antidote

by smoltae

Summary

When Taehyung meets his soulmate, they stand on opposite sides of a seemingly endless war.

In a world where weakness is death, there is no place for love.

Notes

hello!! I'm just wrapping up my last multichap project but this idea has been on my mind for a while now and I just!! had to put it out there.

this is going to be a little different from my usual work (if you guys are familiar, my stories are usually soft and warm) but this time we've got a world that's a little more harsh and difficult. their relationship will not be as easy either, but they'll get there and both taekook and ot7 will get the happiness they deserve c:

without further ado, welcome to Antidote!
There were a few basic rules that you learnt when battle became your life and your powers, weapons.

First, trust was dangerous. Even your closest comrade- the one who saved you an extra cup of the mysterious meat sludge that was lunch- could turn on you in a moment. No one was going to save you when you had something shoved into your chest except your own hands for as long as you could get them to work, despite your body slowly shutting down.

Second, you couldn’t hope for better, not in their world. If you started looking to a horizon that wasn’t there and perhaps never would be, you could lose your mind. It had happened before. Taehyung had seen the stragglers- people in old uniforms, half starved and wild. There was no Force that would open their doors to those people and if you didn’t have a Force to protect you, you were alone in the world.

Lastly, you never stopped. Freeze in battle and it was lost- death’s cold fingers were never far from your neck in a world like their’s and to stop, ever, was to invite them to wrap around your throat in a chilling, fatal embrace.

Taehyung knew these rules. He knew them well and good; had learned their curves and edges in the scars that traced his skin and all the follow soldiers he had lost along the way.

And yet, when it happened, he froze.

The man in front of him- even wrapped up in his red and gold patterned Resistance uniform- clearly seemed to know those rules too. He had a scar on his left cheek, old but ragged, that had a story of its own. They had come together in a burst of violence- the graceful cruelty of Taehyung’s electricity meeting a burst of darkness that was somehow nearly as vibrant as his magic. The moment both met- the polar opposite tendrils colliding- they melted into nothing. And the two men those tendrils had grown from, against all their instincts, froze.
Taehyung has never known a world before the violent one he lives in, only having heard of the way things used to be from the stories his parents used to tell him before he lost them. He has heard about many things; about power rePRESSION pills and air conditioning, about treaties the world’s countries had signed about maintaining peace. He may not have been around for those but he definitely knows that those treaties had burned along with their world. He was there for the burning, after all.

Perhaps the one trivial thing he longs for from the world his parents had described is a mystical and somewhat utopian concept- a bathroom. All he has ever known- especially since he was brought to the Alliance barracks as a boy- is the communal bathroom all the troops share, where the eldest few got the handful of stalls they had up and the younger or weaker ones could dig a hole in the ground and share it, for all the others care. It took Taehyung years to become one of the guys who got those stalls. Yet as he sits there alone, picking at a random scab on his knee, that small touch of privacy does little to make him feel safe with his own thoughts.

Taehyung had always been a prodigy. His magic sparkled out of him as a baby- sending little shocks of electricity to his parents whenever he giggled with joy. In moments of fear, he would wake up from nightmares with dark stains all over the walls and his pillow from where his power had escaped him. The Alliance had schooled his power when he came under their hold, trained into just the kind of weapon of just the kind of calibre they needed. Standing on that field- the battle still racing around them- was the first time Taehyung had lost control over his power for years.

His electricity frizzled in odd shapes and disappeared altogether. His head snapped up because this, this, was something he had heard about in stories and had written out in incident reports but never seen in real life.

The first thing he did was look around. Had anyone noticed? Did anyone know? Knowledge of this meant weakness and weakness meant death. Thankfully, it seemed that in the roaring noise and violent flashes of light and cries of agony, no one had noticed the little corner of peace. So out of place in their world.

Taehyung then looked up, heart pounding, at the person in front of him. He took him in. The scar on his cheek. The red of his Resistance uniform, at odds with the cool tones of Taehyung’s own. Those hands- still outstretched- as if waiting for that darkness to bleed out of them again. His mouth opened, as if to speak but what was there to be said? Their words would be lost in the din anyway. So they stood there. For two, three, four pulsing moments until a force barrelled into his side and Taehyung thought, you broke the rules, your time is up.

Just as quickly as it came, a burst of darkness banished that force away and Taehyung was able to steady himself. When he looked up again, his soulmate was gone.

Taehyung had expected to feel what he always did when that unknown force had hit him- that brief
moment of relief that was usually quickly overturned by his survival instincts. But that relief hadn’t come. He wanted to live; wanted to know more about the man in front of him who was the only one in the world who could mute his powers that way. It was dangerous, deadly to have anyone have that much power over you and yet, the man had saved his life. He wanted to know more- he needed to.

He has never allowed himself to hope for anything, not for years. Not since he was ten years old and his powers had been noticed by the elders in the township he lived in and he woke up to his mother screaming and hard fingers grabbing his gangly arms and dragging him away. Away to where? Ten year old Taehyung hadn’t known and with his life an endless series of battles he still doesn’t know if he has reached anywhere at all. Is there a destination to reach in their world?

Is it one he wants to reach?

Suddenly, the harsh sound of knuckles rapping against the plastic divider jerks him out of his thoughts. The paranoia that had left him for some time strikes him again; there are no mind readers in their camp to his knowledge but he still feels so afraid that someone will be able to touch his memory of his soulmate standing there, in the field surrounded by war, bringing peace for a moment even if it wasn’t voluntary. Taehyung isn’t sure whether his fear is of discovery or of losing the first thing that was truly his in years but either way it is cold and uncomfortable in his chest.

“What the fuck are you doin’ in there!” a harsh, familiar voice calls. Familiar enough that Taehyung pulls up his Alliance-issued underwear and Alliance-issued trousers and opens the door before he can pretend to flush the toilet he had occupied for so long.

(There is running water only in three of their stalls and using one means you don’t get the stale bread with your soup that night. Sometimes Taehyung tells himself not to consider that much of a loss- but that is privilege talking and there isn’t much of that in their world. Alliance soldiers are actually some of the best off and they always eat the bread, stale as it is. Always.)

He steps out of the stall to see the familiar gangly figure of 118; his pale, forever clammy skin and cold expression. Taehyung has known 118 since they had come to the Alliance four months apart as ten year olds but he still doesn’t know his name. He does however know that his gangly limbs hold brute force that he isn’t afraid to use.

“Jesus, if you need a wank go to your room, 129,” he spits, “Fuckin’ imbecile. Electricity finally blow out your brain?”

Taehyung schools his face into something that hopefully doesn’t betray the irritation that springs up
in him despite the regularity of these interactions. “Unfortunately we’re still waiting on that day, 118. You and me both.” He shoves past the taller man before he can’t stop himself from biting back his words. He isn’t sure what he’s feeling about meeting his soulmate yet but it is something akin to happiness, and he doesn’t want that to be tainted by petty anger quite so quickly.

He knows a retreat to his room isn’t a wise idea- not when his stomach is already cramping up with hunger after a day’s battle and they have a regular patrol in the fifteenth district the next day; one notorious for harbouring Resistance and causing trouble for their troops. The ragtag group has little by way of weaponry and training in comparison to the way Alliance has moulded each one of them into perfect soldiers, perfect weapons but they make up for what they lack in numbers and careless determination. To lose an Alliance soldier was to lose a lucrative investment whereas each of those red clad fighters was ready to be a martyr.

Taehyung thinks he might have liked to be a martyr; but he knows he will never be remembered as one if just too much of his blood paints the battlefield someday. In the Alliance, dying means that they have programmed you wrong in some way- you are meant to survive, you are meant to serve- and a faulty piece of machinery has no place in their memories. Only a tweak to the system; perhaps extra training for every troop in the barracks so your memory can be hated by them all instead. He remembers clearly when some months ago, a soldier had escaped-

No, Jimin hadn’t been just a soldier. Not to him. Jimin, who had been captured with his healing powers drained and a red, torn up Resistance uniform barely hanging onto his skin, had become something like a friend in the time they had known each other. Taehyung had shared his little six by six room with the man for the few months he had stuck around, hadn’t told the older man his name even as the other casually dropped his around in a way Taehyung hadn’t heard in years. Jimin is a name he holds close because it is one of the few he remembers in the world. His parents are now only mama and papa in his mind; their real names are lost to him like most other things.

The man escaped seven months later- Taehyung had refused to go with him; the Alliance had drilled into him what traitors received and he would rather die than face that. Instead, he had stayed the night and woken up the next morning to demands for increased training, increased security. Their sleep was reduced to 34 hours a week to allow for more night shifts and the only memory of Jimin left in their camp is occasional curses of that little bitch 510 on cold nights. Taehyung is just glad that those soldiers keep his name out of their mouths.

