meng Lei wedged the poker back into the logs. Sparks exploded from the hot ashes and flew up the chimney like a swarm of fireflies.

Richardson sat rigid with fear. The shrill voice was quiet now. The panic gone. He watched like a man in a dream

while Meng Lei waited for the poker to reheat. Outside the wind screamed, but not for him. It screamed for a little girl. A little girl from whom he had taken so much.

The time to pay for his sin had come at last.

* * * * *

Meng Lei burst from the study, his mouth a tight, furious line and his eyes like screaming pits of rage.

The three men backed away, fear crawling over their expressions.

Meng Lei whirled and lashed out at the man nearest to him, dropping him with a single back-fisted blow. The man folded, but before he fell, Meng Lei seized him and slammed him up against the wall.

"Richardson was nothing, you hear?" Meng Lei screamed into his face. *"Nothing but a stupid old man who fucked up everything he ever touched!"*

The man's head flopped and his eyes rolled. Blood flowed from a broken nose. Meng Lei hurled him away, spinning him like a top. He sprawled over a small antique table and sent an exquisite lamp crashing to the tiles. The stained glass shade spread a shattered rainbow of colour across the black and white chequered floor tiles.

Meng Lei's nostrils flared, the veins bulging from his throat and temples. He closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath as he tried to seize control of his rage.

"Should...we search the house?" one of the men offered.

Meng Lei's hand flashed out. The man flinched, but Meng Lei merely held up a finger, a gesture for silence. The man wet his lips nervously.

After a moment Meng Lei opened his eyes. "It's hidden,"

he said, "and protected - a circle folded within a circle. Even if it is here, we would never find it." He gazed thoughtfully around the spacious hall. "So the clock stops once again."

The other two men hauled their semi-conscious companion to his feet. The bridge of his nose had swollen, his eyes already blackening. Blood dripped from his nostrils, splattering little red stars on the tiles.

"Nothing more to do here," Meng Lei said and left the house.

As the three men followed, a thin mist of greasy blue smoke began to drift from the study.

PART I

In the darkness of the bedroom, she stirred and uttered a breathless sigh. Her eyes darted fearfully behind their lids, while the dream played endlessly against the blank screen of her idle mind. She knew the dream well, for it had been played for her many times before this night. She made a small sound of protest and raised a slender hand as if to ward off what was to come.

But in the still hours, the dream played on:

The old man's dusty robes and weary gait spoke of his long journey. His face lay hidden in the shadow of a hood, and on his back he carried a great Tai Chi sword, the intricately carved ivory handle poking out from beneath his robes.

The stench of death had found him long before he witnessed the first of the devastation. The once lush, green rice paddies had shrivelled into shattered mosaics of dried, pestilence ravaged earth. Cattle lay where they had fallen, their skeletons draped in torn shawls of rotted flesh.

He had recoiled in horror at sight of the dead, their bloated limbs twisted grotesquely, their eyes and mouths agape. The old man stared ahead, trying to spare himself the horror of blackened, flyblown corpses and the maggots that squirmed in every opening.

In the misty distance, the walled and moated villages of the Tang clan emerged. From one of these villages, or tsuen as the Chinese called them, emanated the evil force that had squeezed this land dry.

Inside the village grounds the nightmare worsened, for

here the people still lived and suffered. He saw a hakka woman, one of the earliest settlers, holding a mucus stained swatch of cloth across her face. As he passed by, she reached out a pitiful hand, the cloth falling away to reveal ugly clusters of pale yellow blisters that crept up her throat and face. Something twitched inside the larger pustules, something black and insect-like. The old man froze in horror as black spidery legs dug at the inside of the bubble in an attempted to escape its embryonic sac.

The old man fled. These people were beyond his help. Here the white hand of death had taken hold and would not release its grip until it had been severed from the body.

Away from the woman, he paused and hung his head, his shoulders slumped. Again he wondered if he could really do anything to help here. He was only an old man after all, a weary old man.

The weight of the sword pulled at his ancient shoulders and he sighed. He had travelled too far to turn back now. The hour was at hand. He shrugged the sword up his back and lifted his head. Rising above him, the walls of the tsuen stood dark and foreboding. Would this confrontation be the end of him?

"If it is Shang Di's will," he whispered, "then so be it." Slowly, his feet dragging in the dust, he walked onward.

There was no need for haste for the village's unwanted guest was already waiting for him.

She stirred then, afraid, yet strangely serene. She opened her eyes briefly, the lids weighed down by heavy pillows of drowsiness. The room still waited in darkness, its ambience quiet and sleepy. She blinked slowly, her

tired eyes cajoling her back to sleep. Already, the dream was slipping away from her, as it had all the other times.

In the morning, she wouldn't remember it at all.

