

The Gifted Vol.1 - The Haunting Woman



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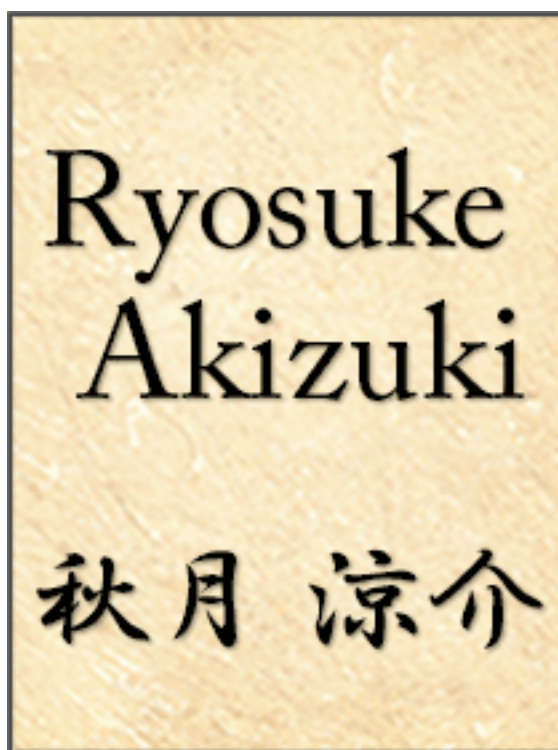
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Prologue

Edward Marlon felt being watched by someone. After slowly turning around, however, it was apparent that he was the only one standing in the entrance hall on the ground floor of his apartment building. It was 11:13 on a Monday night.

It must be my imagination ... he thought.

Shaking off the odd feeling, he headed toward the elevator.

Edward was working on initiating and establishing a bookkeeping system; for weeks, he had been putting in several extra hours at work.

The next day, after a grueling day at the office, Edward arrived at his apartment building at 10:38 p.m. He unlocked the entrance door to the building and walked into the typically quiet hall. He checked his mailbox and walked toward the elevator, which was approximately 12 meters away. It was a long and tiring day and Edward had no intention but to head straight to bed. But as he took his first steps, someone called out,

“Hey, Edward.”

Edward turned around only to see Pablo. Pablo worked as a security guard at Edward’s apartment building, and the two men were acquainted with one another since they went out for drinks after work once in a while. But given the day Edward was having, Pablo’s invitation had been politely turned down. Nevertheless, even in his state of fatigue, Edward noticed that Pablo looked seriously disturbed.

“What’s up? You look awful,” said Edward.

“Have you recently done something that you shouldn’t have?” asked Pablo with a pale face.

“What is it? Come on, tell me!” Edward demanded.

“Come this way,” said Pablo sternly as he abruptly turned around.

Clueless, Edward followed Pablo into the guard’s room. The room had a number of security monitors that silently displayed footage from eight surveillance cameras, positioned at different locations.

“Take a look at this. It was recorded yesterday.”

Pablo pointed out to one of the monitors, whose lower-left portion displayed the time which was counted by a second.

“Just keep watching, especially around 11:13:33 p.m.”

Edward watched himself on the screen, opening the entrance door and walking into the hall, followed by his routine mailbox check, after which he headed toward the elevator, passing by the camera that recorded his every move. At 11:13:34 p.m., Edward saw himself slowly look back and lean his head slightly toward the

left, and then turn back to enter the elevator. Except for some random noises, Edward found nothing strange about the footage.

“Did you spot her?” asked Pablo with his face as white as a sheet.

“Who? What do you mean?”

“I’ll play it again. At precisely 11:13:33 p.m. fix your eyes on the door. It only lasts a few frames. This time I’ll play it frame-by-frame. Are you ready?”

Pablo replayed the footage and stopped it at exactly 11:13:32 p.m.

“Now watch closely after this frame.”

As he watched the footage at 11:13:33 p.m., Edward felt his arms become instantly covered with goose bumps.

Over the entrance door, a tall, thin woman appeared out of nowhere, wearing a white dress from which her hands and legs were protruding like withered branches. Her face was covered with black bobbed hair, except for creepy right eye, which was staring fixedly at Edward’s vulnerable back.

“Keep watching,” said Pablo as he operated the console.

In the recording, as Edward took a step forward, the woman passed through the plate glass of the entrance door. The upper half of her body was inside while the lower portion remained outside. Watching this, Edward shuddered.

“That’s more,” Pablo said without looking up.