Taehyung collects his dinner from the mess hall- the clamour and loud noise making him retreat to the back of the room where he usually sits to avoid them. It isn’t long before 423 joins him, her slightly overgrown short hair falling into her eyes, making her swipe the aggressively curly strands away in a repetitive, annoyed motion.

“I’ll have to scrounge up some points for the grooming room soon,” she says with an irritated tone dancing on her words, “But spending on that shit’s ridiculous when I’ve barely got points to take a
shower. Especially since they don’t have half a clue what to do with my hair in the first place.”

423 had been a bit of an anomaly to most of the soldiers when she had arrived; she was older than most, for one, grey streaking through her pitch black hair even in her first year. But her dark features— the skin and accent that stood out from the endless stream of Korean faces— made her someone who was relegated to the outskirts of their barracks. She didn’t seem to mind much— the fierceness of her attitude contradicted her silent yet deadly poisonous smoke— and Taehyung and her coexisted in a peaceful way most days. It is dangerous to consider anyone a friend but other than Jimin, she would likely be the one he chose if he was dying. He can’t count on her to save him, but he knows she would give him a quiet, peaceful death.

She notices his silence— more absolute than usual— as he picks his way through the powdered potatoes and wet, unknown meat on his plate. “You’re distracted. Losses on the battlefield today? Or did you do something to merit going to the shithole?”

Taehyung shakes his head; he hasn’t earned a night in what the troops lovingly call the shithole since Jimin had run away nearly a year ago and he had been questioned by the commanders for information. It had taken all of his willpower not to give up the older boy’s name but he had clenched his teeth and maintained his silence. Names had power in their world.

423’s questions continue for a while but when met with little response, she dons her coat and heads to her room, dumping her tray into the metal bin on her way out. Taehyung sits there until the mess floodlights are switched off and the loud announcements demanding that all troops exit start ringing loudly through the room.

When he falls asleep on his bed he thinks of this:

_A field of dying, nearly grey-brown grass. The sounds of the helicopters flying overhead, their blades striking at the air so loudly he could feel the sounds vibrate in his throat. A bomb had just gone off, somewhere close enough that his ears rang but far enough that he didn’t have to duck away from any debris. There was a deep cut in his leg from where a Resistance soldier with sharp, metallic claws scratched down his leg before Taehyung had electrocuted him, the scent of slightly burnt flesh rising in the air. This memory is familiar in the way it smells, in the way it stings moving in his mind. This is what his life tastes like._

_But amidst it all— something unusual, an anomaly. A man with a bright red uniform standing out stark against his face, darkened with the ash and grime of battle. A feeling of powerlessness, of submission as the electricity that constantly crackled through him found its antidote in a stranger._
Who are you? Taehyung wanted to ask, his mouth pressed shut by his helmet. Who are you and who are you to me? What will be our story? A sudden burst of violence hit their moment and when he looked back again, the man was gone. Questions remained.

Who are you? How will I find you?

What are we going to do to each other?
hello, and welcome to part 2 c:

please note the addition of a tag on 'abuse' - largely of Taehyung by his superiors and the Alliance which is essentially a fascist military group. it will play a big role in the story going forward, so please read safely!

hope you enjoy x

It’s Tuesday morning the next day and as with every day, the first thing Taehyung does after dressing is check the schedule tacked onto their barrack’s entryway every morning. The Alliance had done away with regularised schedules after multiple infiltrations by the Resistance in some of the earliest years after Taehyung had been brought there and ever since, a fresh schedule is tossed to every unit in a randomised pattern each day. Even though it is still early enough that the sun is laying low in the sky, the space around the schedule is crowded. No one risks missing an early morning shift, and they’d rather wake up an hour earlier than required than sleep through a shift and get sent to the shithole after.

Taehyung is tall enough to see over the heads of many of his troopmates - save for 256’s abnormally extended limbs- and his afternoon shift at the Record’s Building catches his eye instantly. After electricity became a rarity rather than a basic need, the idea of keeping physical records gained precedence again, among the rich and powerful. He’s heard stories of some who like to keep diaries, writing about their lives like someone will read it someday and sympathise, even when paper has become a luxury and the only one writing in diaries for leisure are the ones who deserve the least sympathy in their world.

The Record’s Building is a solid structure with a single entrance and exit, containing what is, perhaps, the most in depth documentation of New Korea and all its people. The Alliance has eyes on nearly everyone who breathed in their presence, and their presence stretched across provinces and districts and even beyond the borders of Korea in some areas.

Taehyung is barely literate; just able to read the most basic words and sentences. He was only ten when the Alliance dragged him away from his childhood and they actively ensure none of their soldiers received an education in the barracks. Education means knowledge and knowledge is danger; his illiteracy is the only reason he is allowed into the Record’s Building at all. But that day he is a man with a purpose; he tries to muster up all the knowledge that has migrated to the back of his head with everything else he never reaches for.
He reaches the Record’s Building just a few moments before the sound system tolls three bells, signalling a new shift. The guards at the entry salute him— he is superior to most soldiers on the grounds simply because of his experience and power— he offers them only a small, impassive nod. Taehyung’s heart is in his throat; though he knows no one can steal his purpose away from his mind, the knowledge of what he is about to attempt has bile rising in his throat.

Of course, that’s likely just the aversion therapy he has been experiencing since he was a child. Shoved into a room with a pill to induce sickness in his body and videos of people attempting rebellion playing for hours in front of them. They were always close to useless the day after the group therapy, retching, sweaty messes collapsed in their barracks but they always emerged more obedient; their very bodies rejecting the idea of ever thinking for themselves.

The building is next to deserted when he enters. No one ever really accesses the records unless it’s one of the higher ups and their arrival always brings with it extra protection and pomp; Taehyung would know to expect them. He is alone with the middle aged woman who has been overseeing the Record’s Building ever since he had his first shift there five years ago. He still doesn’t know her serial number but that isn’t unusual; even serial numbers are something shared only in certain groups. The rest of the building lies desolate; there are enough guards outside and few enough soldiers the Alliance trust enough to let them inside that his being alone isn’t unusual either.

He signs off on the roster at the desk of the overseer and then begins his patrol, tracing the confusing little paths that trace through the whole building to make it near impossible for someone unwanted to find what they’re looking for. Taehyung has worked in the Record’s Building for long enough to know how to follow those paths as if they are something cohesive. He had almost perfected in five years; finding a path in which almost all the letters were in order, with the exception of the Q and E records that somehow stood right next to each other in the Eastern wing.

It doesn’t take long for him to come upon the R records, an entire cupboard taken up by file boxes on the Resistance, divvied into sections. Warfare. Weaponry. No, those are the W’s; he draws his eyes up and across, scanning for the familiar curves of the letter S. He thanks the world briefly for the lack of electricity, if only for this moment, since no cameras could follow him in his pursuit.

Ah, yes, he thinks as his eyes spot Supplies. Subm- submarine? He isn’t sure what that one means. Stronghold. Storage. Stealth. And then finally, Soldiers. Even that file is parted into two: known and unidentified. He thinks of his soulmate— of his wild, raw power and his youthful face. Taehyung places enough faith in the Alliance’s abilities to be sure he would have been forced into their ranks had he been identified, and he has no memory of that boy in his long years as an Alliance soldier. He is tempted to reach for the second box but pulls back harshly when two bells toll through the grounds, signally the midpoint of the shift.

Heart beating hard enough that he can feel it in his throat, Taehyung forces himself away from the shelves. He has many shelves left to survey, the last few being within the overseer’s line of sight and
he can’t afford to draw her suspicion if he lingers away from them for too long. His stomach is already revolting with how long he has been doing… unacceptable things and he knows he won’t be able to swallow down much food at dinner.

*Pull yourself together,* he tells himself, *you’re no use to him if you’re dead.* But Taehyung wonders if that’s exactly what his soulmate might want- one less weakness to worry about. He wishes for a moment that Jimin was still in the hold so he could tell someone about his ripped up feelings but that’s all it is; a wish. He is all alone, and his own mind is the only place he can go to hide.

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He doesn’t get assigned to the Record’s Building until the next week- a desperate week where he gets up to check the roster early enough every morning that more often than not, he’s there before it is delivered. In the week that passes before he gets the shift he is waiting for, a few things happen:

1. The person he had shared bunks with for months before he was given a single room is executed for treason after they found he had been trying to escape. Taehyung realises just how far he has fallen because instead of sadness, he just feels glad that they had been separated so he didn’t have to be interrogated.

2. He doesn’t kill a little girl he finds hiding in an outhouse when they visit the thirty fourth district; he spends the rest of the night on the disgusting bathroom floor puking his guts out.

3. He thinks he spots a Resistance soldier with the buffed metal necklace Jimin had always worn but he looks far too scrawny to be his once friend and the scales crawling up his skin aren’t familiar either. Taehyung still feels glad when 254’s knives miss their mark.

