

Winter is harsh in this era, but it carries with it a sense of comfort and tranquility as well. Naoko always enjoys the sense of contentment that comes with the colder seasons, even if it's hard to deal with now that they're in the stone world.

This winter, like the one during the war against Tsukasa's empire, carries with it a sense of urgency as well. They need to go to the other side of the world to find the source of petrification, and to do that, they have to build a ship.

Naoko knew Senku would win the competition when it came to the blueprint they would follow, but it was still a bit funny to see Yo and Magma's reactions to the ship Senku presented. It makes her chuckle every time she thinks back on it.

And so, the Kingdom of Science starts a new project with building the ship from Senku's blueprint. They undertook many projects before this, so Naoko knows they're prepared for it. After all, back-breaking labor is kind of the thing with Senku and what he presents to them. It's exciting nonetheless, starting to build a ship that will take them to the other side of the world.

Everyone doesn't just focus on building the ship; there has to be moments where they engage in more fun activities or it'll burn everyone out. Senku knows this and thus he plans for a day where the Kingdom of Science participates in what reminds Naoko of the Winter Olympics.

She guesses Senku planned for this to give the physical side of their Kingdom something they excel in since the more scientific things go over their heads. It's another thing that proves to her yet again that Senku is a capable leader. He's amazing at telling what people need so they don't get overwhelmed with all the work that goes into the projects he presents to them.

Naoko participates in the games, even though she's not the most physical person, and Gen does as well. Gen... she was always drawn towards him, even in the old world. His wit and tenacity is something that Naoko was enamored by. He was unique in both his personality and capabilities and she knows their Kingdom wouldn't have gotten as far as it did without him and his mentalist skills.

Gen is a person Naoko doesn't understand how she truly feels about him. She cares for him, that much is obvious, but to what end? Her feelings for him are all garbled and messy. It's frustrating but she's used to it; she's been feeling such ways towards the mentalist for a good while now. It's just a puzzle she'll have to figure out.

The games ended late in the evening, and Naoko laughed when Nikki was declared the winner. Taiju was in second and Magma came in third, something she could see irritated him by the glare

he gave the ones who beat him. But it did what it meant to and boost morale, but the winter chill sets in as the Kingdom scatters to gather warmth for the evening.

Naoko sits by a fire, warming her hands as a slight shiver racks through her. Yes, winter was unforgiving in this world, but it's not unbearable. She can't imagine what Senku and Taiju went through in the first winter when they were revived, but at the same time, Naoko doesn't want to picture it.

"What's a beauty like you doing here, sitting by herself?" a familiar voice echoes from behind her. Naoko looks over her shoulder and smiles at Gen as he approaches her and sits next to her. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Not at all," Naoko replies, her cheeks warming at being so close to Gen. Another thing that confuses her about how she truly feels for him, but she tucks it away for another day. "Those games were fun, weren't they?"

"Quite. Dear Senku's mind is quite the remarkable one," Gen remarks as he leans back on his hands. "I always was captivated by the way he thinks and the fact he kept count of the time the entire time he was petrified? Marvelous, really."

Naoko nods; she too was amazed by the fact Senku kept such an accurate reading of the time for the 3700 years humanity was petrified. She and Gen often spoke of how they were both grateful that Senku took them into the Kingdom of Science for their own different reasons.

Naoko was because she didn't agree with Tsukasa's view of the world, while Gen thought Senku was an incredible mind from the moment he saw the engraving he wrote by the miracle cave. He mentioned it to him a while ago but Naoko assumes she's the only one, besides him, who knows what Gen truly feels about their leader.

"Anyway, enough about him." Gen looks over at Naoko and gives her a smile. She's never seen him give such an authentic one to anyone else before, which makes her wonder if she's the only one who sees this side of him. "You look rather frozen. You can come over and warm yourself up if you like."

"U-Um..." Her cheeks go bright red at the thought of cuddling with... what is Gen to her? But she chews on the inside of her cheek as she looks into his eyes. She can't tell what's looking back at her, but she can see that Gen truly doesn't want her to freeze.

Besides, friends can cuddle against each other to stay warm. She's sure cavemen and women did it too. It's that train of thought that makes her scoot over to the mentalist and bury herself against his body.

*He's so warm*, she thinks to herself as she buries her head against Gen's chest. He's quick to wrap his arms around her smaller body and rest his head on hers. The fire crackles and burns, adding to the warmth. She notices him take her hands and hold them within his, something that makes her cheeks burn even brighter.

Silence passes between them as they sit by the fire, the stars twinkling overhead as the moon basks her glow onto the occupants of the stone world. It's peaceful, amiable, and quiet. Naoko can't remember a time where she felt this content. In the old world, she desperately tried to prove herself time and again to her mother while Naoki resented her for being the golden child.

She couldn't help it. She didn't choose to be the star of their mother's eye. Naoko hopes that, one day, if she and her twin ever reunite, that she can set things straight with him. She hates that they were so distant and that maybe, just maybe, this new world will offer her a chance to have a better connection with Naoki.

"You look rather deep in thought, Naoko."

Shaking her head, Naoko nuzzles closer to Gen. *This doesn't mean anything, it doesn't*, she tells herself repeatedly. It's cold and they're sharing warmth by being close to each other. That's all this is.

"If you don't wish to say what's on your mind, that's quite alright," he says after a few moments of silence. "Just know that if you need to share your feelings or thoughts at any time, I'm here for you."

Those words make her hesitate. She's never heard Gen offer to listen to anyone else before, not even Senku. Is she truly so special to him that he's willing to offer a compassionate ear if she needs to talk? No. Gen never does anything without a reason, no matter what it is. That's part of who he is. He thinks about every possible angle before saying anything.

But this? What does he hope to gain by offering to listen to her?

Maybe he cares more about her than the others in their Kingdom. That thought makes her heart beat harder in her ribs as her cheeks go deeper red. Even though she doesn't understand what her feelings are for Gen or what he feels for her, she can't deny there's something pulling the two of them closer and closer together.

Naoko isn't sure what's going on between them. But being close to him, hearing his heart thrum underneath her ear, makes her feel so at peace she wants to fall asleep. But that wouldn't do, falling asleep. Gen wouldn't be able to move and she wouldn't want to inconvenience him like that.

"If you want to sleep, by all means, drift off." Gen's voice once more knocks her out of her thoughts. "I have nowhere to be."

"Are... are you sure?"

"Of course. Today was tiring, you deserve to rest."

Naoko bites her lip; she isn't sure if Gen is saying such things to be kind or if he's truly okay with it. But she yawns, deciding that she'll apologize to him tomorrow.

Her eyes flutter as she buries herself deeper against Gen, exhaustion and comfort willing her body to rest. Before sleep fully claims her, she feels a brush of lips against her hair, making her wonder yet again what their relationship truly is.

But that's a thought for another time. Naoko lets herself rest, letting Gen's warmth lure her into slumber.