2

September, 1996.

Jack wiped an arc of steam from the bathroom mirror and took stock of his newly scrubbed face. He frowned and stroked his dark brown beard, noting how his face seemed a bit saggy this morning. Old age was creeping upon him before its time. He poked and stretched the soft, doughy flesh of his face, noting the crinkle of lines at the corners of his eyes.

He sighed. Maybe he was just tired. Besides, didn't lines added character?

He smiled, thinking how unusual it was for him to find a silver lining. The joy quickly faded however, when he noticed a couple of stealthy white hairs hiding in thickness of his beard. He moved closer to the mirror, pawing through the bristles in search of more. Despite his dogged attempts, he could find no others. He considered hunting down the two rogues with Brenda's nail scissors, but changed his mind. Jack Freeman would go grey gracefully, he decided. No delaying tactics here, no hiding the evidence that his sell-by date had slipped by at thirty-six.

"Now that *is* a depressing thought," he told his reflection. "Buck up a bit, Jack...or buck off."

He wrapped the damp towel around his waist and opened the bathroom door to find Samantha, his thirteen-year-old daughter, slumped against the wall on the landing. He

caught her in mid-yawn, all puffy eyed and bleary.

"Morning, Sam," he said, smiling at her sleepy face.

She mumbled something that may have been pleasant, and shambled into the bathroom like one of George Romero's zombies.

Jack chuckled and proceeded into the bedroom to get dressed.

Downstairs, he found Brenda perched on edge of the armchair, a mirror propped against the cushion while she blow-dried her hair and snatched glances at *The Big Breakfast* on TV.

Jack never spoke to her as he passed through the living room on his way to the kitchen, and she barely noticed him.

He prepared a modest breakfast of toast and tea, and sat at the knotty pine table to eat it.

He felt so tired. His sleep had been troubled again last night, so it was little wonder he looked so haggard. The Cathy nightmare. He shook his head, not wanting to go to *that* place just now.

But when he tried to leave the table, he found he couldn't. He leaned his head on his hand and pinched the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb.

The nightmare had come and gone over the years, but lately it had visited him almost every night, weighing heavily on him. It was the lowest of moments, waking in the early hours, sobbing to himself, feeling that Cathy had been so near and yet losing her again.

After the nightmare, sleep was usually difficult, but when he finally did drift off, he found himself hiding in the bushes while the man with a white smudge for a face stood on the front steps of a big house looking for him. Then the man turned...

And didn't he see you this time?

The dream broke there, as it always did, and Jack was eternally grateful for that, because if he hadn't awoken...

He frowned, a headache pulsing at his temples. So what if he didn't wake? It was only a dream - dreams couldn't hurt anyone, could they?

He recalled his kid brother, Tim, warning him that if he ever had a dream about falling he would die of a heart attack if he ever hit the ground. *So always wake yourself up*, he had said, his expression grave behind his thick spectacles.

The thought of Tim coaxed a warm, crooked smile from the corner of Jack's mouth. The things you believed when you were kids.

His second attempt at sliding out from under the table was more successful. He washed the cup and swept the toast crumbs off the worktop into his hand. Best to not give Brenda anything to complain about.

He grabbed the foil-wrapped sandwiches he had prepared the night before and went into the front room. Brenda had her coat on. "See you tonight," she said without looking at him. "Make sure Peter's up before you go to work, won't you?"

"Sure," Jack replied, his jaw muscles only bunching slightly.

As Brenda left, Samantha walked in, looking much brighter than she had outside the bathroom. Her long, brown hair shone and her eyes sparkled. Jack had seen Cathy's dark beauty in her even when she was a toddler.

"Hi ya, dad," she said.

"Hi ya, Princess," Jack replied, dropping the foil pack into his work bag.

She kissed him on the cheek, and then regarded him more closely, stroking her slender fingers through his beard.

"Hey, you've got some grey whiskers."

"I know, I know," Jack said, "I've seen them already, and there aren't some, there's two."

"Hmmm, touchy," Sam laughed and went through to the kitchen.

"And they aren't grey, they're white," Jack finished.

"If you ask me," Sam called, "saying they're white and not grey is like saying, my breath doesn't smell, it *stinks*."

"Oh yeah?" Jack said in his best Jimmy Cagney impression. *He* knew what he meant. Grey was dreary and old. White, on the other hand, was distinguished and gentlemanly.

He grinned. Another silver lining found and filed.

He lifted his coat off the hook behind the door and slung the bag over his shoulder. "Is Peter up?"

"Yeah," Sam called from the kitchen. "Just."

"Okay, I'll see you tonight then."

"Yeah, see ya."

"Hey!" Jack called.

Sam popped her head around the door.

