show them you can see

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org) at [http://archiveofourown.org/works/12649038](http://archiveofourown.org/works/12649038).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Natsume Yuujinchou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Natsume Takashi, Madara &quot;Nyanko-sensei&quot;, Nishimura Satoru, Kitamoto Atsushi, Sasada Jun, Fujiwara Touko, Fujiwara Shigeru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>in which some things change and some things stay the same, stewardship, Hurt/Comfort, Fluff, the town loves and appreciates Natsume, youkai are known au, Mentions of child neglect, Implied Child Abuse, Family Fluff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-11-06 Updated: 2018-02-27 Chapters: 4/? Words: 6561</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

show them you can see

by aloneintherain

Summary

A different child, a child that wanted the wealth and notoriety that came with being an exorcist, would’ve forced their foster families to believe they had the ability to see youkai years ago, but Natsume never wanted that. Natsume just wanted a family.

And he finally has one. Amazingly, impossibly, Natsume has a family.

A series of one-shots in the Youkai Are Known AU.

Notes

This fic will be a non-linear series of one-shots following my ‘youkai are known’ AU. Essentially: the world has proof that youkai exist, but most people still can’t see them. People who can see them, who have the Vision, are in high demand and are usually sucked into an exorcist clan. (I’ll delve into Natsume’s past in later chapters.)

‘Stewarts’ are people who look after designated areas. They keep an eye on the youkai population, make sure the humans are protected, etc. It’s a highly respected job (and one Natsume has essentially been doing in canon for six seasons).

Title is from What Do We Know by Thousand Foot Krutch.
See the end of the work for more notes.
People don’t believe that Natsume has the Vision until he’s in high school. A different child, a child that wanted the wealth and notoriety that came with being an exorcist, would’ve forced their foster families to believe they had the ability to see youkai years ago, but Natsume never wanted that. Natsume just wanted a family.

And he finally has one. Amazingly, impossibly, Natsume has a family.

When he finally gathered up the courage to tell the Fujiwaras that he had the Vision, they didn’t dismiss him. They didn’t call up the nearest exorcist clan. They accepted him. And, a few months later, when Natsume was assigned Stewart for their town and surrounding countryside, the Fujiwaras had let him know how proud they were.

People wave and greet Natsume on his way to school. He waves back. A few people nod at Nyanko-sensei, offer him a tentative hello, but he sniffs and holds his nose in the air. The townsfolk don’t completely understand who or what Nyanko-sensei is, but they understand he’s not an average calico cat. He’s helped some of them out before, in Natsume’s absence, and his customary place in Natsume’s arms, or trailing at his ankles, or lazing in Natsume’s school bag earns him their trust.

Mrs. Akagi pokes her head out of her shopfront, calls Natsume over, and shoves a paper bag into his arms. Natsume peers into the bag, and finds that it’s filled to the brim with raspberries.

“Don’t even think about it,” Mrs. Akagi says when Natsume tries to give the berries back. He fumbles for the spare change in his school bag, but she refuses that, too. “Consider this my thanks.”

Natsume ducks his head. Months of openly helping the town, and he’s still embarrassed by their praise. “I haven’t really done anything …”

“You saved an entire week’s worth of stock from being eaten by the youkai in my roof a few weeks back.” She shakes her head. “You deserve more than just berries, Natsume.”

“Thank you,” Natsume murmurs, clutching the paper bag to his chest.

Mrs. Akagi scoffs. “It’s nothing. Now, get going. You miss enough school as it is.” As they leave, she hollers, “And don’t even think about eating our boy’s food, you rotten cat!”

“These humans don’t appreciate me,” Nyanko-sensei says.

Natsume shoots him a withering look. “Mr. Goda fed you a dozen free meat buns a few days ago after you saved his kids..”

“I’m a being of immense power; I deserve all the meat buns.” The school comes into view, and Nyanko-sensei brushes against Natsume’s legs briefly. “Stay out of trouble, for once.”

“I never try to get into trouble,” Natsume says, a little indignant. “Trouble finds me.”

Nyanko-sensei scoffs, and then disappears into the bushland framing the school. Natsume still can’t tell if Nyanko-sensei spends his days lazing around and drinking, or doing something productive, like corralling the youkai population in their area. He occasionally attends class with Natsume—on days when violent youkai have set their eyes on Natsume or his classmates, or on days when Natsume’s anxious, and the only thing that will calm him down is the feel of Nyanko-sensei’s fur under his fingers. The teachers have grown accustomed to Nyanko-sensei’s sporadic appearances.
They don’t blink when he naps on Natsume’s lap or curls around his feet during class.

