

KATE MARTIN

THE
SOULLESS

Book One of
THE MYST AND
LABRYNTHS
SAGA



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Kate Martin

THE SOULLESS: THE MYST AND LABRYNTHS SAGA BOOK ONE
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*For CJ, Rynn, and Elise,
who made all my dreams come true.*



PART ONE



— CHAPTER ONE —

Occasionally, selling your soul was worth it.

That was perhaps a bit dramatic, but not *untrue*. Alec had never regretted selling his soul—he had gotten what he wanted from the bargain...well, half of what he wanted—but the rest of it? Forever serving a single-minded demon who could change what she was single-minded about in an instant? That part got a bit taxing as the years passed. Nearly two thousand years in, Alec had wished he had the option of retirement.

Then, his mistress had disappeared.

Two hundred years later, retirement was working out fairly nicely for him.

Now, he walked the city streets, his boots gently clacking against the cobblestones. The gas lamps flickered in the dark, casting long shadows. A drizzle had begun, so he pulled his top hat down slightly to shield his eyes as he checked the time on the newfangled pocket watch he'd recently acquired. Three more turns until midnight. Or so it claimed. It was an odd contraption, and less reliable than sand moving through glass, but he'd learned over the years that one needed to keep up with the newest inventions.

He didn't want to be gone long, but after three days straight of Dorothea raving and scribing her spells all over the manor, he had to get away. The witch was getting on in years, and it had fallen to him to keep track of her, but he needed a moment. A walk about the city,

passing by the men and woman as they came from elaborate dinners or galas and got into their hansom cabs to avoid the rain helped soothe his mind.

Alec liked it here in Dunlan, where the sun burned hot most of the year, and his skin almost matched that of the locals. It let him blend in and overhear the stories of their simple lives. He liked pretending he was one of them, and not a soulless man who spent his days decoding the ravings of a senile old witch.

He took a turn and headed towards the docks. The smell reminded him of home somewhat. Although there was fuel and the unmistakable tang of metal on the air, underneath lay fresh fish, saltwater, and the ever-present music of the ocean sloshing against the sides of the ships. He'd grown up by the ocean, fishing and sailing. His father had taught him, and he in turn had taught his younger brother. Back then, it had been a good life.

Until it had been consumed by fire and death.

He'd done everything he could, or so he told himself, but it had never assuaged his guilt.

Alec stopped walking abruptly. A voice clearly not his own invaded his thoughts. "Alec, come to me." Her voice was unmistakable.

The world turned cold and bleak, then blistering hot. Scorching orange light blinded him. One had to pass through the eye of Hell when called by its children, and though he had done it many times, it had been nearly two hundred years since the last. He had never been fond of the sensation. The screams of the damned rang in his ears, haunting him. The sound would remain with him for some time, drawn in by his guilt—the guilt of being equally damned, but not sharing their hellish imprisonment.

Of course, who was to say which was worse?

Tick tick tick. The pocket watch was a second heartbeat, made all the stranger by the fact that his own heart had stilled for the journey.

Alec stumbled out of Hell and back into the Mortal Realm with a blinding flash of light. The ground sloshed beneath his feet, but the air was hot and dry. Lifting one foot, he cautiously inspected the sole of his boot, then the trampled grass beneath him.

Blood. Everywhere.

In the distance, he could just make out the silhouette of Dunlan, the port city he had been a citizen of only a moment ago. At least he hadn't been ripped clear across the world, a small favor. Once he had been summoned from a warm tropical paradise into a wintry blood bath. A rolling cloud of smog hung above Dunlan, but a darker swatch of smoke clung to the sky where he found himself now.

Bonfires with bases as wide as two grown men, which must have once raged and stretched towards the summer stars, now fizzled and popped, holding onto what little remained of their life. Black lines crept along the ground, most likely composed of charred chalk or salt. The lines twisted and turned, looped and doubled back all on their own—a *labrynth*, a spell. In some places the lines overlapped, crossed, and broke in two, indicating they had been improperly scribed. A dangerous thing to meddle with. Alec knew that all too well. The screams from his past still haunted his dreams, even two millennia later, and he would often wake feeling the heat of the flames on his skin. He skirted the lines drawn into the ground, careful not to get too close. Just beside his left foot, one combination of loops, lines, and turns looked eerily familiar.

The old scars on his right forearm began to itch.

He ignored it. Ignored it because of the foul stench that rode the air, choking him and turning his stomach. Ignored it because of the source of that stench.