Jack raised his eyebrows and held out his arms. Sam knew what he wanted. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly, her face snug against his chest. Jack gave her a squeeze and kissed the top of her head.

"Love you, Princess."

"Love you too, dad. See you later."

Sam was rinsing her breakfast pots when Peter slunk into the kitchen. He slumped onto a bench at the table and sat

watching Sam for a moment.

"Make us some cereal," he said.

"Make it yourself," Sam replied, noting the current state of the acne riot on Peter's forehead.

"Go on. I'll do yours tomorrow."

Sam dried her hands on the pot towel. "No chance. You're never even up before I am."

"Go on."

"No," Sam replied. She glanced at the wall clock. "And you're gonna end up on detention again if you don't get moving."

Peter wrinkled his nose. "So?"

Sam went to pass him, but he blocked her path with his foot against the wall. "You really think you're somebody, don't you?" he said.

"Move," Sam said, pushing his leg with her knees. Peter swiftly raised the other leg, trapping her between them.

"You walk around like you own the place, but you only live here because we let you."

"Grow up," she said. "You don't have anything to do with it."

"Oh no?" he said, sliding his feet further up the wall and lifting her pleated skirt a little. He glanced down at her legs and grinned, squeezing her thighs between his knees.

When she was a very little girl, being caught like this would have whipped up a tornado of anger in her belly - but she'd learned to control that feeling a long time ago. Instead she just stared at him, thinking about the time she had been in her room wearing just her bra and briefs and combing out her wet hair after a shower. She'd heard a noise, and when she looked behind her the door to her room

had been slightly open. Except she was sure she'd closed it. With a teenage boy in the house, she was more than a little careful about her privacy. But there the door was, standing slightly open, and she with nothing more than a piece of flimsy fabric to hide her modesty.

She'd quickly closed the door, glancing out towards Peter's room as she did so, convinced that he'd been peeking on her.

It made her skin crawl to be caught by him this way now, but she refused to struggle or even push down her skirt.

Peter smiled wryly, gave her another squeeze and let her go.

"Thank you," she said and gave him her best *I'm tired of you* look.

She sat down to watch some TV before she left, but Peter had unsettled her. Why did he have to be such a dick? She'd had high hopes when they first met. The prospect of gaining a half brother had appealed to her, but Peter was unsociable from the start.

She'd noticed this look about him, like everything he did was sneaky. He had this crafty way of looking at you from the corner of his eye, like he wasn't looking at you at all.

Occasionally she had caught him though, leering over her breasts or legs. Though he was no worse than the boys at school, it bothered her. This was supposed to be her home after all, not a place she should have to be coy.

Yet even without Peter she knew this place could never be her home. This was Brenda's house. Brenda, who had been full of welcoming smiles when they'd moved in ten months ago. But Sam had seen the cat-like sparkle in her eye, the one that viewed her as a rival and said: *This is my patch,*

sweetie, and don't you forget it.

She didn't tell her father about the peeking incident. Besides not wanting to cause a fuss (God knows there was enough of that with out her adding to it), she didn't want to admit to anyone - not even her father - that she might have been the subject of Peter's smutty teenage voyeurism.

At the sound of Peter clattering pots in the kitchen, Sam slung her bag over her shoulder, in much the same fashion as her father had, and set out for school early.

That sinking feeling lowered Jack's spirits the second he punched his clock-card. Most of the other workers were in already, sitting around reading newspapers and sipping steaming mugs of tea. He knew some of them had arrived half an hour or more before the 8 o'clock start.

Jack glanced around the scruffy factory. The overhead fluorescents washed the shop with cold, hard light, one or two of them flickering irritatingly. Years of accumulated filth blackened the walls, and the windows were streaked with grime. Pallets of sheet steel and components cluttered the floor, while great drifts of rubbish congregated in every corner. Why anyone would choose to sit in this crap any longer than necessary was beyond him.

Most of the men carried on reading as Jack went to hang up his jacket, but old Sid and Gary gave him a friendly nod as he passed by. Sid drew on one of his smelly home-made cigarettes, a newspaper spread out in front of him, and a pint mug of strong tea beside it. Gary had his heels on the table, reading the sports pages.

Jack entered the dirty office to get some earplugs. It reeked of old paper and stale cigarette smoke. He delved into a blue and white box under the desk and fished out a

packet of yellow foam earplugs.

As he left the office the start of work hooter issued its monotonous honk. Derrick, the floor manager appeared from nowhere, clapping his hands like a junior school teacher. "Buzzer's gone lads, come on, get those machines going."

Jack sighed. Rousing the men the instant the buzzer sounded was the most consistent of Derrick's petty tyrannies.

Jack dragged his feet over to his big punch press machine and switched on the isolator. The green console screen rolled and flickered as it began its start-up routine.