Stewarts are allowed to keep their familiars with them, after all.

Natsume weaves through the crowds of students, meeting each smile and call good morning with a shy nod of his head. At his classroom, Nishimura’s gaze hones in on the paper bag. “Natsume, buddy, you look so good today. Very handsome. Have I mentioned how much I care about you?”

“Fine, you can have some.” Natsume drops the bag on his desk. Nishimura shoves a hand inside, and grabs a fistful of berries. With a nod and a small smile from Natsume, his classmates help themselves to the berries, too.

The homeroom teacher scolds Natsume for bringing in food, but it’s halfhearted, and when he offers her the bag, she takes a few, tucks them under her tongue, and lets him off with a warning. That’s what she did last time he brought food in. It’s what she’ll do next time, too.

At the beginning of lunch, Hinoe raps on the classroom door. Natsume gathers up his bento, says a quick goodbye to his friends, and follows her out.

Stewarts are usually adults, people who can devote themselves entirely to the job. Natsume has a small fleet of youkai to help him manage the town and outlying areas, but balancing his official responsibilities with schoolwork can be a challenge. It doesn’t leave him a lot of free-time. If Natsume would change one thing it would be this. He misses spending every other break with his friends.

Natsume settles behind the school, and opens up his bento. Hinoe settles down beside him, kimono folded beneath her. She keeps her daily report short: an overconfident middle-class youkai is trying to take control of the northern forest; a minor god’s delegation will arrive in two days time, wishing to speak with him; and the dog circle wants to throw him a party for his 6 month anniversary of being their Stewart.

Natsume leaves his friends to handle the first, but to come to him if the situation deteriorates. He already knows about the god’s visitors, but thanks her for the reminder. At the last point, Natsume rubs at his temples, and says, “You all just want an excuse to get drunk again.”

Hinoe smirks. “Of course not! We want to celebrate our majestic Stewart.”

“Fine,” Natsume relents. “But only a few people, and only for a few hours.”

“But everyone wants to honour you—the forest dwellers, the river spirits, and especially the few youkai that pass through the main town. Most had never even heard of a Stewart as kind and understanding as you, until you were dropped into our laps.”

“Wasn’t my grandmother the area’s unofficial Stewart for a while?”

Hineo’s smirk grows. “Exactly.”

“I don’t know. I don’t like big crowds.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll keep the party small.”

He eats his lunch, bids Hinoe goodbye, and returns to class. He doesn’t like sending his friends out to work; orders of any kind make his stomach clench. Natsume won’t let himself be like the many exorcists he’s seen in the cities, especially now that he’s in a position of power. Thankfully, the youkai know—often before he does—what needs to be done, and see to it with little prompting from
Natsume himself.

He returns to class, and Nishimura jumps up from his desk. “More berries?”

“Sorry,” Natsume says.

Nishimura flops back into his seat with a huff. Kitamoto pokes his cheek with a chopstick. Sasada greets him with a gentle smile, ignoring the slap fight breaking out between the two boys.

“Is everything alright?” she asks.

“Fine,” Natsume says, and he means it. “It was a regular update.”

Nishimura and Kitamoto call a temporary truce in favour of turning to Natsume. “What’s going on?” Kitamoto asks, and Nishimura leans forward in his seat. Even Sasada watches him expectantly.

There was nothing dangerous in Hinoe’s report, so Natsume tells them, “Just a youkai making a bid for power in the forest. It happens every now and then. And … ” He ducks his head, his fringe sweeping over his eyes. His cheeks redden. “They want to throw me a party.”

“A party?” Nishimura asks loudly. Several heads turn towards them. Sasada hushes him.

Natsume nods, focussing on his hands entwined in his lap. “It’s my six month anniversary.”

The three echo congratulations and start talking over one another about doing something for Natsume—baking a cake, collecting gifts, throwing him a party.

“Ah,” Kitamoto says, “but you’re already having one, I suppose.”

Natsume swallows the lump in his throat. Over ten years of hiding his talents, of believing that he shouldn’t let youkai and humans mix because it only leads to bad things happening, and yet here he is, considering letting his human friends meet his youkai ones.

“Well,” Natsume says slowly, “would you like to come?”

The three light up.

“Really?” Kitamoto says. He smiles, and Natsume beams back.

“Sure. I said only friends were invited, and that’s what you are.” Natsume ducks his head. “My friends.”

Sasada and Nishimura coo at him. Thankfully Taki isn’t there to join in. “He’s gotten cuter with age,” Nishimura complains to Sasada. “It’s not fair.”