His kill rate is dangerously low at the end of the week; it’s likely only the building full of violent squatters that Taehyung sets on fire that keeps him off the commanders’ watch list. A soldier’s casualties failling usually indicates something being wrong; lack of efficiency, too much distraction or unwelcome empathy. Taehyung has seen troops being thrown out of the ranks for showing humanity where the Alliance could see it and even as his chest aches at the smell of burnt flesh emanating from the building, he convinces himself of the necessity of his actions. That those squatters were terrorising the district they lived in when the blood on his own hands was likely far, far more.
When Taehyung goes to the Record’s Building next, he knows which shelf to reach for. He ignores the discomfort of his nervousness painting its way through his insides as he opens the box file of unidentified soldiers and instantly reaches for the thinner files bundled together under offensive. He shudders lightly at the memory of those inky black tendrils reaching for him but wrapping around his body instead, like something protective. And then the violence they were capable of, just a second later, to protect. Offensive, for sure.

With clammy fingers, he tries to sort through the files as quickly as he can, tracing over each for something familiar in the picture or abilities. He finds his soulmate quickly enough, almost missing him in his rush to get through them all before the overseer notices that he has lingered too long. His pictures falls out of a folder, fluttering gently down onto the ground.

Taehyung recognises him instantly. Of all the smallest, most minute of details— that little curved half moon scar on his cheek. He wonders which one of the Alliance soldiers that he shares his life with pressed that wound onto the boy’s cheek— for a brief moment he entertains the thought that maybe it was him then remembers he could never harm his soulmate.

He looks for a name but then remembers the folder he is holding is labelled unidentified and stops himself. It’s for the better, Taehyung tells himself; after all it was him that spent months convincing Jimin of just how dangerous names could be in their world. Still, when he returns to his room that night, he feels almost empty.

For a few, brief days, he had had something to work towards. He was doing something for himself for the first time in years; a part of him Taehyung had thought had been beaten from him a lifetime ago. But now, a picture he already had held in his mind and no name in hand, he realises how Sisyphean his entire pursuit had been. What had he truly achieved? Did having a soulmate mean anything at all where they were?

Had he truly caught so desperately onto the idea of having someone of his own that he had forgotten the world that grew like a cage around him?

The thought drains him of most excitement that had teased his mind and the next week, when he is assigned to the Record’s Building again, Taehyung pointedly ignores the R shelf. He resigns himself to the idea that that brief moment on the battlefield;

*The man’s dark hair, dancing in the wind like the tendrils of his magic in the air. Taehyung’s electricity revolting against his control and ducking back into his bloodstream to protect a stranger. Their uniforms— one blue, one red— representing how far apart they were even as they faced each other. The taste of blood in the air and—*
that, that was all he would ever have with his soulmate. Someday, perhaps, they would meet in battle again and part as strangers whose bodies tied together in a connection their world would not allow.

He tells himself it isn’t much of a loss; not like losing his family had felt, not like losing Jimin had felt. Perhaps he could have learnt to love that stranger he had met on the field- though he wasn’t quite sure he now how that word was spelled, or the meaning it truly held anymore- but having the possibility snatched away had been a little blessing in itself. You can’t miss something you never had. He lets go, or so he thinks. Until one night, five battles later, when he is washing blood out of his uniform and suddenly a sharp pain runs through him.

Taehyung groans softly, checking his hands immediately because the lye soap they’re forced to use has a tendency of stinging, even breaking skin sometimes. His hands have become hardened to it over time and he isn’t surprised to find no wound, left to wonder what exactly had happened. The pain hits again, stronger this time; he muffles a whine and leans heavily onto the soot darkened wall of the wash room.

At first, all he hears, inside his head, is breathing. Taehyung grabs at his head with both hands, wondering what the hell is going on- if 118’s comments about him going insane had finally reached fruition when a voice:

_Fuc- FU- hel- o? Are you- s this workIN-g?

Taehyung’s first instinct is to scream- his confusion, his fear of the unknown. Thankfully, he has a lot of practice choking down screams because some part of him just knows, even if he doesn’t know what this is, it’s something to do with the soulmate he had already made peace with losing.

_Hel- lo? The voice is steadier now. Less like static and more like the echo of a human voice. This is- um, this -s yoUR-

“My soulmate,” Taehyung whispers to himself first, letting himself say the word for the first time. He tastes how the letters fall onto his tongue. Then he closes his eyes and thinks; thinks as loud as he can.

_My soulmate, he screams into a void and for once, the void screams back._

Chapter End Notes
eep that was just a bucketload of angst but the world I'm trying to depict here,,, it's pretty dark. Taehyung's mind too,, it's pretty lost after the things he's been through. don't worry, we'll get him to people who will love him asap x
There is static that punctuates their words- takes over them- and at first Taehyung doesn’t understand why and then he remembers how loud his mind gets at night and wonders at how little disturbance there is.

_Soulmate_ he tries to say, although it comes out more like _sO-l ma_? He tries again and he almost gets the sounds to form the word the second time. The pain in his head is something strong and stinging; he’s still crouched on the disgusting bathroom floor and yet he clenches his teeth and reaches out with all the hope he never dared to allow himself to feel and _finally_;

_sOULMATE_- his voice breaks through, even if it leaves him panting. _I- where. Wh- who are you?_ He asks out of instinct, out of his body’s unrestrained curiosity but instantly bites back his words and regrets them instantly.

_I_- the voice in his head skitters like the camp’s public announcement system every two hours- the connection making it hard to breathe and so Taehyung tries his best to cut it off. His soulmate’s voice settles into something clearer. _MY NAME_-

No. Taehyung brings his fingers up to block his ears on instinct. He can’t know his soulmate’s name; knowledge is power, power far stronger than anything he had. Knowing his name meant that name could be tortured out of him and he couldn’t do that to this stranger in his head who was meant to become the center of his universe.

_Fight_, he screams at himself, not realising when the voice in his head turns into the soldier who used to oversee him as a child; his voice harsh and grating in his ears. It was one that often came to him when he needed to restrain himself. _Fight you little bitch, weak, disgusting_.

_What_- the voice says loudly, overwhelming the noise in his mind, _What the hell, man? What the fuck are you saying?_ His soulmate had settled down into a steady voice now, perhaps the urgency of what he wanted to say speeding up the adjustment period.

_Oh_. Taehyung realises dully, muscles loosening into something more relaxed- maybe more resigned to the situation. He had forgotten he wasn’t alone in his mind anymore. _I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, I was talking to myself, not you._ Talking comes easier now; he doesn’t need to clench the muscles in his neck, or his fists to get the words out. He realises that his soulmate must have thought he was
shouting those things at him; those awful, awful things that followed him into his darkest times. The guilt has him saying I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry over and over again.

**Hey,** the voice is gentler now, **hey,** it’s alright. It's okay.

And Taehyung’s eyes are suddenly stinging because he hasn’t heard comfort- not to him, or any other person- since Jimin had left over a year ago. It’s overwhelming; his voice, somehow fitting just right into the crevices of his mind. Taehyung already needs him and he has never seen him, has never met him. Has never really wanted anything since he was a child.

*I’m sorry,* he says one last time. *I was talking to myself. But please-* his voice breaks. He didn’t know that voices could break in one’s mind but he supposes that’s what panicked thoughts were like; coming together and breaking off too rapidly to make much sense. Please, don’t tell me your name.

*I don’t… understand?* His soulmate voiced in confusion.

He had been quite sure the man in his head wouldn’t understand; Jimin never really did. Maybe the fear of names to others might seem like just another part of the Alliance’s indoctrination but he knows better. Neither Jimin nor his soulmate, evidently, had ever seen a seventeen year old girl missing three fingers because the informant they had trapped was the older brother she had thought she had lost forever- their names being the tell tale sign. Names had power and Kim Taehyung- 118- would never forget it.

*Please,* Taehyung says, because he can’t press a palm against his soulmate’s mouth to stop him the way he had done with Jimin that first time (though even then, he had moved too late and that five letter name is now burned into his memory.) *It’s dangerous for me to know your name, especially considering who you are. The Alliance won’t forgive a Resistance soldier, or a traitor.*

Already, he feels his stomach twist and turn as his natural pull towards his soulmate wars with the science that’s edited him into some idea of a perfect soldier; one who never defers. Taehyung presses his hand to his abdomen to stave off the feeling and-

**Bang!**

His shoulders nearly hit his ears as the stall door bangs open loudly, exposing his crouched, bent body. Predictably, 118 stands there, although uncharacteristically alone. “The fuck are you doing?” He spat out, looking down at Taehyung’s still weak body.
In his ear, his soulmate asks *wh-t's wrONg?* but his voice is breaking up again now that Taehyung’s mind isn’t focused anymore. He isn’t sure how much his soulmate can sense outside of his own thoughts but he doesn’t have time to think on that- not with 118 staring at him and a secret to hide.

“It’s nothing,” he says out loud, though he supposes the words are an apt response to his soulmate as well. “Just feeling a little sick.”