In the following frame, the woman completely vanished from the monitor, and Edward slowly turned around frame-by-frame.

“What the hell was that? Who was she? A ghost?”

Pablo peered back over his shoulder at Edward, who snapped in disbelief, “Hey, hey, stop joking! April Fool’s Day is well past now!”

“Listen. I am serious,” said Pablo patiently. “What’s the purpose of tricking you with pictures like this?”

“This is ridiculous. I’m not fooled this easily. You did this in vain. See you later!” Edward spat out the words and left the guard’s room.

Two days later, Edward was stopped again by Pablo.

“What’s the matter? You wanna show me some more ghost pictures?” said Edward mockingly.

“I’m serious Edward. You are in big trouble. Something hideous is happening. Come with me!”

Disturbed by Pablo’s ghastly looking face, Edward could not help but follow him into the security guard’s room.

“Watch this. This one was recorded yesterday morning,” said Pablo. This time Edward saw himself walking in the entrance hall and heading for work at 08:30 a.m.

“Keep watching,” Pablo said while stopping the footage and forwarding it frame-by-frame.

Suddenly, the monitor was filled with the back of the tall, thin woman. Her raven-black hair reflected no light and was cut off upon her shoulders. The woman was so close to the monitor that Edward could clearly make out even her spinal column under her white dress.

“And this one was caught yesterday evening,” said Pablo nervously.

It was 07:37 p.m. on the monitor; Edward had managed to leave the office relatively early and was chatting with another resident, when suddenly the eerie woman emerged out of nowhere. Since she was facing the surveillance camera, Edward could clearly observe her lifeless face, which made him shudder uncontrollably. The woman disappeared after two frames without a trace. The person he was talking to did not show any sign of a disturbance.

“Do you get it?” said Pablo as he looked back at Edward.

“Get what?” Edward asked.

“She gets closer to you every day. Look at this picture recorded first. Here the distance between you and her is about five meters, and in the image recorded yesterday morning, the distance is no less than three meters. Then, by the evening, she was closer to you than she was in the morning.”

“Wait, wait, this is ridiculous! As you know ...” Edward’s words were at a loss due to his confusion.

“If ... if this woman finally reaches your back ... do you know what could happen to you?” asked Pablo.

Looking at Pablo’s gravely concerned face, Edward was speechless.

Two days later, Edward fell unconscious at work and slipped into a coma. He subsequently died at the hospital. According to the autopsy report, his death was caused by a cerebral hemorrhage.

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In their school library, Saya Touma sat opposite Milo Baltsa, who was reading at the time, and asked,

“Milo, have you heard of this story?”

However, Milo cast a glance at her and went back to reading his book.

“You know what? An eerie woman haunts the amusement area of City, and apparently, if you turn down her invite, her spirit haunts you until the end of time. She can be caught in photographs or videos, but nobody can see with their own eyes. She is said to creep up on you day after day, and when she finally touches your back after a week ... you die! Isn’t that scary?”

“No, it isn’t,” Milo said, refusing to even look up from his book. “Besides, your soft voice fails to scare anyone.”

Although Milo was only a year ahead of Saya in school, he looked rather mature for his age and had mannerisms of an intellectual.

“Well, if I tell such a scary story in a more ominous way, then it might actually scare me too,” muttered Saya.

“You should know by now that there are no scarier things than human ill-will,” said Milo calmly. “So you shouldn’t allow such tales to scare you. Anyway, is this just an urban legend or an actual murder case?”

“The latter.”

Hearing Saya's clear answer, Milo raised his handsome face. A lock of his platinum blonde hair fell gently across his forehead.

Saya went on to substantiate her point. “Let me see ... according to Riccardo's investigations, in the past two months alone, five deaths have occurred under similar circumstances. Rumor has it that these five men were all haunted by a strange female ghost with bobbed hair. In fact, there are plenty of footage and pictures of her uploaded on the Internet. Of course, there also plenty of imitations by those who like to fabricate such stories.”

“And what do the police have to say about this?”

“According to them, four of them died of cerebral hemorrhages, while one of them was due to myocardial infarction,” Saya answered. “Although, essentially, there were no dubious aspects in any of these cases, I mean it is said that they simply died from typical adult diseases, Riccardo noticed a commonality. Apparently, one of the cases occurred in his own apartment building. So if it wasn't for him, no one would have even become aware of it.”