“It won’t be dangerous?” Kitamoto asks.

“I wouldn’t invite you if it was. The youkai there are like my family.”

“We won’t be able to see them,” Sasada says.

“I’ll invite Taki and Tanuma. We could use Taki’s circle, and maybe I could introduce everyone.”

That sets off another wave of celebration. Nishimura takes hold of Kitamoto’s hands and swings them around. Sasanda is thinking aloud, going over the time she has to organise everyone into buying gifts and baking a joint cake for Natsume’s anniversary. Natsume presses his hands to his
face, feeling his smile with his fingers.

He still has to search out Tanuma and Taki, and let Hinoe know he’ll have human companions tonight.

“Natsume,” Nishimura says abruptly. Natsume looks up, expecting another wave of excited babbling about tonight’s party, but he only gets three smiles. Nishimura pokes him in the arm, and says, “Happy anniversary.”
Chapter Summary

The youkai presses a hand to his chest, over his heart. Her nails tear at the fabric, but he doesn’t push her away.

“You’re okay, now,” Natsume says. She cries and huddles close to him. It’s nice, almost. Her nails are too long, and his chest hurts, but she pushes into him like a cat, eager for his touch, and no one does that. No one’s ever done that before. Not to him.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for bullying and vague mentions of child neglect.

The festival takes place in autumn. There aren’t many trees here, in the centre of the city, but the wind is cold, biting through Natsume’s thin jacket.

Natsume doesn’t like this city. The buildings tower over him, and make him feel small. His previous foster family, a place he managed to stay for almost seven months, was in the quiet suburbs. He shouldn’t be this rattled by the move to this city—just another city in the long list of places he’s stayed—but he is.

The festival is run by exorcists set up in marquees. Each stall is exotic in a different way. They sell all manner of things: talismans hanging from pegs; cursed objects; books with warnings stamped on the cover; quivering chests and cages padlocked shut.

Natsume has to pass through the festival to get home. He walks with his hood up. Several classmates walk down the street in twos or threes. Natsume recognises a few boys who have grown increasingly worse in the few weeks he has been here.

He hasn’t had many public run-ins with youkai, but the boys can sense that there’s something wrong, something unsettling and vacant, about Natsume. They think he’s too quiet, too mysterious, too pretty for his own good. It’s not Natsume’s fault. He’s not attention seeking; he tries to actively avoid calling attention to himself. He doesn’t want the girls in their class to be interested in him, but they are, and these boys have taken offence.

Natsume steps into a shadowy marquee to avoid the bullies. The stall is loud. On all sides, cages and chests rattle and howl and bang. Natsume runs a hand over a tin lunchbox padlocked shut. Something inside screams, chokes off into a sob, and then quiets.

“Temperamental, that one.” An exorcist in a black mask stands by Natsume, his hands in his sleeves. “As powerful as it is strong-willed.”

“A youkai?”
“They all are.” The exorcist gestures around them. There must be a dozen or more miscellaneous objects fastened shut and labelled around the stall. Natsume feels sick.

“Why?” Natsume asks. “Don’t exorcists find their familiars, not buy them?”

“Some people don’t want to go out and find their own shiki. It’s very time-consuming, and requires a great deal of skill, so buying spirit-slaves has become common. But for the average person … ” He drags Natsume towards the back of the stall. “Bound youkai can guard your house and your loved ones from harm. What better way to be protected from monsters, then by harnessing the power of one?”

A cage that might have once held a small dog or cat is propped in the corner. It’s as tall as Natsume’s knees. He bends down. The youkai inside is too big for her cage; her back is hunched, and her head is bent awkwardly. Her long-fingered hands flop on the floor. Natsume has to wonder how long she’s been in captivity to look like this—worn down and filthy with neglect, hair grown past her waist in clumps, nails grown into claws.

Natsume swallows hard. The salesman mistakes the urge to throw up for something else. He claps Natsume on the back, and says, “Don’t be scared, kid. You’re perfectly safe.”

The youkai’s fingers trail across the bars. Her nails rattle against the metal, a gentle clank, clank, clank that reverberates through Natsume’s chest. “How … ” Natsume can’t say the rest of the sentence: how could you do this?

The salesman explains how he catches and binds youkai. He disappears deeper into the stall to hunt down a book full of sketches of the bound youkai for customers without the Vision.

“Hello,” Natsume whispers. The youkai flinches away from the bars. “I won’t hurt you. I’m sorry you’re in here.”