“Sick, huh?” 118 has thick, caterpillar-like eyebrows that make it *known* when he is disbelieving or suspicious. “Queasy, 129? What are you hiding that your aversion’s acting up?”

Taehyung scoffs, a little louder than necessary to cover how those questions are far too close to home for comfort. “I haven’t eaten all day, that’s why I’m feeling off. I don’t need to explain *shit* to you, 118.” He stands up and leaves the stall with confidence that he isn’t quite sure where he draws from. His t-shirt under his thin, bulletproof vest is slightly damp with sweat; his breath comes more stutteringly once he knows that he’s out of his fellow soldier’s eyesight. He closes his eyes with a little more distance putting him at ease and even though his mind stays silent, he *feels.*

He can’t hear clear voices but he can feel his soulmate’s confusion, he feels the man speaking to someone else. Taehyung takes a deep breath, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to pull his attention into a tunnel towards his soulmate’s mind.

Dully, voices come to him. Not clear like when the man had been talking to him but just quiet hints of *well, where is he and I can’t- him, he’S scAred.* Taehyung knows that there, in the middle of the camp, he can’t reach out for the man with any kind of safety and so he just whispers out- or what he thinks is a whisper- *thank you* to the man and and then pulls himself out of his mind before his soulmate can say anything else.

He doesn’t hear from his soulmate again for a few weeks- long enough to have him almost wondering whether the interaction had been real at all. 118 keeps sending him dirty looks over his porridge every morning; his eyes far too knowing, enough to make chills run down Taehyung’s body. That makes him sure that he *had* been in that bathroom stall and that he *had* been bent down with his abdomen in agony but he wonders if that is just a symptom of his long overdue insanity.
He is assigned to patrolling the Northern frontier for nearly the rest of the month as the number of villages ruined by famine continued to rise. The Alliance has a responsibility to the people under its protection to provide their basic necessities—food, water; that was all that one’s loyalty had come down to in their world.

Taehyung spends his days marching alongside the clean faced peacekeepers in their crisp, blue suits that are theoretically supposed to represent the Alliance’s blue but reflect none of the struggle that most of the Alliance’s people face. The murky, burnt blue uniforms of an Alliance soldier. The torn uniforms of stragglers or traitors who had been abandoned. The blue doors that represented every Alliance protected house; the bright, well maintained color at odds with the dirty, cracked concrete of the rest of their houses' exteriors. None of that showed itself in the cornflower blue, artfully designed clothing of those who were supposed to be the bringers of peace.

Taehyung and his fellow soldiers aren’t supposed to question the system, though. He protects the diplomats although they all know that none of them are in any real danger; the fear they can wield easily over their people is protection enough. He witnesses them handing out sacks of grain and rice with benevolent smiles but Taehyung knows well enough that their gifts are just tokens; a small bandage over a giant, gaping wound that inspires intense pain but is artfully ignored by anyone who could heal it.

He’s seen their giant storehouses of supplies that no one has access to but the officers with grade A access passes; he has guarded those storehouses before. They have more than enough to give their people more than a few sacks of supplies a township and repetitive gruel to those fighting for them. But these are expectations and expectations are dangerous.

After the bi monthly supply run, things settle down again. Taehyung’s life returns to that strange balance between silence and noise that it always is. Fight in the morning, gruel and rest for the required five hours and then repeat. Everything is so silent that a midnight meeting being called by their commander is a surprise— an ominous one.

It’s late enough into the year that Taehyung’s bulletproof suit and multiple layers of uniform are of comfort rather than a nuisance. Their troop is senior enough that their numbers dwindle into something comfortable enough to fit into a single chamber. Their sub commander is the one who takes over the room; their ever present commander is mysteriously absent.

She has a shredded Resistance uniform in front of her, conspicuously red against the dull table. “A foot soldier from Troupe 3 found this out by the east gate today. We all know what this is, and what the implications of it being found here are. We’re guessing this may be the uniform of the unidentified person who approached the gate a few days ago; they were shot at immediately. Indicated by the bullet holes on this uniform. No body was located.”
"The presence of a Resistance soldier at our gates is enough to initiate a shoot on sight motion. We’re doubling security at all four gates. We won’t be wasting any resources on additional troops to seed them out but we’ll be concentrating our regular patrols more strongly toward the Eastern quadrant. Any red uniforms, execute without any questions."

They are sent back to their quarters after a loud echo of yes ma’am and Taehyung, after weeks of silence, reaches out to his soulmate.

It’s a little difficult at first but not as hard as it had been before. Hello? um RE you there?

For a few moments, there is silence and he thinks that’s all the response he’s going to receive. And then- I’m here. Where have you been?

Taehyung asks a question to himself, but it isn’t the one his soulmate had just asked. “Where do your loyalties lie?” he whispers, as quietly as possible, so his mind doesn’t send the question away from him without asking. He isn’t quite sure of his answer but he knows the choice he’s going to make regardless of his better sense.

East quadrant. He pinches his eyes shut and whimpers slightly as his entire body revolts.

I- What’s wrong? Are you o-

Please. Eastern quadrant. It’s a shoot on sight order so steer clear. That’s all I can give you for now.

He cuts off his soulmate as best he can and tries to stay calm because he doesn’t want the man hearing great job, you’re a traitor now- pray that they won’t catch you or start counting which limbs you’re ready to let go of. At least they won’t take your hands because they need them-

Jesus. What are you- god, I’m going to get you out of there.

Taehyung lets himself smile, just briefly, at the idea of that. And then he whispers save yourself, first and hopes that his soulmate will listen.
Chapter End Notes

this was a bit of a build up?? chapter, as will be a few others before the boys come together. I know things are looking bleak for Taehyung right now but I promise things will look up in a while :c:

hope you enjoyed, see you next time x
The Wars were over by the time Taehyung was born. Those innumerable localised battles that took place all over Asia and Africa- people turning against governments, arms against arms. Before, being one of the enhanced was something that made you valuable in certain fields, or for research and study. After, those very powers turned into weapons against one’s own people.

Taehyung doesn’t know much about the West; there is very little they are allowed to know but he is aware that it isn’t like their land over there. When the world had begun to run out of resources that were expendable but valuable- electricity, oil- those countries had been protected. The countries with wealth and power and veto rights in the UN as it was then- a false representation of peace that came to be little more than a war council. The day the Relative Resources Agreement had been signed- by only five countries, but those were the ones that mattered- had been a dark one.

Suddenly, countries were cut off from resources based on their buying power in the market. The war torn countries had fallen first; countries where the West had created hostilities and then left them to fight them out. All support was stopped and they starved themselves out of existence. His parents had told him that some countries had felt like they could survive; more powerful Asian countries like South Korea and India who had had some amount of power in their hands but that wasn’t how it had gone. Even China, the only Asian country with a seat in the security council was easily ousted. Without foreign aid and with trucks from USA and Europe having unrestrained access to their resources, their overflowing populations were halved in a matter of months.

Sometimes his father had darkly joked about how their population problems, at the very least, had been solved. But the cost had been massive. The poor, of course, had died first. Poverty was a ghost that followed one even into a new world. Then even amongst those with money; the weak, the passive, those without any protection from powered individuals were all erased from this new plane of reality. Armed factions arose and in Korea, the Alliance took control, lead by their former Vice President. Smaller actions were born in response and now they were locked in a constant struggle; there were no ceasefires, no truces in their world.

There would be no saviour. There was nothing but escape over the armed borders of the country into the anonymity and relative peace of the other sphere of the world but those walls were near impenetrable- both keeping others out and keeping them in. All their people were to know was war. There was no nation, only loyalty to the militia you fought for, or which protected you. Evolution had taken its coldest place in their lives; it was kill, or be killed.

Taehyung- willingly or not- had been recruited onto the kill side of the world and yet, he had never really seen war. Well, not war in the way it had once been- shocking, crippling, out of the ordinary.
Their country was in a constant state of unrest but that had become an everyday. Just as no one questioned peace in the world before, living vigilant and in constant fear for your life became everyday too. Never in his years serving the Alliance had anything big changed; small events peppered here and there but his is a routine existence.

But something is coming; Taehyung feels it in the very bones that have electricity running up and down them. Conflict with the Resistance- and a few smaller factions- was barely something worth speaking about. It was considered a daily occurrence; there was always a small battle to be fought over a rusty old pipe well or a couple acres of wheat field. These small battles were the most lethal and most important in their world. Their ancestors had once fought for wealth and territory; it was these small things that had become their generation’s gold.

The last few days had been different.

Their sleep hours had been cut down and their meals had been changed from random meat to the high protein mush that keeps them awake, sometimes even in the few sleep hours they are allowed. Their commander had been missing all three days and their roster, emptied of all guard duties. The lower soldiers- classified as such because of their relatively mundane powers- were posted in place of them and instead of cyclic battlefield assignments, the soot-blood-smoke smell of battle became a daily thing. And yet, even as his groupmates grumble in private in the bathroom, as more and more Resistance and Alliance deaths pile up, Taehyung still has no idea why.

