

HEARTBREAK, TERROR, AND HEALING

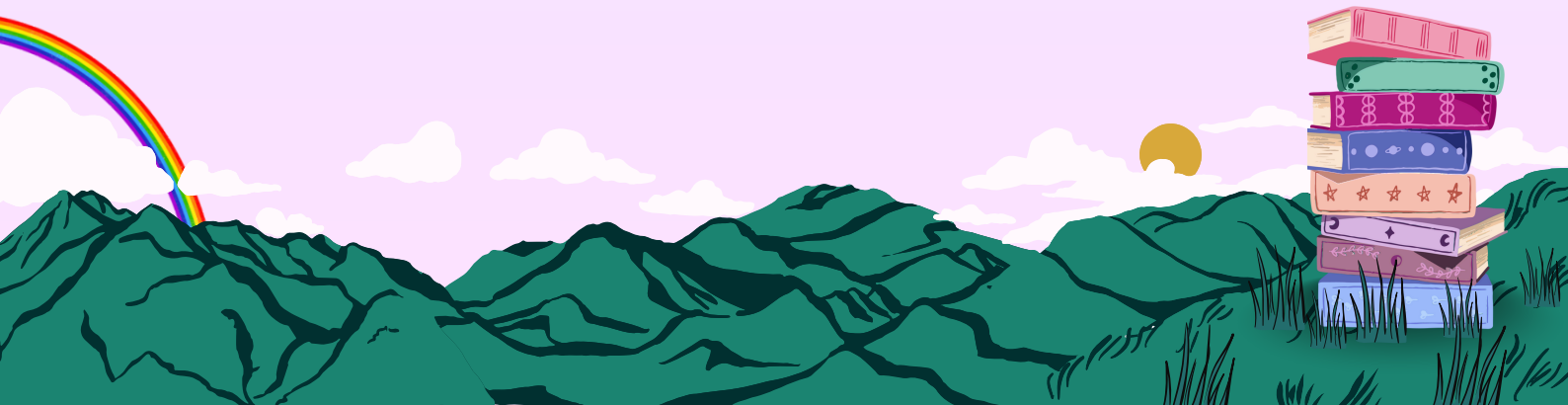
Nat Parker

Looking back, Jasper wasn't too surprised by the person leaving the caves. Their tunic was ripped and dirty, showing Jasper the viridian tattoos swirling on their chest that marked them as magic. They looked around thirteen years old, maybe fourteen, and even without seeing their eyes, he could tell they were from the Below, judging by their coal-black hair and pale skin. Them being from the Below and being magic didn't surprise him, he had seen many evacuees from the Below in his fifty-eight years of life. However, he was surprised at the look of absolute heartbreak and terror on their face. He had seen that look before, but he had never seen it look so *real*. It reminded him of a time long ago, when he had first returned here. Whoever this person was, Jasper decided, he'd help them, **no matter what**.

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Twenty-five years had passed since the Below, a sprawling underground city, whose people are known for their pale skin, long dark hair, large, bright, colourful eyes, and ability to adjust to darkness incredibly easily, began purges on magic users, after a black magic user killed the children of the much-beloved, *slightly* unhinged king, making him be so lost in grief, he attempted to kill any magic user under his rule. And he almost succeeded.

But you see, magic is a complex wee thing that cannot be contained by bloodlines. Instead, if the magic decides that you would be a suitable host, it merges with your soul and gives you, well, magic! But the Below didn't know this yet, and attempted to exterminate any magic user, regardless of their age.



However, the people of the Above, a massive country who lived above ground, whose people are known for their sun-kissed skin, vibrant hair, and dark eyes, who worship the sun for blessing them with light, were horrified by their neighbours actions, and tried to help the mages of the Below.

Groups from the Above would go to the Below, and evacuate the Below mages. One of these groups of evacuators included a twenty-three year old Jasper.

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When Lynn woke up, their body burned and ached. However they pushed on despite the stinging pain, and sat up. *Where was their brother? Where was Orion?* Their head hurt so much, why was the room flashing? Lynn fell into the comfort of unconsciousness.

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Twenty-eight years ago, Jasper met Warren. He had just finished a course in archeology, and was going to the Below to study some strange bones that had been found by some healing mages that specialised in bones. He had come out as Gay and Trans male only a few months ago, and had been itching for a change in scenery ever since. Immediately, he felt a pull of belonging toward the tea-coloured haired man with kind, violet eyes. The violet eyed man's name? Warren.