The youkai runs her nails across the bars again. Clank, clank, clank. Natsume trails his fingertips over the bars in an opposite pattern. They sit there for a few moments, tracing patterns together, enjoying the rhythmic noise of nails on metal. The youkai likes looking into Natsume’s eyes. It’s strange; youkai are always so eager to look him in the eye, to see him for what he is, when humans flinch away from his ghostly stare.

“Here it is!” The salesman shoves a sketch of a drooling, slit-eyed monster under Natsume’s nose. The sketch looks nothing like the neglected youkai. “This is the one in the cage.”

Natsume hooks his fingers into the cage, and the youkai’s nails brush over his skin. Her touch is featherlight. Pleading.

“How long has she been locked in here?”

The salesman pauses. He wets his lips, and says, “She?”

“How, check out these cages!”

The salesman is distracted by the teenagers entering the marquee. He moves away from Natsume to usher them inside. “Welcome, welcome. Come in.”

Natsume peeks over his shoulder, and there, hands stuffed into their pockets, are the classmates he’s been trying to avoid.

A blanketed cage rattles nosily in the corner. The boys jump, and then laugh and shove each other
for being scared, like this is a haunted house full of painted styrofoam walls, not a place full of suffering, chained youkai.

Natsume instinctively shuffles away from them, towards the cage. The youkai latches onto Natsume’s loose hoodie, right above his navel, and tugs. Don’t forget about me, she seems to say. Natsume wonders if she can talk, or if she’s learnt to be mute.

His classmates spot Natsume crouched in the corner and start laughing.

“Hey, isn’t that the weird transfer kid?”

“Yeah, it is! Of course he’d be here.”

“I thought they kept the animals in cages.”

The salesman makes no move to intervene, even as the boys make their way to Natsume, even as one of them presses a hand against Natsume’s neck, and another uses his foot to prod Natsume in the side. The salesman’s mask is flat, expressionless. Natsume might’ve thought he was a youkai, if he hadn’t seen Vision-less people interact with him.

His classmates’ laughter echoes through the stall. The bars and the youkai’s long nails bite into his side. Natsume leans into the pressure, into that cold weight, and keeps his eyes down.

A woman at the mouth of the stall flags down the salesman. He goes to her, and they chatter about the quieter youkai in small jars designed to hang in window sills and ward off evil spirits—the kind of youkai that are more likely to be eaten if a bigger youkai did come along, rather than protect the house.

One of the boys crouches by Natsume. He needs to get up. He needs to leave, to find somewhere safe, but the youkai’s fixating eyes and grasping hands keep him kneeling there on the floor.

“What’re you looking at?” His classmate pokes him in the cheek. “Looking for a new home, huh? It’s small enough. This place is so weird that you’d fit right in.”

He pokes Natsume in the cheek again, harder, like he’s trying to screw in a nail. Natsume feels the pressure against his teeth. “Don’t,” he says, almost inaudible.

“What do you think?” he asks the other boys. “Is it big enough for him?”

“He’s a beanpole. He’ll fit.”

His classmates pull at the chains wrapped around the cage. The youkai grips at the bars, and shrieks in terror.

“Stop it,” Natsume says. He grabs at a wrist, and receives an elbow to the gut. “Stop it, you’re hurting her.”

“You actually believe this nonsense? There’s nothing actually in there. It’s a scam.”

The salesman has stepped out of the marquee to talk a semicircle of women into buying talismans. He doesn’t hear the rattle of the cage, or the youkai’s wild cries. He doesn’t see the chains loosen, pulled away like wrapping paper.

The door to the cage swings open, and his classmates cheer. The youkai, foaming at the mouth, pushes off the back wall with her hind legs and attacks the closest boy. She hangs around his neck,
and claws at his eyes, and he screams through the chokehold. Blood drips down his cheeks. The other boys scramble for the exit. The youkai tries to jump onto one of their backs, but Natsume snatches her out of the air, and holds her like she’s a kicking baby.

“It’s okay,” he says into her ear, even as she shrieks and tugs her nails over his arms and kicks him in the ribs. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

The salesman starts shouting. Natsume’s classmate is curled on the ground, hands pressed to his bloody face, wailing into his fingers. The other two boys have disappeared down the street, hollering about the spirit-beast that attacked their friend.

Natsume looks at the salesman, the onlookers crowded around the mouth of the marquee, the exorcists pushing away from their stations and heading their way, and then at the youkai tangled in his arms. Her small chest heaves. Her arms hang limply around his wrist. She’s not fighting anymore. She’s just crying.