Why everything is descending into the madness of war time when just days ago, everything had been absolutely still, silent. The Alliance owes them no explanations; they offer none. They just hand out assignments and send soldiers to death, not knowing what they were even fighting for. What part of the system had been harmed- what cog in the Alliance’s machine that had been somehow affected badly enough to cause such a shift in the tireless schedule that had been in place for years.

Taehyung’s body is exhausted in just a few days; even his well trained soldier’s body feels the consequences of food and rest that just passes a necessary borderline to keep them going. He’s tired enough that he doesn’t need to try consciously to put up walls against his soulmate the way he had the first few days.

The man is stubborn as all hell; the first facet of his personality that Taehyung really realises. It’s almost endearing- the way his soulmate seems to refuse to back off even in the face of resistance. On the first day, especially, the commander’s instructions are mixed in with broken fragments of talk to me and where are you? In the beginning he just tries not responding, clenching his teeth against the thoughts he’s sure escape him anyway. Taehyung doesn’t know what his soulmate hears in his mind but it’s alarming enough that the man keeps trying to contact him- more fervently than before.
The silence in his mind comes only on the second night after hours of warding off attacks by a straggly group of former Alliance members in the Huangum district, trying to take advantage of the situation. Contacting his soulmate had taken effort, he remembers and his body is far too drained to supply any of that. It isn’t a proper solution, but it’s enough to keep his soulmate away— and safe—from his mind. Minds, he knows, are far too vulnerable to be trusted.

The air is dangerous; it sizzles with fear and suspicion and that’s why it’s more with resignation than anything else that Taehyung gets dressed in the darkest hours of the night a few days later. The new schedule keeps everyone carefully on the brink of exhaustion so he feels every morning like it’s been just an hour since his body went to sleep but he knows for a fact that night a few hours is all he gets.

The commander had banged on his room’s door irreverently to wake him, the harsh clattering sound clattering him out of sleep instantly. His chest heaved with panic for a few short moments— Taehyung wasn’t good with associating loud sounds with anything positive after a lifetime of war— until he remembered himself. He stood up on only slightly shaky legs to go to the door and opened it, wondering why they had bothered knocking at all since they were allowed no locks.

He straightened up on instinct when he saw his commander, announcing a short sir and bowing his head.

“Rec Room. Now, 129.” The man said shortly, turning on his heel to leave after the instruction was given. Taehyung’s head spun with questions even as he closed the door to wear a crisp uniform, wondering why he had received a personal invitation from the commander himself with the cold knowledge that there could be no good causal factor.

The walk to the Rec Room was frigid but the relative warmth of the room brought no comfort. Instantly, Taehyung was chilled to the bone at the sight of not only his commander and co-commander but also the six other commanders of their camp and the ever elusive camp director. He was a small man; weak, frail but protected by his position of power and his power; a rare type of torture that Taehyung had only heard stories of.

These people, collectively, had decided Taehyung’s life since he was taken. They had chosen the clothes he would wear, the battles he would fight, the food he would eat and the hours he would sleep. The air in the room told him that a decision was going to be made tonight, and he was not going to like it.
The camp director had a cold smile on his face; the kind of smile that Taehyung thought was better off not existing. “Ah, 118,” he said, his voice carrying all the chilling hollowness his voice did. Even his attempt at sounding kind was just a perversion of the idea. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’ve been following your work for a while now.”

*This isn’t the first time you’ve met me,* Taehyung thought; he had a singular, painful memory from his childhood that he was sure that this very man had been responsible for. Cold, cold realisation sunk into him that maybe the reason he was here for a second time—standing in front of the camp director—mirrored the first.

“I’m sure you know that our carefully crafted system is being… meddled with by those rats.” His face is disdainful, breaking his composure slightly. “You don’t need to know much but the Eastern Power Station has been temporarily disabled.”

Taehyung’s mind translates the man’s words as he says them. *The power station’s been taken by the Resistance.* And he knows, he *knows* what this means and his hands are shaking ever so slightly where they’re clasped behind his back. *No, no, no, no,* he chants and he can’t stop his thoughts from rushing out, crying out for the only person he can scream his fear to.

*Wh-* The fragmented, now familiar voice is finally back after days of silence. Even as he stands there, nodding at everything the commanders are saying, he tries to focus on that voice. The confusion it holds. The way it tries to break through the walls he had thrown up all week. Instead of any response, he just remembers that moment from his childhood that’s inspiring the fear flooding through his veins. He isn’t sure how much of it his soulmate feels but the man falls back into silence in his mind. He remembers

*Metal cuffs around his hands. Not just his wrists but all around his hands. His palms were sweaty but that was the least of his discomfort. There’s a war in his tiny body; a war between his adrenaline and the exhaustion of being drained of his powers. His parents had always reprimanded him for being careless with his electricity but the scary commander had told him that if he didn’t keep the power steady he would get in trouble.*

*They had put him in a dark room away from the room where the big meeting was happening. He knew that they needed him to keep all the lights on because the power was down and important people were visiting. His sub commander was watching him impassively and he didn’t want her to see the way his lower lip was wobbling.*
Another pulse went through him as someone drew more electricity from his already exhausted body. Someone must have felt like they needed another light. Taehyung’s body gave up and he fell onto his knees onto the plastic insulation they had placed to make sure his electricity didn’t go anywhere they didn’t want it. He stopped feeling anything at all at some point.

A few hours later, an older man with a smile that even a younger, muddled Taehyung knew was just wrong nudged his face up with a finger under his chin. The man regarded the tears dried onto his face with disinterest and said only a cold good boy, patted his head once and then turned on his heel and left.

Years had passed since that dark, painful night and some things have changed. The camp leader has more wrinkles on his face. Taehyung is older, and has more control over his powers. He also has a secret in his head now. But the director is still in control and against everything in him, Taehyung is still afraid.

Chapter End Notes

exposition and angst: a summary of this fic so far.

honestly, I feel like apologising 200000 times to Tae every time I write a chapter of this story because I am being a complete meanie but sOON ALL WILL BE WELL. *pats Tae's head comfortingly*

I know the lack of taekook/ot7 is also a lil frustrating but don't worry that's going to be fixed very soon ;)
They lead him into the building- somewhere away from their base camp that they brought him to, blinded temporarily by one of their commanders’ unsuitably gentle powers. Taehyung can see that everything has been arranged in preparation for this moment. That meeting wasn’t a request; it was a notification. There’s a chain and metal contraption standing proudly in the middle of the room, anchored by concrete. Handcuffs ready to bind him and a near complete suit of chainmail of some kind to draw, he can only assume, the maximum possible electricity from him.

He isn’t sure why they’re bothering to show him the room a day in advance; it’s likely just another one of their mind games, a way to show him how helpless he will be and get him to submit. Taehyung follows them as they show him everything expectedly, excitedly; every prop and tool they’ve used to create their perfect electricity chamber with him in the center. The stage has been set and all that it’s now awaiting is its lead character.

Taehyung is taken back to the base, right to his room, then. Get your rest, his commander tells him, you’ll need your strength. They shut the light off when they leave, which tells him it isn’t up for argument that he’s meant to rest but Taehyung finds it laughable that they expect him to catch any hours of sleep at all. Anticipation is tingling him almost as constantly as it did when he was a child and not yet immune to the way his own electricity gently buzzed up and down his own skin. But the anticipation isn’t excitement; here in the darkness of his room, Taehyung can finally admit to himself that he is terrified.

His breath trembles. In, out. In, out. He thinks about it for a few seconds; about what he longs to do. Taehyung tells himself that it’s just to check up on the other man; completely altruistic and separate from his own comfort. He isn’t sure what he deserves but he knows his soulmate deserves to be safe, even from Taehyung himself.

It’s dark in his room, just a little light filters in through the high window and it’s quiet enough that he can hear his own breathing. It’s the perfect, most lonely, time to make a decision that he might not allow himself at other times.

Taehyung flips around so his cheek is pressed against his pillow and he closes his eyes tight. He feels like he’s wishing for something, and maybe he is. By now it isn’t difficult, or painful to reach for him. The one who was born with his life twined with Taehyung’s.

Hello? Taehyung thinks and oddly, his voice sounds as small as he feels even though he isn’t really speaking at all. He isn’t sure what he’s hoping for and he hates how indecisive he is. His soulmate is
bound to be frustrated too but his voice is gentle when he reaches back a few moments later.

Hi. Where have you been?

I’m sorry, I wish this could be different. But I can’t- I don’t know how to change this. Taehyung bites his lower lip as his eyes sting at his own reality. I just- I had to ask. Do you feel me? I mean, can you feel what I feel?

Why are you asking this? His soulmate sounds agitated; likely sick and tired of his back and forth, of the way he can’t settle on holding on or letting go. They’re strangers to each other even if their bond says otherwise and Taehyung so badly longs for them to become something more. To know each other beyond just a few short, broken conversations.