Milo looked at her sadly, crinkling his blonde eyebrows. “I understand that these cases probably have something to do with one of the so-called gifted, who make contact with the higher spirits and often use their gifts to curse others. If they could only use their powers to bless others, then they would be happier ...”

“Because, everyone cares for only himself or herself, and of course so did I.” Saya turned away from Milo's gaze and looked down at her hands folded on the desk. Although Milo's soft voice did not have the slightest hint of blame, she still couldn't forgive her past. Milo often said that no one was perfect and you could restart your life at anytime, if you only forgive yourself. But for Saya this was easier said than done.

“Your case was significantly different than this one since you did not kill anyone,” said Milo softly. “Once you die you never come back, and this case includes five deaths, doesn't it?”

“Maybe. Well ... should we hunt down the gifted now?” asked Saya nervously.

“I think we should. The police cannot do anything with her, can they? Besides, we could actually prevent additional murders.”

“Okay, I'll call Riccardo and Chloe. Let's meet at the usual place at 07:00 p.m.” said Saya as she rose from her seat.

“No problem. See you later.” Milo turned his eyes back to the pages of his book. Taking her eyes away from his delicate profile, Saya quietly left the library.

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When Saya arrived at the building entrance at 06:55 p.m., Chloe Dyrek was already there. Chloe was dressed casually in a black- and red-checkered blouse and navy blue jeans that suggested she changed her cloths after work.

“Saya! Long time no see!” Chloe cheerfully waved with one hand and smiled while carrying a large plastic bag in the other, which appeared to contain some food and drinks.

“Long time no see. Riccardo is not here yet?” asked Saya.

“That fool isn’t here as usual. He never arrives until well after seven. What’s the point of using his apartment as our meeting place if he never shows up on time?” Chloe sighed, looking back at the entrance.

“I see. On the contrary, Milo always comes on time.”

“You and Milo didn’t come together?”

“No ... He was already gone when I stopped by his classroom.”

“Hmm, that’s too bad. It is possible that there is a woman in his life,” said Chloe. “Have a go at him, Saya, or else you’ll lose him to someone else!”

“Well, but pretty girls are everywhere and ...”

“You are Asian though, and beautiful. Your odds are not that bad. If I was as young as you are now, I would have definitely tried going out with him,” said Chloe.

“What? Do you like him?” asked Saya shockingly.

“Why not? He is such a mysterious boy? Not so bad huh?”

“—What are you talking about?”

“Wow!” Chloe was so surprised that she almost fell down.

Suddenly, Milo appeared out of nowhere. “You shouldn’t use your gift around here so carelessly! Someone might see you!” said Chloe, who quickly glanced around swinging her blonde ponytail.

“Excuse me, but I was in a hurry. And, of course, I made sure that there was no one around. Well, it is seven now. Riccardo hasn’t come yet?” asked Milo as if nothing had happened. It was 07:00:07 p.m. on Saya’s watch now. He was really always on time.

“Well, well. There you are all together!”

As Saya looked back toward the familiar voice, she saw Riccardo Albani coming out of the building.

“It is very rare that you come this early,” said Chloe sarcastically. She was always so kind to Milo and Saya, but faithfully harsh to Riccardo.

“Why Chloe, I’m merely taking heed of your advice. I thought I’d be punctual once in a while,” Riccardo said brushing his loose brown hair back with his fingers. He was dressed in an untidy red shirt and black slacks, and as usual, he did not bother to shave.

“Well, I think ‘once in a while’ and ‘punctual’ can’t go together.” Saya couldn’t help but interrupt Riccardo since she knew his characteristic too well.

“Saya, you are way too serious. A bit much don’t you think? To be popular among boys, you should be more generous, like me.”

“We don’t think so. Saya, let’s go.” Breaking off from the conversation, Chloe took hold of Saya’s hand and headed straight into the building; Milo and Riccardo followed them. As the four of them entered the entrance hall, a security guard approached them.

“How’s it going, Riccardo? Do you have a party tonight?”

“You guessed right,” Riccardo said with ease.

“I will be here until nine or so. May I join you after that?” asked the guard.

Without hesitation, Riccardo replied, “Sorry, but you may not. It’s kind of a secret party. See you later.” They left him and headed toward the elevator as the guard watched them in disappointment.

As soon as the elevator doors closed, Riccardo said, “The guard’s name is Pablo. He had access to the footage of the second case. The footage clearly shows the woman haunting a man named Edward. He lived in this building and died soon after the pictures were taken. I received a copy of the footage from Pablo directly, so it cannot be a fake. I’ll show it to you later.” Riccardo placed a large bag over his shoulder, which appeared to contain several appliances.