Natsume pushes his way through the crowd, and runs as fast as he can. He shoves the youkai under his sweatshirt, grateful that most of his wardrobe is oversized hand-me-downs. He weaves through the streets, legs pumping, leaving the festival behind. The exorcist chases after him, but Natsume is faster, more afraid, and he loses him eventually. Natsume runs and runs, until his legs burn and the buildings shrink and make way for suburban housing. Natsume finds a dimly lit footbridge and huddles underneath it.

The sun is beginning to set, casting the world in shadows. Natsume makes sure no one can see him before he pulls the youkai out of his sweatshirt. She’s shaking violently.

“I’m sorry,” Natsume tells her. “My classmates were after me, not you.”

She presses a hand to his chest, over his heart. Her nails tear at the fabric, but he doesn’t push her away.

“You’re okay, now,” he says. She cries and huddles close to him. It’s nice, almost. Her nails are too long, and his chest hurts, but she pushes into him like a cat, eager for his touch, and no one does that. No one’s ever done that before. Not to him.

Natsume leaves the youkai in the garden of a cheery house. The yellow panelling and well-tended fruit trees make something in his chest ache. It looks like a happy place. Natsume hopes the youkai likes it there. She scurries beneath a blueberry bush as soon as he puts her down.

Inexplicably, Natsume wants to shrink down and follow her. Living off of blueberries and sleeping on warm earth sounds peaceful.

Natsume watches the softly rustling bush, and pushes down those strange, useless thoughts. He waits until his eyes stop burning, until he can’t bear to look at the little house with it’s happy garden and inviting yellow door any longer, before making his way to his foster family’s house.

When he arrives, the police are there, along with a handful of exorcists. They ask him where the youkai has gone.

“What youkai?” Natsume says, and keeps saying it, until the police shake their heads and leave.

That night, his foster family locks him in his room. He doesn’t sleep; he packs his things into boxes. When they unlock the door, sometime around mid-afternoon the next day, they don’t look surprised that he’s already packed, just usher him outside and into a waiting car, ready to ferry him off to the next house.
Age 8

Chapter Summary

In school, the teacher hands out bits of coloured card and instructs everyone to write about their best friend. Natsume writes about his friend named Shiki. He writes about her purple hands, and long, dark hair, and how he can feel her stare even through her mask, listening attentively to him.

The teacher makes Natsume stay after school.

“Your friend is a shiki? A spirit-slave?”

Natsume frowns at her. “She’s not a slave.”

The woman sighs like Natsume is especially exhausting. “Natsume, you're too old for imaginary friends.”

When Natsume is eight, he moves to a city with several large exorcist agencies. Natsume thought this would mean there would be less youkai, and while that’s partway true—there are less pests, less hostile youkai who spot Natsume’s wondering eyes and decide to target him—there are also more youkai walking the streets.

Natsume sees them throughout the city, perched on corners like sentries, or trailing several paces behind men and women in business suits.

He almost collides with a towering woman in a kimono at a set of traffic lights. He tries to stop himself from knocking her onto the road and loses his balance, tumbling sideways onto the pavement.

“Sorry,” he says to her, jumping to his feet. He scoops up his fallen school bag. “I should’ve been watching where I was going.”

She looks down at him and—oh. She’s wearing a bone-white mask. Dark bangs fall halfway down her face, ending where he nose might have begun. Her skin is purple. A sword hangs at her hip.

She’s a youkai.

She tilts her head. “You can see me?”

Natsume glances around. Several people are staring at him. A man in a business suit and a rattling tote bag steps in front of the woman and grasps Natsume by the shoulders.

“You can see my shiki?” he asks. No one has ever sounded that excited to talk to him before.

“Shiki?”

“My youkai.” The man gestures at the tall, demure woman. “My servant.”

“Servant?”
The people waiting at the traffic lights whisper to each other. Natsume’s skin crawls at the attention.

Natsume steps out of the man’s grip. He’s never heard someone call a youkai their servant before, and he’s never seen such a tall youkai stand like that—long neck bent submissively, as still as an oak tree as people obliviously walk through her. And no one has ever looked at him like this—intense and hungry.

“I have to get to school,” Natsume says.

“Wait—” The man fumbles for Natsume, but the crosswalk light changes to green and Natsume lets himself get swept up in the bustling crowd of pedestrians. Natsume keeps his head ducked, and doesn’t look behind him the whole way to school.

The youkai woman is standing in front of his school that afternoon.

Natsume freezes in the middle of the yard. Several people jostle him, and yell at him to keep moving, to stop being so weird, but Natsume doesn’t listen. Can he double-back inside? Can he sneak out the back entrance the way he sometimes does, when dangerous youkai or violent classmates set their eyes on him?