Please, he thinks, eyes shut tight, just tell me.

I mean- sometimes. Not much. I feel where you are and I just, know what’s happening around you most of the time. But nothing clear. Everything a little blurry and distant. Taehyung recognises the way he describes their bond; it’s the way he feels his soulmate too. He doesn’t hear all words his soulmate does, or feel everything around him. But he’s like a constant part of Taehyung’s consciousness; a second person he can feel somewhere in his chest- far away, but close enough to feel like he isn’t alone.

I understand, Taehyung thinks, I just wanted to let you know. In the next few days… weeks, I’m not sure how long. There’s going to be something… really painful. Just don’t be afraid. It isn’t fatal.

Wh- what the fuck? Can you just- a groan of frustration, bordering on anger- Can you be honest with me for once. Please. You can’t just tell me these things and then banish me into silence again. What are they doing to you?

I can’t- Taehyung sits up on his bed so his sheets pool around his waist; he clenches his fists around them. I can’t tell you. It’s to keep you safe. You and those with you. The less you know, it’s safer.

I’m not a fucking child. I can take care of myself and I can take care of you. Let us protect you.

I can’t-
Please. Just a name. A place. Just tell me what they’re doing to you.

No names. I’m… I’m 118. A number, that’s all.

I can’t even begin to- Taehyung feels the tightness in his chest that isn’t entirely his own; his soulmate is conflicted, frustrated. Okay, no names. Just please, please stay safe. As safe as you can. I’ll be there I promise. Soon.

The knowledge of what’s going to happen the next day has Taehyung’s resolve weaker than it normally would be. His eyes flood with tears and he has to bite his lips even harder, on the verge of breaking skin. Will you? Will you come for me?

I will, I promise. Just hold on for me.

I don’t know. Taehyung covers his mouth with his hand, chest shuddering with repressed emotion. He feels overwhelmed and so, so afraid. He knows there’s pain in his near future, his powers sucked dry and his energy drained. I don’t know how long I can. I’m going to try.

If something’s happening tomorrow… maybe you should rest.

I- I can’t. My mind won’t stay quiet.

Hey, his soulmate’s voice has a smile painted through it, I’m in your mind and I resent that. Taehyung smiles at that, lying back down and curling up. Somehow he feels warmer than he ever has under that paper thin blanket every soldier in their camp is assigned. You know, I know a few songs. From before.

A song? I haven’t heard one since I was a kid with my parents.

My mom was the one who sang to me, too. Should I sing you my favorite?
He nods vehemently, before realising the man can’t see him. *Yes, please,* he whispers into the silence of the night and he falls asleep to the sweet sound of his soulmate singing to him.

The chains are heavy around his wrists and neck but not as heavy as he remembers them feeling when he was younger. He’s sure it isn’t the same set they had dressed him in back then; that had been a rag tag collection of metal chains thrown together at last minute. This time, he can tell they’ve taken their time and perfected their method.

One of the things that had come of the removal of most electricity from their world was that people had returned to handiwork in a way that had faded with the growth of technology Before. There is artistry in the device that binds him; hard work and someone’s effort in every link of the chainmail, in the thick metal strips wrapped around his wrists and neck.

In a final touch, his commander steps in front of him with a round elaborate amalgamation of metal with a sombre expression on his face. Sombre enough that Taehyung’s fear is trumped by his confusion for a few short moments. And then his commander orders *bend your head forward* and he knows what’s about to happen instantly.

Taehyung takes one last deep breath and then allows the mask to be placed over his head and suddenly, his vision is shuttered through panels of metal. The room was dark to begin with but now he feels trapped more intensely than before. He already knew his breathing would be restricted but the sudden realisation of that has him panting quick, slightly panicked breaths that tire his chest out before the process has even begun.

The room is quickly emptied of people- it has been turned into a generator of sorts with him as the nucleus- no one would be able to avoid electrocution for long if they stood there when his body started pumping electricity out. He’s off their main grounds again; Taehyung guesses at one of the hidden away power stations, one that hasn’t been taken over by the Resistance.

For a few moments all he hears is the loud, frantic beating of his own heartbeat in his ears. And then, at a distance, the *click* of the doors locking over multiple times. He steels himself for the first burst which will undoubtedly be the most painful; not yet numbed by his powers being stretched to thin, or grown accustomed to the feeling.
When it hits, it feels like someone has struck his chest with an iron hammer. A sudden, gaping loss. Powers were never meant, his mother had told him, to be harnessed completely, only to be sprinkled generously through one’s life with training and care. Taehyung’s body seems to flounder, acting on its own accord as he occasionally jerks forward or wobbles as the power ebbs and flows.

For a brief moment, he thinks he hears a now familiar voice in his mind but after some time, he feels nothing at all.

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A day passes. Then, days. Taehyung is lost in a sort of fever; his mind is held captive by his weakness the same way his body is trapped by the metal frame. They let him out twice a day to feed him and it’s through those meals that he keeps track of time. They don’t feed him the protein mush anymore- no, they need their power generator to be energetic and strong- and so, for the first time in years, Taehyung is given actual meat, and bread, cooked vegetables and warm food. He counts these things as small wins.

It’s on the… night? Night, after his seventeenth meal, that there is a break in the pattern. It isn’t Taehyung that causes it. Instead it strikes him, with all the force that him finding his soulmate had. After living years in a structured, monotonous pattern, these sudden changes give him whiplash.

His sense have been dulled by days of feeding the Alliance’s generators but he still hears gunshots ring out outside his door; sudden, shocking sounds at the always silent power base. The violence draws closer to his door- Taehyung hears it in the loud shouts, the shots firing, the rushed footsteps and dull thud of bodies hitting the ground. And then finally, in the click of the heavy metal door of his room. It swings open.

Taehyung’s vision is blurry, still largely cut off because of the metal covering his face. But still, he would know that shade of red anywhere. Nearly as dark as blood, just as haunting.

The Resistance is here.

Chapter End Notes
a bit of a longer interaction between taekook and at long last, everyone's favorite child Tae is safe(ish)! anyone want to join me in assassinating everyone who's ever hurt him? sounds like a plan.

hope you enjoyed, and see you next time x
It’s been weeks but his face is as familiar as it had inexplicably been the first time they had met. Taehyung is hit, once more, with that ridiculous feeling of safety and homecoming even as his body remains trapped in its metallic cage and two strangers enter the building. One who is simultaneously less of a stranger and still the most confounding person he has ever met. He doesn’t need to see the man’s scar to recognise him but Taehyung still peers through the metal bars cutting across his vision to catch a quick glimpse of the crescent; slightly lighter than the sun darkened skin it sits on.

He can’t see him clearly and if he was any other soldier, just brushing past him in a short moment in the midst of war, Taehyung would have likely forgotten his face entirely. The man next to his soulmate is a prime example; he swears the necklace resting against the red of his uniform once belonged to Jimin but Taehyung has no idea who he is.

But his soulmate- his soulmate is different. Taehyung recognises him and deep inside him, he thinks his soul knows the other man. Even if they are strangers in this life, they were always meant to twine together. He knows the man recognises him, too, even within his metal cage, shuttered away from the world.

For a few long moments, it’s like the whole world fades and all an overwhelmed Taehyung can hear is the sound of his own heartbeat, feeling the breaths moving his chest up and down. And then, all at once, his senses come back to him.

“-dangerous!” The man wearing Jimin’s necklace is yelling, “This isn’t worth your life, you idiot!”

His grasp on his soulmate’s arm looks hard, painful, and for a brief moment Taehyung’s powers tug at him to protect his soulmate. His powers are the most primal part of him and they want to tear at, they want to punish this man who dares to cause any kind of pain to his destined. If this is anything close to what his soulmate had felt the first time they had met, it’s no wonder the man had protected a mere stranger so instinctively.

But the more logical part of Taehyung recognises concern in the way the man approaches his soulmate, the way he fights against the stubborn man with a hissed, “Jeongguk, snap out of it!”

Jeongguk, Taehyung muses, bizarrely, even in the midst of the battle and the sound of his electricity crackling loudly against the metal conductors all around the room. Jeongguk, he decides he likes that
name, even if it’s something to lose for the rest of his life, now. It’s a name he’ll protect with his own life, he decides, one of two that now hold such power on him.

*Jeongguk* now moves towards Taehyung, ignoring the man covered in what looks like scales beside him. The electrically charged atmosphere has his hair standing on its end; something that might have been comical in another world but in theirs is anything but. It’s only the raw energy in the air that manipulates his soulmate’s body, though; even without the strenuous effort Taehyung pours into keeping him safe, his electricity seems to avoid the man completely. His soulmate- *Jeongguk* -is protected, his powers- trained to destroy- refuse to touch his vulnerable, all too human skin.

