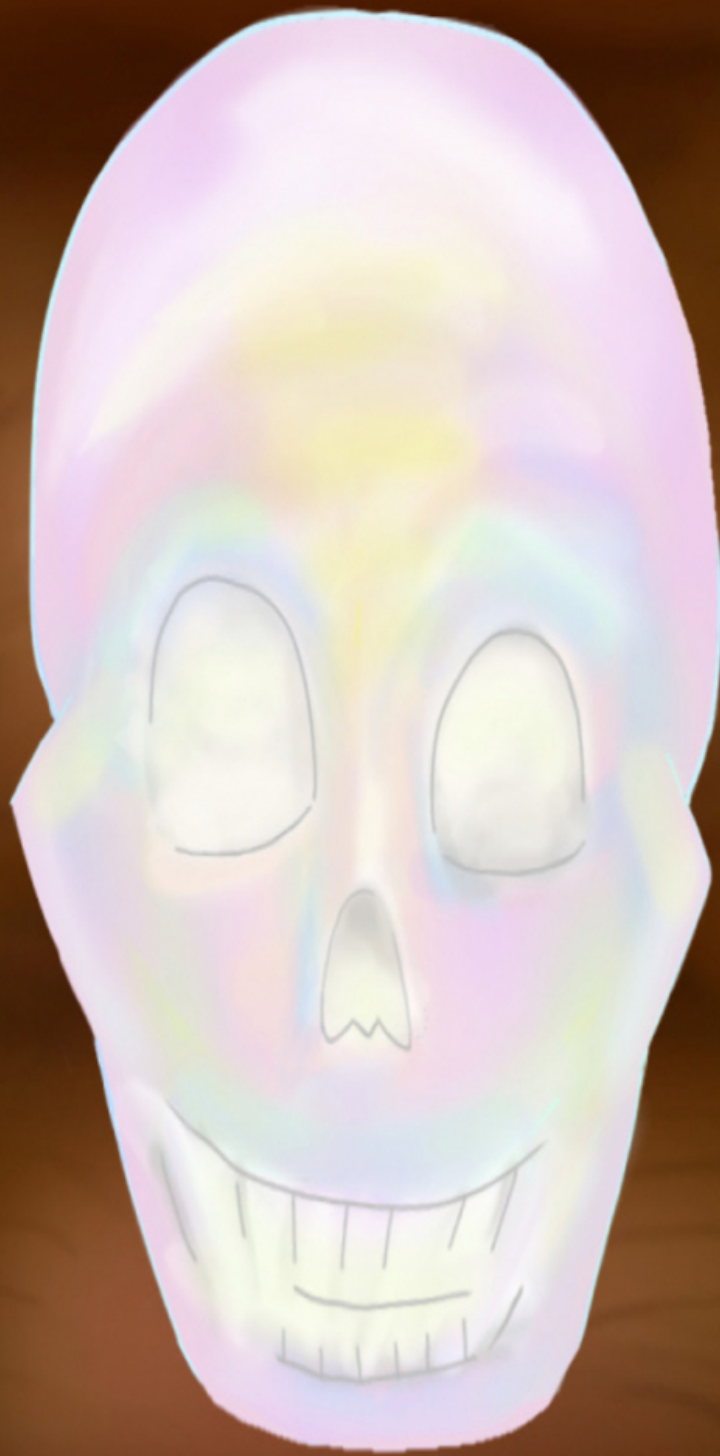
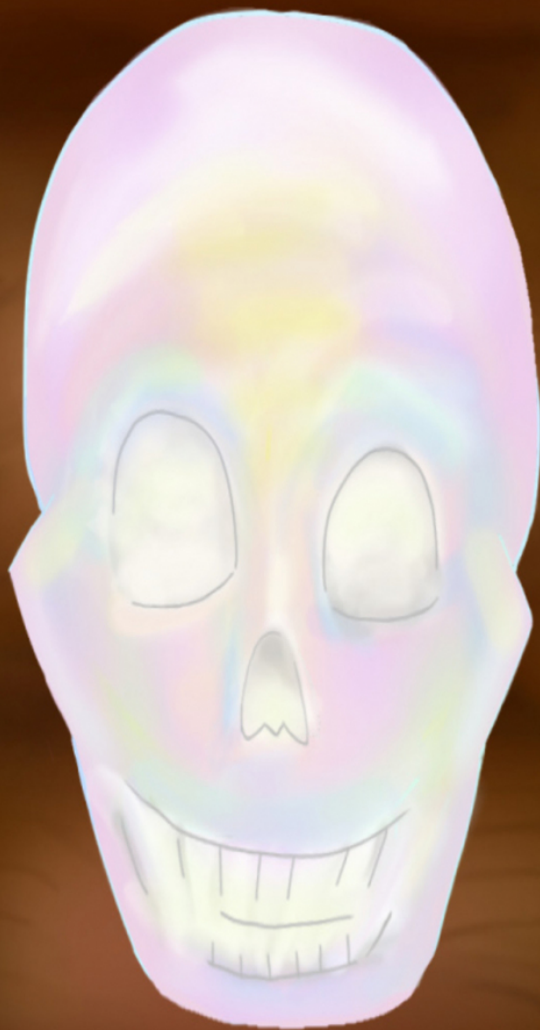


Thirteen Skulls



Ryan Lanosa

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Dedicated to my Fiance and partner Dolan, my cover designer and little bro Grey, my mom who's strength, determination and support inspire me every day, and my Nana who's always been my number one fan.