But no, she’s seen him. She pulls her gaze from the ground to pin him with an expressionless stare. He can’t see her eyes, but he can feel the weight of her gaze.

Natsume wraps his hands around his bag’s straps, and keeps walking. When he passes the youkai, she falls into step several metres behind him. She follows him all the way home, silently, her head down. When he reaches his foster family’s house, she stops at the letter box, hovering as she looks over the trimmed rosebushes and the small town house, before she turns away.

“Wait!” he calls. She stops, her back to him. “Are you dangerous?”

“I wish you no harm,” she says in a deep voice. She sounds as though she has not spoken in a long time.

This rankles something inside of Natsume, and he steps back through the iron wrought gate and onto the footpath.

“Do you want to be friends?”

“I have no friends.”

“Me neither, but it’s okay. We can teach each other how to be friends.”

“Friends,” she says.

“We did just walk home from school together.”

She turns, then. She nods slowly. Her long hair slips over one shoulder. “Okay.”

“Okay. Do you have a name?”
“My master calls me shiki.”

“Pleased to meet you, Shiki. I’m Natsume.”

“Natsume,” she says.

Natsume waves goodbye to her when she leaves, and skips inside. Today, he met his first friend.

Shiki is there the next morning, waiting by the rosebushes. She towers over Natsume. If she were to come inside his foster mother’s house, she would have to stoop down so she wouldn’t hit her head. It’s like being friends with a very big, very pretty cherry tree.

It becomes a routine; she waits for him by his house in the morning, and by the school entrance in the afternoon. She listens as he chatters about his day, but she only speaks when he asks her a question. She doesn’t look bothered by his rambling, and doesn’t cut him off or snap at him like most adults do—which is fine, Natsume understands everyone is very busy and he doesn’t have anything very important to say, but it’s nice to not tip-toe through a conversation.

Some of the kids make fun of him for talking to himself on his way to and from school, but Natsume tries not to listen. He knows he’s not talking to himself. He’s talking to his friend. He doesn’t see Shiki everyday. He worries, every time, that she’s gotten sick of him. It’s always a relief when she appears the next day as though nothing is amiss. He doesn’t ask about her disappearances.

In school, the teacher hands out bits of coloured card and instructs everyone to write about their best friend. Natsume writes about his friend named Shiki. He writes about her purple hands, and long, dark hair, and how he can feel her stare even through her mask, listening attentively to him.

The teacher makes Natsume stay after school.

“Your friend is a shiki? A spirit-slave?”

Natsume frowns at her. “She’s not a slave.”

The woman sighs like Natsume is especially exhausting. “Natsume, you’re too old for imaginary friends.”

“She’s not imaginary.”

“You shouldn’t pretend you can see youkai, Natsume. It’s a very serious and dangerous talent.”

Natsume stares at his sneakers. A kind woman bought them for him; her house had been warm, if a little cramped, and she had fussed over his tattered clothing and bought him nice things. But that was months ago, several homes ago, and his feet have grown again. His toes are bunched, and blisters are forming on his heel.

Natsume wants to be big like Shiki. He wants to spread his fingers up and touch the door-frames like the tall high school boys. He wants to be large enough to take care of himself, and not be shuffled
around, and not to have to wear shoes that hurt around the heel.

“I’m not lying,” Natsume says quietly, even though he knows he shouldn’t.

He remembers very little about his dad, but he remembers that evening sitting out on their porch, watching the sinking sun turn the world orange, listening to his dad explain how important it was that Natsume didn’t flaunt his gifts to world. To keep himself safe.

The teacher sighs and rubs at her temple. “I read your file when you were transferred, Natsume. If you had the vision, we would know. You didn’t pass the standardised test.”

“Okay,” Natsume says.

“You need to stop lying in class.”

“Okay.”

“And stop fiddling with your shoes so much. It’s impolite. You need to look at people when they’re talking to you.”

Natsume drops his hand, where he had been trying to loosen his shoelaces in the hopes that it would take some of the pressure off his feet. “Sorry,” he says, and gives her a smile.

The teacher reels back. She shuffles her papers and clears her throat, and it’s her turn to not look straight at Natsume, but over his shoulder. He doesn’t blame her. It’s hard for people to look at him sometimes, especially when he pulls out this smile, his favourite mask, that makes him look strange and unreachable, more like a glass doll than a human boy.

“You can go now, Natsume.”