However, what occurred down in the Below's underbelly is a story for another time, and as it is irreverent to this part of the story, all you know is that Jasper made friends with Warren, a Cis, Demi stone magic user, and they began a relationship around a year after meeting.

They worked at the same job, and although sometimes one would be Above, and the other was Below, they made it work. They loved each other after all.



And whenever they both were Above or Below, they'd go to each other's house, sipping hot chocolate in front of a blazing fire whilst cuddling in Warrens house Below, and attempting to make flower crowns for each other in the garden of Jaspers barn, the warm sun and cobalt blue sky above them.

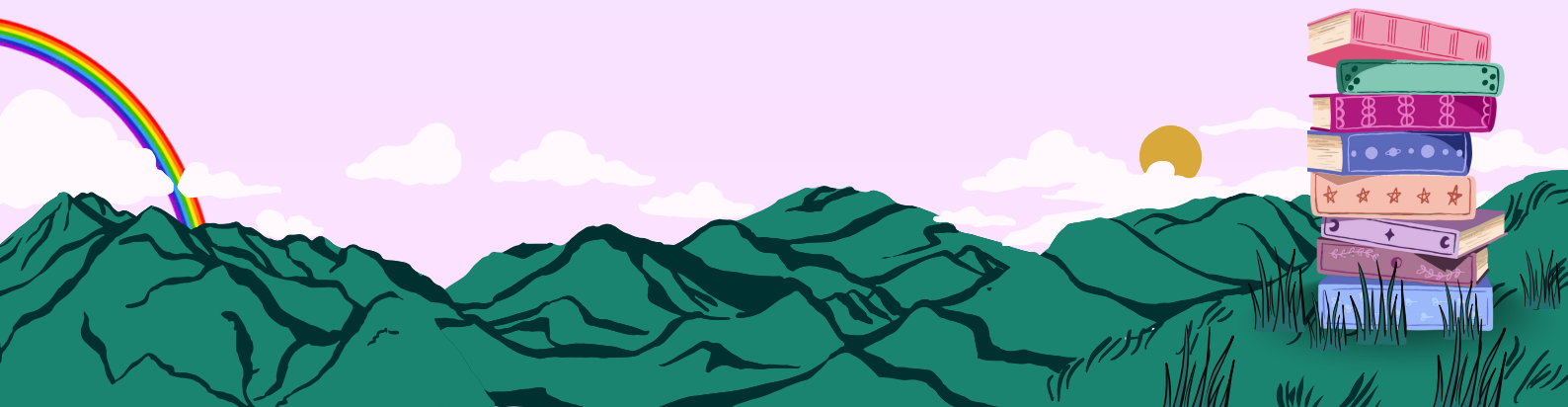
However, all good things come to an end, and as you may recall, the King of the Below attempted to kill all magic users, regardless of their type of magic. Unfortunately, that included stone magic users.

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Lynn awoke at the sounds of movement. Opening their eyes, they saw a tall, lean man with lime hair streaked with silver in their peripheral vision. *They are not Orion. But where then, they wondered, is Orion?* The man turned, a slight smile appearing on their sun worn skin as they saw Lynn was awake. "Ah, awake are you? My name is Jasper, and until I deem you well enough to leave, you're gonna be staying with me. Alright?" Lynn nodded. A grin split on the man's, Jasper's, face. "Good. Welcome to the Above, I'll get you some soup, you must be hungry."

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When the purges began, Warren had been in the Below, studying some old texts, while Jasper had been Above, visiting friends. They were going to meet up at the end of Spring, and were planning on moving to the Above in the Summer together. Warren had been leaving the archives when he overheard soldiers talking about the King's anger, and whether or not the bill of Magicplace, a bill that prevented mages from being hunted, or forced into servitude, would be revoked as a result. Their words made him uneasy, and knowing that his king was famous for his *eccentric* ideas, he decided to head Above to Jasper, and finish his research up there to be sent Below. If he had decided to do that just a day sooner, he might still be here.



He packed quickly, changed into a clean t-shirt and left that night, heading for the lifts, which were masterpieces of rope, cogwheels and weights, that could pull whole *people* Above or Below, and after paying, waited for his turn. However, before he could leave, guards of the King stopped him and, seeing his tattooed arms, asked him to follow them. He complied.