BookRix GmbH & Co. KG
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Prologue

He ran... Feet thudding heavily on the forest floor, he used the last bit of strength he had to keep himself moving. For now, he was far ahead of the beasts, but they would soon catch him; he had to get to the Well. Without noticing, a root poking out of the ground beneath him caught his foot. Tumbling over he rolled a few feet, but quickly regained his composure and kept on his sprint.

RUFF RUFF RUFF!! The monstrous barks of the beasts pierced the air behind him. Eyes growing wider in terror, he was practically leaping rather than running. Ahead of him came a clearing and at its center was the Well. Quickly he reached it. Gasping for breath and barely holding himself up, his sweaty and bloodied hands grabbed at the Well's bucket. He reached into his shredded robes and pulled out a red, wooden box. After ripping off a piece of his robe he wrapped it and put it into the bucket. He covered and locked the bucket and cut the rope holding it. Down it fell into the water at the Well's base.

He turned to face the way he had come; knowing the beasts were rapidly closing in and sprinted that way, but went at an angle to lead them off. After putting as much distance between himself and the well as he could he eventually collapsed from exhaustion and a loss of blood. Lying on the earth he closed his eyes and waited for the monsters to be upon on him. It wasn't long before they appeared.

Hell Hounds, dogs straight from the Under World with fur black as the abyss and eyes burning bright like an inferno. He kept his eyes clenched tight and braced himself; thankfully his pain- though the most excruciating thing he had felt in all his life- ended quickly. The dogs had ripped him to shreds and devoured most his flesh within seconds. They chewed and played with the remains only for a few

minutes before the pack leader growled for their attention and gave the signal it was time to return home.

One hound dropped a hand it was crunching on, bone fragments and tissue falling from its mouth. Another hound gave one more smack to what remained of the head, sending it out of its path. The leader snarled at the bigger hound who kept the spinal cord it had been playing with, but refused to let it go. Begrudgingly, the leader let it keep the spine and they took off.

Chapter 1

Lance Nike ran down the gravel trail of the woods. At the end of the path was a fork that normally Lance would run down the right path and finish his route home, but today he felt particularly energetic and decided to keep his run going by taking the left. The path lead off to a side street that would take him downtown and he would go home from there. Going up the street he noticed a store he hadn't seen before. This seemed unusual, as it had only been less than a week since he had last come this way and it was a rather quiet and empty street (despite being right off of downtown). The sign read: Earth, Air & Beyond.

Curiosity got the better of Lance and he went into the store. Immediately the scent of sage struck him. On either side of the entrance were two small ornamental tables. One held a crystal-like shell with a bundle of sage burning in it, the other an incense burning in a star shaped holder. The store was small and only boasted three aisles with six rows of shelves total. One side of the store seemed to have creepier things such as shrunken heads and skull shaped candles, while the other side had prettier things like crystal angels and herbs.

Lance slowly browsed down the middle aisle looking at the various artifacts. Something small and strange caught his eye. It was a crystal skull,

only about a half an inch in diameter. It was golden and brown with streaks of black. Hesitantly he reached for the skull, and with caution picked it up. He brought it up to his eye and it almost seemed to gleam with a golden light, though no light had hit it.

“Ah, that there is a Golden Tiger’s Eye, a very powerful type of quartz.”

Lance nearly dropped the stone in shock. At the back of the store was the register and behind it stood an older woman who Lance had not seen until now. The woman appeared to be in her sixties and wore purple and blue robes with her silver hair tied in a ponytail.

“Oh, that’s pretty cool. I’ll be honest I don’t know much about crystals.” He said honestly, looking at her from the aisle.

“Tiger’s Eye is a stone to bring abundance and strengthens will power.” She said, her delicate voice thoughtful and light. “It gives great strength to those who carry it. It’s a great crystal for those who are high energy and goal oriented.”

“Oh, nice, that does sounds pretty accurate for me. How much is it?” He asked, and reached for his wallet.

“Go on,” she said, peering at him and waving him off. “Just take it.” She said and wrapped her raised hand around his, the one with the Golden Tiger’s eye skull. “I can see it in your aura that this stone is meant to be with you. All I ask is you take good care of it.”

“Wow, of course I will, but are you sure?” he asked hesitantly, her hand still laid on top his.

“I’m certain dear, take it.”

“Thanks ma’am, I’ll come by your store again sometime.”