“First, why don’t we visit the room?” asked Chloe, pushing the button for the 4th floor. After the elevator reached the 4th floor, she pushed the button for the 2nd floor, followed by the 4th again, 8th, 10th, and 5th floor. When the doors opened, a woman in a black dress and hat entered the elevator. Since Saya had been warned by Chloe that she must not speak to this woman, she even tried not to see her direction every time she met her. Chloe ended the operation by pressing the button for the 1st floor. The elevator began moving up instead of down until it finally stopped on the 9th floor.

“Hurry up! Get out!” The four quickly left the elevator. When the doors closed, the woman in black, quiet and motionless, completely vanished.

“Now let’s get to Room 999.” Chloe used her gift to lead them down to a pure white empty hall. Chloe could connect the “other world” when operating elevators in buildings with more than 10 stories. This ability, called “The Alien Elevator,” was very useful, especially for arranging secret meetings or trying to escape from reality. Anyone witnessing these actions might consider them as part of some mysterious urban legends such as human disappearance or even time travel.

Chloe stopped at a door marked “Room 999” and opened it without a key. The room had white furnishings and a large table with six chairs. Chloe took out the food and drinks from her large plastic bag and placed them on the table with Saya’s help. Riccardo then positioned a hand-held video recorder and a small projector on the table while Milo pulled out his laptop.

“Well, are you all ready? What we are examining here is ... Riccardo, have you named this case?” Milo asked tapping the keyboard.

“How about calling this ‘The Case of the Haunting Woman’? Anyway, take a look at this first.” It was the footage recorded by the surveillance camera; they watched a man walking into the entrance hall of the building, looking back suspiciously, and then walking away from the field of view.

“So what? What’s the problem?” Chloe was now eating potato chips and drinking a glass of white beer.

“Fix your eyes on the screen at around 11:13 p.m. This time, I’ll pause it for you.” Using the remote, Riccardo stopped the footage at 11:12 p.m. and then played it frame-by-frame.

When they recognized what Riccardo wanted them to see, Chloe dropped the potato chip from her mouth and Saya felt a shiver run down her spine. Saya finally identified the ominous curse that she had never seen before.

“This woman? If haunted by her, you will die in a week?” Milo pointed his finger at her image with great interest.

“It’s not certain if victims actually died within a week, but these particular victims definitely died in less than a week. Besides, isn’t it queer that she was recorded in only two frames each time?” As he pushed the

forward button, the woman's upper body came through the glass door, and in the following frame, they simply vanished.

"You mean she appeared the same way each time?" asked Milo using his laptop.

"Well yes," said Riccardo. "The surveillance camera recorded this woman a total of three times, and each time, you can see her in only two frames. In addition to this one, two surveillance cameras in a bank and a station and one home video took similar images, in which you can see three men had this woman on their back in only two frames. I downloaded the one taken at the station from the Internet. But, although I examined it thoroughly, I still can't tell if it's genuine or not. The one recorded at the bank is also from the Internet. However, I managed to get the original tape from the security guard at the bank, and this one is genuine. The home video can't be a fake since I dubbed it myself and devoted an entire day yesterday searching for her in the tape."

"What a nice holiday, huh?" Chloe shrugged her shoulders.

"Stop talking like that," snapped Riccardo. "I am serious. The last one is a photograph. Here you are." Riccardo threw the photo on the desk.

It was a snapshot of a smiling family. One of them was a young man in his 20s. He was sitting on a bench and behind him stood the woman, who was gazing at him with her ominous eye through her raven-black hair.

"It appears to be a simple composition and the person who made this must not have had much skill. But if this is a real picture, it's horrible," said Chloe with a shudder.

"This picture was not taken with a digital camera but with a film camera," said Riccardo taking it from Chloe's hand. "First, I found a scanned image of this picture on the Internet, then I obtained a copy of the film from the man who took the picture. It can't be a fake because the negative also clearly shows the image of the woman. And, he told me that he also turned down an eerie woman's invitation in the amusement area at around 09:30 p.m. three days before this picture was taken. You must know that he died yesterday." Riccardo looked gravely at the picture.

"I guess these cases have something to do with the higher spirits," said Milo. "But we could say that an evil spirit as well as one of the gifted are pulling the wires behind these incidents, because all the victims appear to die according to some regularity."