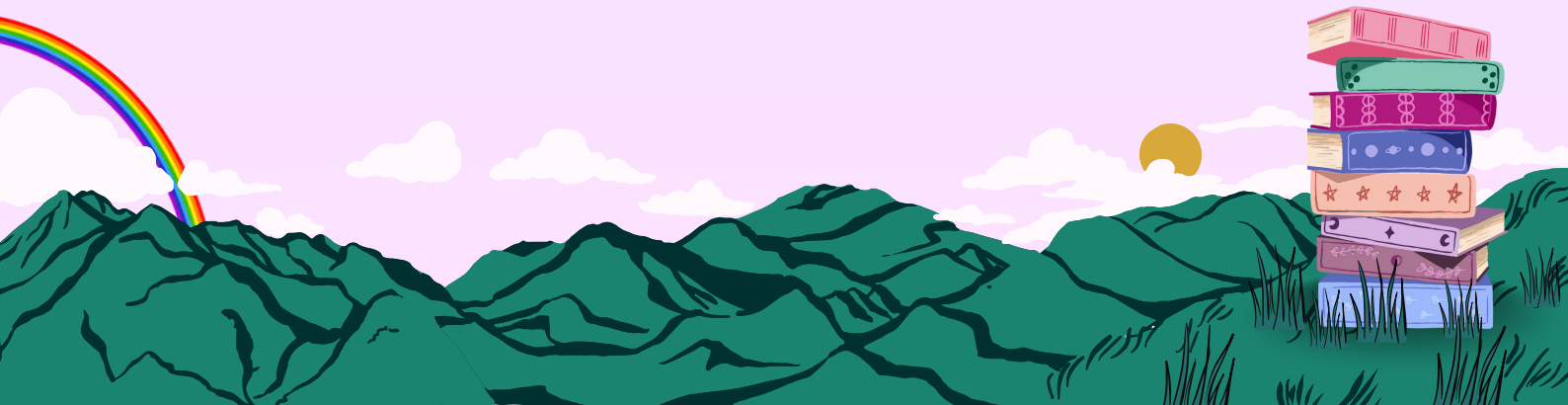
Warren was taken to an abandoned part of the city, well... used to be abandoned. There were *hundreds* of magic users here. All of them looking confused and tired, all of them with tattoos on their body's. He was taken into a building where he was given a bedroll, and some food, before he was sent out. Confused and concerned, he went into a spot where he would be hidden from view, but could see out. Warren didn't sleep that night.

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Under Jasper's watch, Lynn healed wonderfully. However, they were still confined to bed rest, and they still hadn't seen Orion. They had asked Jasper about it once, but he just gave them a look of pity and sadness, before telling them to eat their bread. Sometimes, they remembered things, memories, like when their mother took them to the market, or when they first saw Orion use magic. But... there were also things they didn't want to remember. Stone, falling on them. Orion, with glassy, unseeing eyes and *screams*. Some of them their own, others from Orion, or their mother, or their friends. They didn't like those memories.

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Jasper had gotten a letter from Warren a week before he went to the lifts, telling him how he missed him, and how much he couldn't wait to see him again, saying how he might have to cut his time Below short so he could be with his *fiance*, his love, his Jasper. Jasper read the pristine paper every night, waiting to see his love again.



Now, he still reads it, despite it now being quite crumpled, tearstained and ripped every night, still waiting to see his love again.

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Two nights after Warren had been taken, he heard footsteps near him. Quietly, he crept closer to the shadows, watching the guards wake people up. Perhaps, if he were slightly less cautious, he would have followed them, but he wasn't, so he stayed put. He watched take half of them away, not daring to move. The people didn't return. Warren continued watching.