Taehyung hears the scaly man let out a sound of pain in the periphery of his vision; his electricity must have struck, dangerous and indiscriminate as it usually is. But he doesn’t really notice, not when suddenly, breathlessly, his soulmate is right there- his face close enough that he now knows the exact shade of brown his eyes are, the way his lashes are thick, with crude edges and can smell the smoke and blood off his skin, breathing hard. It’s him. He’s magnificent. Taehyung can smell the death on him and if not as his soulmate, he already knows this man deserves his respect as a warrior.

The man reaches out with both hands outstretched for his mask and then- hesitation flickers visibly in his eyes- he pauses. *I- is it you?* The voice is tentative, uncertain in his mind. Touching the mask is a death sentence if his electricity doesn’t turn off and his soulmate knows it.

Taehyung is too exhausted to reach out with his mind and so he just nods. It’s such a small gesture that he takes a deep breath, steels himself and nods again. More pronounced this time. His soulmate bites his lip and whispers a soft *okay* and then reaches more confidently for the mask. He draws closer and for a few moments, his powers don’t respond. They rage on- violent and angry and destructive- and Taehyung musters all his energy to try and control them. And then to stop his soulmate from coming closer, terrified that the old stories were wrong and he can kill this man without meaning. To.

But then Jeongguk’s hands touch the metal and like a switch, everything goes still and silent. So quiet that it’s overwhelming. Taehyung has never realised how loud his electricity can be until that one moment of stillness after days of being surrounded by it until it ran as unnoticed as white noise, yet loud enough to drown out all rational thought.

The mask is lifted off and his face is instantly chilled by the air coming in contact with it for the first time in hours. His skin is pale, clammy under the mask; he knows that he likely looks like a ghost to his soulmate. Taehyung isn’t sure what he wanted their first actual meeting to be like but he wishes he could have shown his soulmate that he was a warrior, too; that he could protect and fight, too. He hopes his soulmate- *Jeongguk*- won’t forget that after seeing him standing there, shaking and breathless.
There is danger in the air; Taehyung knows that backup is likely on its way and that he’s valuable enough that the Alliance won’t go easy on them. But just like the first time, everything goes calm and quiet with them facing each other. He should be afraid, he should be very afraid but he feels at peace.

His soulmate lifts his hands to touch Taehyung but he flinches away, instinctive after coming to associate most touches only with violence. “I’m sorry,” the man says, voice identical to the one in his head, “I’m sorry, you’re safe now.”

Safe? Taehyung asks. He’s too unsure to voice the thought; it sounds tentative even in his own mind. The man nods. His companion is yelling behind them, something about hurry the fuck up and seriously? soulmates? but he can barely hear him. Safe isn’t a word that’s familiar to him; it isn’t a word that should be thrown around lightly because no one in their world is safe and certainly not two soldiers that stand in opposite colors, tied together by their souls.

“I’m sorry,” is the first thing he says to Jeongguk. “You should go. You won’t ever be safe if I’m with you.” It’s a lot of words, too many for a voice that hasn’t spoken in so long and they catch in his throat. He swallows down the itch in his throat.

Jeongguk’s eyebrows furrow. It does a funny little stretch thing to the scar on his face. “I’m not leaving here without you.”

“You shouldn’t have-” Taehyung tires out from those words. He’s still buzzing with the remnants of the high currents he had been releasing for hours and the sudden absence of them is strange. You shouldn’t have come for me.

I didn’t come here for you. Or… maybe I did. We wanted to find the electricity and it’s you. It’s you and I’m not leaving you here.

Taehyung shakes his head weakly, backing away as best he can with the heavy chains- and exhaustion- still weighing his limbs down. No. Go now. Before they get backup. Instead of heeding his warning, the man reaches out for his hands, knowing full well that he can’t resist as his fingers bleed darkness that breaks his shackles apart. He realises for the first time just how sacred this bond is- how powerful a thing it is to strike someone powerless. Can he trust this stranger; benevolent and beautiful as he seems?

He watches the metal resist for a few weak moments under the onslaught of darkness until it melts apart easily. The first touch of cold air against clammy skin doesn’t bring freedom but rather has him collapsing down, heaving up what’s left of the huge meal his commander had brought him hours ago. This is the biggest betrayal; the ultimate betrayal to the Alliance. There’s no way to come back
from it and his entire body seems to flash with rebellion. Jeongguk rubs his back and stays silent, giving him time to adjust.

His friend, however, doesn’t seem so patient. “Jeongguk, we have a couple moments if we’re lucky. Get him moving.”

Taehyung watches his soulmate’s eyes flash with something akin to irritation, tossing a look at the man, before turning back to him. He’s right, he sticks with talking to him through their bond, perhaps guessing that option is softer, gentler, we have to move. Can you stand up now? I promise we’ll keep you safe.

With a deep breath- he’s doing this, he fucking doing this- Taehyung nods. His strength has returned to him slightly, no longer being constantly drained, and he only supports himself a little on the man beside him. He wobbles only once and slowly, steadily, they make their way to the entrance. Taehyung can see the two more clearly in the light outside- he hadn’t even realised it was morning- the aura of dark, void-like black that outlines his soulmate, the way the sunlight glints off of the blue-green scales that dance across his companion’s body. They are ready for battle and he grits his teeth and summons his electricity’s familiar warmth; he can fight, too.

And then a hand comes down on his skin- not his soulmate’s, and thus, not protected with an unrestrained, inexplicable love that comes from nowhere- and his electricity reacts. He feels the current leaving him on instinct, knowing he’s surrounded by danger, he’s so hyperaware after being drained for an indeterminable period of time. It’s only one moment later that he becomes aware of the scales that crowd the hand that had touched him.

“For fuck’s sake!” Taehyung hears the scaly man say, already slightly dizzy from the burst of power even though it had been just momentary. His body is tired; not ready to defend him unless staying alive is that defence. “We don’t have time for this.”

Taehyung hears his soulmate’s hyung, no! and is confused for a second, before a hard object hits his head, hard, and suddenly everything… everything is muffled and distant. Jeongguk catches him as he falls, body moving as if to shield him just a moment too late. He can hear muffled shouting above him but it’s too distant and garbled to be clear to him. The last time he was carried away with his senses shut down this way, Taehyung woke up on the Alliance base and was never able to leave.

He feels like he’s stuck in a sort of purgatory- he doesn’t know where he’s being taken, whether his soulmate is enough to keep him alive there. But Taehyung also knows that the Alliance will lock him up in a hole and lose the key and drain him until his heart stops beating if they find him.
He can hear static in his mind where his soulmate tries to soothe him but it’s hardly less garbled than the world around him. Taehyung wonders if his thoughts elude Jeongguk, too, not that there is much thought at all. Stuck in that strange space of half-consciousness with his own well developed mortal fear of the Alliance, he remembers the song the kids from his village once used to sing. Taehyung hopes his soulmate can’t hear it, haunting and true in its horror. Even after decades, after he’s forgotten his parents’ names, he still remembers the words perfectly.

One, two,

They’re coming for you,

Three, four,

Lock your doors,

Five, six,

No time left for tricks,

Seven, eight,

No time left to wait,

Nine, ten,

Goodnight, my little friend.

Chapter End Notes

I lost all restraint with this scene and it's long and rambly and essentially 2k of just one moment and I'm soRRY. but I hope y'all didn't mind. I promise things will move along a lil next time. Thanks for reading x

(and don't forget to support scenery because our boy deserves it so much)

(also I'm sorry I didn't get around to comment last time, I'll reply right now eep)
When you grow up around powered individuals, you develop a sense for it. The way they move through the air, the way molecule moved to accommodate them and the way they taste, the way they smell. Taehyung’s electricity smells like smoke and a burnt kind of spice that lingers for a few moments after it fizzes out. He can recognise those fighting by him- especially those he grew up with in the barracks- without even turning around to see them. The tickle of the Commander’s powers that they had been conditioned to expect violence right after.

When he wakes up, there’s a familiar note in the air around him. He knows- Taehyung knows this crisp, clean scent that moves like something cold into his chest but he just can’t recognise it. His mind is still foggy with sleep and it’s too early in the slow dawn of consciousness in him for panic to strike just yet. Taehyung just lays there- the lumpy pillow a small comfort to the back of his head that’s aching something fierce. His body’s been through the worst of the abuse and yet that simple blow to his head has left him throbbing in pain, hard enough that his back teeth and cheek muscles ache. That lizard-man sure had one good punch.

His eyes feel stuck together with exhaustion- this is the first time his body has truly rested in weeks after all- but Taehyung pries them open with some effort. Above him is a room; so grimy that he can barely recognise that it was once a dull white. It’s completely bare, as most ceilings are, and though his body protests he attempts to move because an empty dirty ceiling is not going to tell him anything he needs to know. Taehyung can feel his muscles stretch, his bones creak in protest as he hoists himself onto his elbows with a soft grunt. He closes his eyes tightly and then opens them again and takes in the room around him; it looks like a generic hospital ward if he’s ever seen one.