"Higher spirits" are spiritual beings that live in higher dimensions than the fourth and when they come in to contact with a person, intentionally or not, they pass on supernatural powers and those who have such powers are called the "gifted" among Saya and her colleagues. Some might be afraid of "higher spirits" because of their mysterious nature, but through the contact with them, Saya knows that when a soul leaves a body, it goes into the fourth dimension. However, at the moment of death, if one does not let go of all ill wishes, hatred, and regrets, he or she will be prevented from returning to the fifth dimension or higher and their soul will become corrupted. Such corrupted souls are transformed into the so-called fallen ones, also known as the "evil spirits." Although these "evil spirits" are also a type of "higher spirits," they are quite different in nature. So, in other words, "higher spirits" are both our previous lives and after lives. Furthermore, the higher the dimension, the mightier are their powers, using which they could interfere with beings living in the lower dimensions. The nobler ones among them are called "guardian spirits," by whom every individual is haunted and watched. However, ordinary individuals can neither see them nor notice their presence.

"First, I want to discuss how to find the gifted ..." said Riccardo biting into a piece of Camembert cheese. He promptly poured a glass of white wine and gulped down half of it.

“You already made a list of cases, didn’t you?” asked Milo. “Let’s see it before discussing.”

“All right, just a moment.” Riccardo took out a laptop from his bag and connected it to the projector by wireless. “Here, take a look at this table.”

Name

Date/ Hour, Place of Recording, and Media Used;

Date/ Hour, Location, and Cause of Death

1) Barry

May 10, 07:54 a.m., central station of City, surveillance camera;

May 12, approximately 03:30 p.m., Barry died at work of due to cerebral hemorrhage.

2) Edward

May 16, 11:13 p.m., entrance hall of Edward’s apartment building, surveillance camera;

May 18, 08:31 a.m., entrance hall of Edward’s apartment building, surveillance camera;

May 18, 07:37 p.m., entrance hall of Edward’s apartment building, surveillance camera;

May 20, approximately 04:00 p.m., Edward died at work due to cerebral hemorrhage.

3) Herbert

May 25, 10:22 a.m., east station branch of City Bank, surveillance camera;

May 29, approximately 02:15 p.m., Herbert died at home due to myocardial infarction.

4) Kim

June 3, 08:37 p.m., Kim’s house, home video recorder;

June 6, approximately 03:15 p.m., Kim died at work due to cerebral hemorrhage.

5) Gregg

June 17, 04:21 p.m., central park, film camera;

June 19, sometime after 12:00 p.m., Gregg died at home due to cerebral hemorrhage.

“I have thoroughly investigated this case, and with my luck, there should not be any omissions on this list,” said Riccardo confidently. Riccardo was so confident because he had collected the information using his gift. Saya had become worried about it because he often said that he might have a bad luck as a counteraction if he used his gift for his benefit.

“It’s not just a murder case, but much like a killing show,” said Chloe as she picked up a piece of Camembert.

“Many thanks for Riccardo’s effort,” said Milo. “We now have at least one clue. The gifted can only place the woman at one man’s back so I guess this curse can’t be simultaneously spread over.”

“You’re right,” agreed Riccardo. “The murders were committed at intervals of days.”

“That means, in the worst case, someone is already possessed by this woman?” It suddenly occurred to Saya that she might be that someone, which gave her chills.

“It’s possible. Today is June 20th, and the last murder was on June 19th” said Chloe frowning.

“She may be looking for her next target at this very moment,” said Milo, who was visibly preoccupied. He hadn’t even touched his glass of ice tea.

“The question is how do we lure her out of hiding?” Riccardo gulped the remaining wine, quickly pouring himself another one.

“There’s a pretty cliché way of doing it, but I guess a decoy operation would be suitable.” Milo looked up at Riccardo’s face rather pitifully.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that? Are you hinting that I would be the decoy?” snapped Riccardo in astonishment.

“Rumor has it that if you turn down an eerie woman’s invitation at the amusement area, you will die. If I’m right, didn’t you specialize in this type of field? ”

“Of course, you right, I mean, about my specialty, but ...” said Riccardo rather proudly.

“Then what’s the point of boasting about that?” grumbled Chloe.

“Saya and I are students, so it would be imprudent to hang around the amusement area at night. Chloe is, needless to say, a woman. There is no other person more suitable than you,” said Milo hoping to convince Riccardo. Saya noticed the twinkle in Milo’s blue-green eyes and sensed that he was amused by the whole situation.