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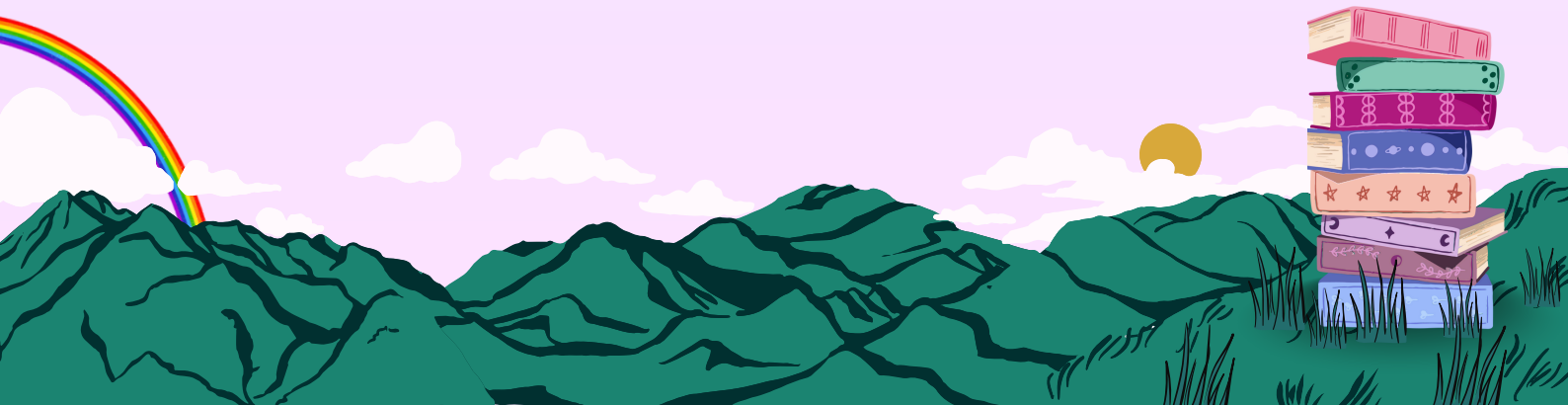
When Jasper heard of what the Below's King had done, he immediately decided to head Below to find Warren. He, and a group of others, began calling themselves evacuators, and went Below, to evacuate whoever they could find. Something was going to go down, and whatever it was, Jasper didn't want anyone around to experience it.

They began hearing rumours that the mages had been taken to an abandoned part of the city, and after finding it, entered it. climbing the roofs, they looked at the monstrous scene below them.

Two hundred magic users stood below them, most children, but there were some adults. There were some guards too, but they didn't look the most attentive.

As the evacuators watched Below, a tea-brown haired man appeared behind them and spoke; "There were over a thousand before. Every second night they take more. I don't know where too, but I doubt it's good."

Jasper froze, he *knew* that voice. The man also froze. "*Jasper!?*"
"*Warren!?*"



The two fiances looked at each other, first with shock, then confusion, and finally, to sheer joy. However, before they could have a touching reunion, the leader, Rebecca, spoke, asking if they knew each other, and how they knew each other. They looked at one another with love in their eyes, promised each other they'd have a proper reunion later, and explained their shared past.

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Three hours later, the evacuators struck. They knocked the guards unconscious, and took anyone who wanted to go with them. They made it to a cave system that led to the surface before guards caught up with them, which led to the original group separating. Jasper's new group had Warren, and ten others.

They unfortunately were caught halfway through, and were chased. They entered a mineshaft, guards hot on their heels, when archers appeared. Five arrows flew. Seven people remained.

Warren, stupid, *honourable* Warren, knew they couldn't run forever. And, seeing stone ahead, pushed his group on onward. Using the last bits of his energy, he pushed the stone down, creating a pit. Then he rose the stones again, creating stalagmites. He tried to continue running, but he was so *tired*. Another arrow flew, hitting him in the arm. The ground span, and he felt something pull him back towards the points. The last thing Warren saw was Lime-green hair reaching towards him.

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Jasper saw the moment Warren decided to do something stupid. He grit his teeth, and hoped that whatever he was going to do wasn't *too* stupid, before matching Warren's pace.

Jasper watched Warren use his magic to manipulate the stone, thinking about how much he adored this man.



Jasper saw how tired Warren was, he had clearly used too much magic.

And Jasper watched that damned arrow fly, hitting Warren's left arm. He watched in horror and shock as a guard jumped, realised he was going to fall in Warren's pit, and grabbed Warren's cloak. And he ran, terrified as Warren, his *love*, fell down into his own pit. Held out his hand, as the light left his lover's eyes.

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He didn't remember what happened after that. Another member on his team had come back for him and pulled him out of the caves. He remembered looking into a mirror, heartbreak and terror clear on it, and crying.

Jasper mourned for a long time after. But eventually, he began to heal. Twenty-eight years later, he was hiking when he saw someone, mirroring his expression of terror from so many years ago, leave the caves nearby. That someone was Lynn.

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Lynn eventually healed, and decided to stay with Jasper. He was old, and in a way, reminded them of their father, before he left. They missed Orion, but Jasper helped. When they were sad, or angry, or just hollow, he sat with them.

They made a tombstone together, and, despite not having a body, they made a grave for Orion, Lynn's older brother, who was nineteen when he died, six years Lynn's senior. They placed that tombstone on a hill, with Warren's tombstone.

Four years after meeting one another, sixty-two year old Jasper officially adopted a seventeen-year old Lynn, and the two lived as father and child for a long, happy time.