Natsume goes. Shiki is waiting outside the gates for him. Her head is tilted towards the park where yellow flowers are flourishing in bunches. He thinks she likes flowers. She always looks at the rosebushes at his foster mother’s house.

He holds his hand out. She takes it. They walk home like that, clasped hands swinging between them.

A few days later, Shiki doesn’t leave him at the gate after school. She usually stops a few paces back from the fence, watching as he crosses the front yard and lets himself in. But today, when he opens up the gate with a squeal of rusty hinges, she follows behind him This should’ve been the first clue that something was wrong.

Natsume’s foster mother is hovering by the front door, waiting for him; this should’ve been the second clue.

She bounces on her heels, compulsively smoothing her hair down and rubbing her hands over her slacks. When he’s close enough, she scoops him up into a sweaty hug.

“Sweetheart!” She’s never called Natsume sweetheart before. “Come in, come in. Why didn’t you
She doesn’t look at his friend. She can’t see her.

Shiki trails behind Natsume as he is ushered inside and stripped of his coat and bag.

“Tell you what?”

The foster mother ducks down, lowering her voice, “That you have the Vision. You can see … things.”

Shiki studies the pictures hanging on the walls, the photo frames propped on the coffee table. She points at them. Natsume shakes his head, as if to say, No, I’m not in them; I don’t belong to this house.

His relative purses her lips. “Come this way,” she says, tugging him through the house. “We have a guest.”

Seated primly before a cooling teapot is a man wearing a business suit and a small smile. “Natsume Takashi, hello. I’m Hiruma. I’ve heard much about you.”

Shiki settles behind Hiruma. She crosses her hands behind her back demurely, and she bows her head. Himura’s eyes flick to her briefly, and then back to Natsume.

“You’re Shiki’s friend, too?” Natsume asks.

“Shiki isn’t her name,” Hiruma says gently. “It’s what she is. Now, come and sit with me. We have much to discuss.”

His foster mother prods him until he sits down. Hiruma smiles, and starts to talk about being an exorcist. He says, It’s an honour—a respected and well-paid position. He says, We protect people from monsters, Natsume. He says, Many people would do anything for an opportunity like this.

Hiruma doesn’t once look at Shiki.

His foster mother slots herself into the conversation, twisting her fingers nervously in her lap. “I don’t know if I’m ready to let my dear Natsume go,” she says with a sniffle. Natsume doesn’t point out that she’s only known him a few weeks, or that she often spends her evenings smoking over the sink with the kitchen window propped open, phone pressed to her ear, complaining about the strange boy she’s been saddled with. “I would be all alone. He’s all I have …”

Hiruma smiles politely. “I understand. Natsume will be well looked after, and of course, you’ll be compensated as well.”

“I don’t know if anything can replace him.”

“I’m sure we can settle on the right price.”

Natsume says, “I’m sorry, but no, thank you.”

The adults look at him. “Natsume,” his foster mother says with reproach. “You can’t say no to this.”

“Sorry, but I’m not interested.”

Hiruma purses his lips, and then forces himself to smile. It’s a very tense smile, and it matches the knot of anxiety settled behind Natsume’s sternum. “I don’t think you understand the gift you’ve been
given, Natsume. This is an amazing opportunity for you.”

Natsume watches Shiki. She hasn’t looked at him once during this discussion. With her head bowed, she looks like she’s praying. “I don’t want to be an exorcist,” Natsume says. “I don’t want to hurt anybody.”

“We don’t hurt people,” Himura says. “We protect them.”

“I don’t want to hurt youkai.”

“Youkai aren’t people. They’re like wild animals. They reside between the spirit world and the physical world. They’re parasites.”

“Is Shiki a parasite?”

Himura coughs into his fist, and launches into another discussion about the resources his clan has to offer, the programs, the personal mentorships designed to mould him into a fully-fledged exorcist. The adults’ smiles get tighter and tighter, and the knot of anxiety gets bigger and bigger, but Natsume continues to sit up straight, and say, “No, thank you.” And, “No, I’m not interested.”

His foster mother climbs to her feet. “You will go.” Natsume numbly shakes his head. “You will go, or you will leave. I won’t have someone so ungrateful staying here; you’ve been living off of the charity of your family for years, and now you have the world at your feet and you’re throwing that away?”

Natsume looks at Shiki, and shakes his head, and flinches when his foster mother’s fist comes thundering down on the low table.

“I should go,” Himura says.

“Wait,” says his foster mother. “Please. He doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

“There’s only so much I can do. If he’s not interesting, then he’s not interested.”