Nine bodies all dead, burned, bled; each at one of the points of the nine-pointed star the *labrynth* had been scribed around. By their clothes, Alec recognized them as members of a traveling caravan that had been in the area. It appeared they'd wanted to raise a piece of Hell. Wanted to control it.

Judging by their mangled bodies, they'd gotten it half right.

There were others; smaller, more fragile bodies, strewn about the edges of the circle. These Alec couldn't bear to linger on any longer than was needed to see that they were irreversibly dead, their throats slashed. Memories clawed at him of a similar young body. Cold and lifeless, all in the name of a summoning.

She had been there as well. Only, it had been *he* who had called *her*.

She stood there now, at the center of the ill-made *labrynth*, her skin bronze, hair silver, and body crimson-streaked with blood. More oozed over her clawed hands as she held a still beating heart to her lips. Eyes closed, head tossed back, she seemed to revel in the way the warm blood ran down her throat. She was partially transformed, half human form and half demon. It was a wonder she had managed to call him to her at all.

"Carma." Alec said her name carefully, gently, unwilling to provoke or startle her. A demon in this condition was nothing to trifle with.

At the sound of his voice, she dropped the heart and a smile spread over her blood-smeared face. When she turned her gold and sapphire gaze upon him, her eyes lit up in recognition, glowing in the night, and raising Alec's alarms further.

"Alec, there you are," she said.

"What have you done, Carma?"

She stumbled towards him, one hand reaching for him, the other ready to catch herself should she fall. "Alec, it is finally time."

He caught her. She pressed her naked, blood-soaked body against his, ruining his jacquard vest. Her hand caressed his face, but he grabbed it, not in the mood, and not willing to risk her forgetting her claws. "Time for what?"

"I found him."

"Found who?"

"*Him!*" She surged forward, pressing her lips to his. Alec allowed the kiss for a moment, then pulled back, getting a firm grip on both her wrists and holding her just out of reach.

"Who, Carma?"

"The boy." She turned to look towards the *labrynth*.

He followed her gaze. In the dying light of the fires, he saw a child's body inside the lines of the *labrynth*, on his back and unmoving.

Was that a slight rise of his chest?

"Is he alive?" Alec asked.

"I would never let him die. He is the last piece." She twisted away from him, dancing to the music of the crackling fires, her eyes closed and her arms outspread.

Alec grabbed her and pulled her back. "You're mad with the blood haze. Let me take you home."

She wrenched away. "I am not mad." She stomped her foot and lifted her chin like a stubborn child. Ridiculous behavior for a demon more than two thousand years old.

"Drunk, then," he said.

"No. I see everything clearly now."

"You've been missing for nearly two hundred years. You've just gorged yourself on human blood. I doubt you see anything clearly at the moment."

"And the promise of a soul. I will have a soul," she said.

"What?" He stepped back, rolling his shoulder away from her grip, hearing his jacket tear.

"Take me home now, but we take the boy with us."

Before he could form the words of his next question, she was on him again, kissing him so deeply he could feel the pull of his soul where it lived deep inside her. It was hard not to kiss back, not to press himself against her so tightly that it felt as if his soul dwelled within his own flesh again. But the blood that slipped under his hands on her bare back reminded him of what was important.

She let him pull away, and he noticed her skin was losing some of its metallic hardness, slowly returning to soft flesh. "Take the boy, Alec." Turning, she went off to survey the damage.

Alec watched her dance about the broken *labrynth*, exhaustion already setting in. He'd been tired, tired of existing, even before she had disappeared, and the past two hundred years had only added to that. With her return, he could feel the surge of her power jolting him awake again. He wasn't ready, wasn't willing, but his contract with her didn't care. He went to the boy.

Closer now, he saw the kid's chest rise and fall with shallow breaths. The unkempt auburn hair, and the face so young caused memories to rise once again. Memories of another boy, hair only a shade darker,

and only a year or so older. A boy whose body had felt too light in Alec's arms, too cold, too—

He shook the painful past from his mind before it could go any farther. He focused instead on the present.

This boy was thin—too thin—but even that thought, and the questions that came with it, disappeared when he saw the boy's right forearm. He knew the vine-like lines all too well. Knew each criss and cross as they wove their way from wrist to elbow. The same delicate lines crept across his arm, laid above the thicker burn scars that resembled a portion of a *labrynth*. On him, the vine had faded to a lifeless scar. On the boy, the lines pulsed with life.

A contract with a demon, not yet fulfilled.