While he waited, he inserted the earplugs and listened as the expanding foam squeezed out the machine noise. He pressed a big, green, flashing button on the control panel and the machine started up, hissing and groaning.

The door to the shop burst open and young Eddie darted in. He snatched his clock card and punched in, grimacing and cursing when he saw 08:04am printed in red ink.

Jack grinned. Young Eddie hadn't worked there long, but Jack had taken to him right away, not only because he was funny, but because his erratic behaviour infuriated Derrick.

Derrick tapped his watch as Eddie passed sheepishly by.

"Morning, Eddie," Jack said.

"Late again," Eddie moaned, shrugging out of his coat.

Jack smiled. Maybe the day wouldn't be so bad after all, he thought as he heaved the first sheet of steel onto the machine. But an hour later, he was staring into space, his expression fixed and his eyes glazed, while the machine hammered at yet another sheet of steel.

Not many miles away from the East End factory where Jack worked, Meng Lei read the morning paper in the dining room of Grenadier House. The luxurious ten bed-roomed dwelling belonged to Meng Lei, though it wasn't his name that appeared on the deeds. The property was registered in the name of his long time associate, Tony Weller. All part of Meng Lei's anonymity.

The large dining room was quiet and relaxing this early in the morning. Breakfast food sat on a heated trolley, thin wisps of steam escaping from beneath silver domed platters. Meng Lei had not eaten anything. All he had partaken of was a cup of fresh coffee that he sipped from time to time while reading the newspaper.

Tony lumbered into the dining room, a big man, with an open, friendly face and a solidly muscled body. A little bleary eyed, he ignored the scrambled eggs and bacon and made straight for the coffee. The cups were hot and the coffee steaming.

"I've just had a call from Ivan," Tony said, rubbing at a small white scar that parted his left eyebrow. "They got him."

"Tony," Meng Lei said, disregarding his comment for the moment, "have you seen this?"

Tony glanced back from pouring the coffee.

"A man's torso has been found floating in the Thames."

Tony coloured the coffee with a drip of cream and turned to listen.

"What is this world coming to?" Meng Lei lamented. "It says here that the police suspect the killing may be drug

related."

"No shit," Tony said. He set the cup down on the table and fished out his cigarettes.

"They are making door to door enquires and appealing to the public for help in establishing his identity."

The two men looked at each other and shared laughter.

"Ah, Toxic Pete," Meng Lei sighed, folding the newspaper and setting it to one side. "How we'll miss him."

Tony took a drag from his cigarette. "At least his poisonous shite won't be on the streets anymore."

Meng Lei met his eye curiously. "Why Tony, I never realised you were so public spirited."

Tony shrugged. "Anyone who cuts heroin with scouring powder deserves all they get as far as I'm concerned."

Meng Lei raised an eyebrow. "So where are they?" he asked, finally responding to Tony's news.

"Toxic's information was good," Tony said. "They've got Kosher."

"He had the stuff on him?"

"No, but they found a big bag of cash. He'd stashed it, but Ivan persuaded him to cough it up."

"How much cash?"

"Ivan said..." Tony paused to lick his lips nervously, "one hundred and twenty five big ones."

Meng Lei shot a look at Tony, his eyes as hard as flint.

"That shipment was worth twice that amount."

"I know, I know," Tony said, "but Kosher claims that's all he got for it."

Meng Lei placed the heel of his palm on the table and began rapidly tapping his middle finger against the polished top, his eyes moving restlessly from side to side.

Tony began to feel uncomfortable.

"Where is he now?" Meng Lei asked.

"They're holding him at the tenement. Do you want to bring him in?"

"Better not," Meng Lei said, the agitation lifting as quickly as it had descended. "After extending our hospitality to Peter the other evening, I believe we may be inviting misfortune if we bring Kosher here. I enjoy watching the police stumble around, Tony, but I never underestimate them. I'm afraid a field trip is necessary."

"When?" Tony asked.

"This afternoon. Four o'clock."

Tony glanced at his watch.

"I'm disappointed with Kosher," Meng Lei said. "I trusted him. Why do you think he betrayed me?"

"Someone could have gotten to him," Tony suggested.

Meng Lei raised his eyebrows. "Who? The Frenchman? Or Quentin perhaps?"

Tony shrugged. "Quentin more likely. He has a bug up his ass at the moment. He might like to make some trouble for you."

Meng Lei smiled. "If there is dissent among the ranks, an example needs to be made. A sharp shock will curb their bravado."

"You want me to set up a meeting with Quentin?" Tony asked.

"No," Meng Lei replied. "Let's err on the side of caution and see what our friend Kosher has to say first. If our suspicions prove correct, then you can arrange the meeting with Quentin."

Tony nodded poured another coffee.