Himura thanks Natsume and his foster mother for their time. He leaves, Shiki trailing after him. She stops in the door’s threshold, and lifts her head, her silky hair falling to frame her masked face. Natsume holds her gaze.

They both know they won’t see each other again.

Natsume goes to his room, and packs his things. The sound of his foster mother floats up from the kitchen—the flick of the lighter as she lights up a cigarette; the click of the phone as she hangs up and redials, and hangs up and redials; and her voice, sharp and cutting like barbed wire, growing louder and louder as the night progresses.

She comes to get him the next morning. Neither of them has slept. She’s still angry, and Natsume lets his thoughts haze over. He thinks about getting out of this smoggy city. He thinks about the yellow flowers at the park and the pink rosebushes that Shiki liked, and how it felt to hold her hand when they walked back from school. He wants to remember her when he thinks about this place, not the feel of his foster mother’s nails digging into his arm as she shakes him.

Two hours later, he’s in the backseat of a stranger’s car, squashed beside his boxes, rubbing at the bruises that run down his arm.
Age 14

Chapter Summary

Natsume has never met anyone that cares about youkai before, not in the way the Fujiwaras do.

At breakfast, Touko piles rice, fish, and steamed vegetables into a ceramic bowl. She fills a jug with ice water, and takes a stack of cups down from the cupboard. “Takashi, can you help me carry this out the front, please?”

Natsume takes the cups and the bowl from her. Jug in hand, she leads him out the house. They come to a stop just outside the gate. Touko places the jug on the ground, and gestures for Natsume to lay the cups and bowl down, too.

“What is this?” he asks.

“It’s for the youkai that pass by,” Touko says. She doesn’t notice the way Natsume stares at her. “They can’t go into supermarkets themselves. Do they even have kitchens to cook their food in? What if they get hungry?”

It takes Natsume a few tries to swallow properly. He wets his chapped lips, and says, “They probably catch their own food, and light campfires if they need to. If I had to guess.”

“Still.” Touko looks over the things they’ve left, studying how much food is in the large bowl, how many cups are set out, before she nods, and heads back in. “Come inside, Takashi. You’ll catch a cold if you stay there without a jacket.”

That night, after dinner, Touko sends Natsume to collect the dishes set in front of their house. The bowl is empty. The jug is half-full. Natsume glances around the darkened street, but there are no youkai in sight.

He brings in the dishes to Touko, and she claps her hands and beams. “Oh, good, today they ate it all! Sometimes no one touches it. Sometimes it’s completely cleaned out, or the dishes have disappeared. I wonder if I’m putting enough out …”

“You can’t feed the town’s entire youkai population,” Shigeru scolds with a fond smile, “no matter how much you want to.”

“Are there …” Natsume swallows, and bunches the front of his sweatshirt up—an anxious and childish habit he hasn’t broken himself out of. “Are there many youkai here?”

“We haven’t had a steward in a long time,” Shigeru says, “so I don’t know. We have a decent amount, I think. This is a country town.”

“Enough to get hungry.” Touko says at the sink. She sets about cleaning the ceramic bowl with vigour. “Tomorrow I’m putting out twice as much food!”

Shigeru laughs, and kisses the top of her head. He tosses a dishcloth to Natsume, and reminds him to help Touko dry the dishes.
Each morning, Natsume puts out the food and water Touko hands him. Sometimes, on cold days, she makes pots of tea or lays out cheap blankets she buys in bulk. Each night, Natsume collects the dishes. Her gifts are not always eaten, but more often than not, they are. It makes Touko smile proudly each time.

Natsume keeps watches for any youkai that come too close. He won’t let anyone take advantage of the Fujiwara’s kindness and hurt them. Natsume is already deceiving them with his very existence; the least he can do is make sure they’re safe.

Still, he finds himself directing the more desperate, small, or safe-looking youkai towards the Fujiwaras’ house. Sometimes, when Natsume knows clusters of youkai are struggling, he will suggest Touko leave out extra pieces of food. She never questions him, just sets about making extras. Sometimes, Natsume even uses his allowance to buy water bottles and non-perishables and leaves them alongside Touko’s dishes.

Natsume has never met anyone that cares about youkai before, not in the way the Fujiwaras do.

They're different. In so many small, incomprehensible ways, they're different. It leaves Natsume feeling off-balanced. He’s grateful, but this place is so beautiful that it hurts. He feels safe here. Happy, even.

And when this beautiful dream ends and Natsume has to leave, he will carry with him memories of Touko’s smile as she lays out spare blankets for wondering youkai, and the familiar feeling of grief.

End Notes

Feel free to come talk to me on my tumblr, captainkirkk.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!