“129?” A voice comes from beside him; not the one his mind tells him belongs to his soulmate but someone else- someone familiar. His mind rushes to fill in the blanks and filter out possibilities and oh my god.

“Jimin?” He twists his neck to the side and sure enough, there he is, as soft in the face of their adverse world and somewhat resilient at the same time as he ever was. It’s shocking to see him after all these months, after that one dark night punctuated by flashing violence where the man had disappeared into the night and never returned. Taehyung remembers the brief friendship that existed between them but he also remembers the way his bunk mates had spat out his numbers angrily for the extra hours they all got because of him, he remembers the taste of grimy water being thrown at him as he was interrogated as a possible coconspirator. He doesn’t begrudge Jimin his freedom but the man feels almost like a stranger to him now. Taehyung is stuck somewhere strange, somewhere tentative; anonymity that seemed so precious in the Alliance camp now just feels like a very real thing separating them.
“I’m so glad you’re okay,” Jimin is saying, eyes wet, “I wish you had come with me. At least you’re here now and…” There’s too many words. The smaller man always did have a penchant for rambling; in worry, in anger, in excitement. Taehyung had always thought the habit was endearing but his head is still throbbing and he feels bereft enough that he tactlessly asks the question that lingers in his mind.

“Where is- do you know… Jeongguk? Where is he?” His soulmate. Curiosity burns through him and he wants to know, he needs to know. It’s beyond curiosity. His body yearns for its other half now that he knows he’s so close. Where are you? he asks again, this time reaching out to the man himself. Taehyung feels irrational anxiety course through him. That he’s been left behind, that he’s been forgotten.

JMin must see the fear on his face so he places a hand on his shoulder. Tentative. “He’s here. He’s been here the whole time you’ve been asleep. I’ll ask Yoongi to send for him.”

I’m here. I’m coming. Don’t worry angel.

“No he’s- he’s on his way.” Taehyung says quietly. His face is warm. He hasn’t heard someone call him so softly, so comfortably in many years; he’s sure his parents must have had special names for him but he can’t remember them.

JMin’s eyes grow a little wide at that. “So it’s true,” he smiles slightly, “You both are soulmates.”

Taehyung’s chest tightens at the thought of someone else knowing; he knows JMin isn’t going to hurt them but it terrifies him that anyone else could know this weakness of theirs. His arms come up to wrap around himself in some kind of half hearted defence.

“Don’t worry, 129,” the older man says softly, “I’ve got a soulmate, too. I know what you’re feeling.” Taehyung looks up at that, curious. “Yeah, he’s the man who gave you that head wound. He’s sorry; he won’t say it but I can hear it.”

Taehyung rests his chin on his knees, tilting his head slightly against the strain it puts on his neck. “I think I saw him once,” he says, “He was wearing your necklace. I didn’t hurt him when I saw that. Just… just in case-”

There’s a soft click as the door to the room slides open; his soulmate stands there, halted in the doorway. Jeongguk’s eyes are wider in peace- or maybe he’s just surprised- his hair sits softer, his
lips unconsciously parted. Jimin stands when he sees him, but not before squeezing his shoulder, just once. “I’ll see you later, 129. You’re safe now.”

Taehyung nods at him, taking in the sight of the friend he had thought he had lost forever one more time before he left. Then the door shuts behind Jimin and it’s quiet. It’s just the two of them.

He feels small, sitting there on the metal framed bed. There’s a single lightbulb in the room that’s been left off in favour of wide open windows that let sunlight paint their shadows onto the walls. The emotions that churn inside Taehyung have his powers flicking the light on, first tremulous and then bright and brilliant. His soulmate just barely looks at it, focusing on him instead. Taehyung wants to curl in on himself but instead he reaches out a tentative hand for the man in front of him.

Jeongguk looks slightly hesitant but meets his hand halfway. When their fingers touch, the light blinks out. His breath catches in his throat.

Don’t worry, he hears his soulmate’s voice but not out loud, like Jeongguk thinks it might just overwhelm him, it’s all safe now. Jimin took care of you. And we weren’t followed. You’re safe here.

Taehyung hesitates a little, checking his own comfort and whether that reflects in the way the man in front of him holds himself, and before twining their fingers together. “Safe?” is the first thing he asks, voice scratchy as it walks up his throat. Then- convinced- he continues. “Thank you. For getting me out of the extraction. It was- I needed it. Needed your help.”

Jeongguk has a sweet smile; it tugs slightly on the edges because he is a child of the war too and none of them, Taehyung knows, are truly innocent or untouched. But that’s what makes the sweetness so special; the way his lips curve upward, the way his eyes crinkle lightly, the way the little moon on his face arches deeper.

“You’re my soulmate,” he says simply; it’s the first time he’s heard Jeongguk address him directly out loud, “Of course I would come for you. It’s my soul bound duty.” Duty, Taehyung had nearly forgotten himself and the world they lived in. The man hadn’t come for him because he cared; it was because a soulmate was the most delicate weakness to have and vulnerabilities had to be hidden under lock and key. He isn’t going to be weakness; Taehyung refuses to be.

“Well,” he says, throat dry, “Thank you. I can- thank you for your hospitality and for caring for me. I can take it from here.”
Jeongguk’s eyebrows draw together at that. “What do you mean? You can’t go back. They’ll hurt you. They’ll *kill* you.”

“No, they won’t. They need my currents to keep their camp running.”

“Listen to me,” Jeongguk’s hold on his hand grows the slightest bit tighter; he uses that to sit them both down so they’re facing each other on the metal framed bed. He tentatively holds Taehyung’s face gently between his palms, asking *is this okay?* Taehyung nods; his eyes don’t know where to focus.

“You told me things. Things from your life in the camp and I don’t want you to go back there again. You will be safe here; Jimin hyung will protect you. *I* will protect you. You will never have to feel that way again.”

“I don’t-” Taehyung reaches up and pushes the man’s hand away from one of his cheeks. Just one. “I don’t need protection. I can fight; I’ve been fighting my whole life. Thank you for saving me but I don’t know what peace looks like and I don’t think becoming a part of the Resistance is where I can find it.”

“You’re right, there isn’t peace here. But we’re fighting the people who hurt you for so long. You can find a home here.” Jeongguk sighs. “I’m sorry for not treating you like the warrior you are. You are so powerful; I have no doubt you could challenge me in a minute.”

“I wouldn’t hurt you.” The words are indignant; Taehyung feels out of touch with the very idea of it.

“You can’t.”

“I *wouldn’t.*”

They sit there then, caught in a stalemate. Taehyung reaches for the hand he had pushed away and he holds it. Gentle and forgiving.

“Will you stay?” Jeongguk asks and his voice is hopeful, “I don’t even know your name.”
Taehyung sighs at that reminder. “I know yours now. I tried- but I heard it when your friend called you. It’s just one more thing to lose. All of this- it’s just more to lose.” But in his mind, he tells his soulmate, yes, yes I’ll stay because fear is a powerful master but he has realised he’s more afraid of having nothing to lose at all. Of going back to living in literal metal chains the drain him and blank faces around him and no names to remember.

Jeongguk’s eyes brighten when he hears the words and they sit there for some time, just looking. Taehyung knows the hands he’s holding are those of a warrior; calloused hands that have killed, that have drained lives. He knows that the man in front of him has danced with violence just like him and yet, there together, everything feels gentle and safe.

“My name,” he says quietly after a few long moments in the silence that surrounds them. He pauses. His throat feels like it’s closing up and all he can hear is you’ll be punished you aren’t a person you are a part of the Alliance your name is ours now forget forget forget 129 forget 129 129 forget and he has to bite his lip sharply to pull himself back to reality.

You don’t have to tell me. 129? If that’s what you want-

No, he thinks, then says out loud, “No.” Because 129 is what was printed onto his skin when he was a child in a dark room not valuable enough to waste anaesthesia on. 129 is what his commanders called him before they shoved him into battle or to be drained of electricity and he doesn’t want to hear Jeongguk say that again.

“Taehyung,” he says, “My name is Taehyung.”

The moment, perhaps, could have done without him immediately keeling over and retching even though he had absolutely nothing in his stomach but there’s a palm on his back and for the first time in over a decade, he had spoken his name. Their hold over him still chokes the words but they are his words and he still fears what he could do to his soulmate but not enough to let him go. It’s the first battle in his entire life that he feels like he’s won.

Chapter End Notes

welcome to another chapter (aka one single scene that I ramble on and on and on about) hehe. hope you enjoyed (at long last) interaction between taekook and vmin!!! this was probably the most peaceful chapter in the entire fic. I know vmin isn't as fluffy as I usually write it but I think it's realistic that there's a distance between them; some residual, unconscious resentment. And taekook still has a long ways to go. but step by step, fight by fight c:
End Notes

hope you enjoyed!
leave a comment, a little encouragement goes a long way c:

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