“Milo is right,” said Chloe. “You are the most suitable man in the world to take on this operation. If you like, you can even travel to other dimensions with her. So don’t worry, leave everything else up to us.” She joked holding her empty beer bottle, with her rosy complexion showing signs of intoxication.

“Stop talking like that, Chloe! Who can take on such a dangerous curse so casually?” retorted Riccardo sharply in anger.

“You know, Riccardo should not use his gift,” said Saya in her attempt to soothe him, “it could make things worse. Even if he uses his luck to spare his life, he might lose it in an accident the very next day. I think it’s too dangerous.” She thought that they could never be too careful since this curse appears to bring inevitable sudden death.

“Saya, you are very kind,” said Riccardo. “Unlike the savage woman, be careful not to be too kind to me, or else ...”

“Which one of us is the savage woman?” Chloe interrupted. “Even I doubt that a good-for-nothing like you has the ability to die!”

“Hey, it’s useless to quarrel over this matter,” said Milo trying to calm the two adults. “Don’t worry Riccardo. They died of cerebral hemorrhages or myocardial infarctions because, I suppose, the spirit’s attack can only have physical impacts. If she could mentally attack her victims, then there would be a greater variety of deaths.” Upon hearing his theory, Saya couldn’t understand why there was no danger for Riccardo.

“You mean she can attack blood vessels in the brain or the heart?” Riccardo asked Milo dubiously.

“I guess this particular spirit has limited physical power that can damage a blood vessel at best. So I guess there is no danger if Saya stays with you,” Milo declared firmly. His words made Saya believe that she could really save Riccardo with her gift.

“If you two stay together all night,” said Chloe to Riccardo meaningfully, “Then I’m afraid of Saya’s security.”

“Chloe, what do you mean by that?” Riccardo retorted instantly.

“Milo, I understand your plan. You mean if Riccardo is possessed by her, then I will protect him from her, right?” Saya tried to speak to Milo before the quarrel between Riccardo and Chloe could escalate. She had been friends with the two for a long time and already used to dealing with this type of situation.

“Yes, I do,” said Milo looking at Riccardo. “So, as I said before, I want you to hang around the amusement area beginning this evening, and at the same time, try to get more information about the woman. Do you understand?”

“From this evening on?” sighed Riccardo. “Okay. Anyway, I almost overslept this morning.”

“You know, never hesitate to do good,” said Milo. “Besides, it is almost impossible to know if she is already haunted someone else. And, I want you to constantly record yourself with a video camera while you are in your room, since no one can anticipate when and where she will appear. Plus, keep uploading the footage onto a server for me so that I have access to it at any time,” Milo concluded as he finally drew his glass of ice tea close to him.

“Got it,” said Riccardo confidently, “and I am leaving the pictures for you to check.”

“Never accept any offer from any woman. Do you understand?” Chloe demanded.

“Jesus, I’ve never thought that I would keep myself away from women. Luck should have turned its back on me this month,” mumbled Riccardo.

“If you manage to get haunted by her,” said Saya with her best smile, “I’ll stay with you and protect you. So you don’t have to worry.” She thought, *no one else could spare his life except for me.*

“Looks like now you don’t have any choice, Mr. Playboy.” Chloe jeered as Riccardo smiled sulkily.

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Riccardo left the others in front of his apartment building and headed toward the amusement area. He boarded a subway and got off at the central station of City. Located on the southern side of the station was the amusement area, which consisted of numerous bars and nightclubs that would take more than a week to comb through. In the alleys, he could see the silhouettes of drunken people staggering and tottering around under the glow of the neon lights. As soon as Riccardo arrived in the alley, he was stopped by a tall and heavily made-up woman.

“Hey, could you stand having a couple of drinks with me?”

Her face and figure were not bad, and under different circumstances, he would have probably taken up her offer. But as instructed, he memorized the woman’s face and turned down her offer with a waving gesture. Between 09:00 p.m. and 02:00 a.m., he had been stopped by a total of 13 women and he faithfully turned down every one of them.

This is a good way to kill time, and above all, you don't need any money, Riccardo thought to himself. Finally, he started for home imagining that if Chloe had heard this, she would have probably passed some sarcastic remarks.

The next day, Riccardo left for work at 08:00 a.m. and arrived at the office sometime before 09:00 a.m. After work, he headed for the amusement area and walked through the streets. He returned home sometime after 12:00 a.m. The night before, he was so tired that he forgot to record himself. But this time, he was prepared.

The last thing I should become interested in is a recording of a sleeping man, he thought. He set up a hand-held camera on a tripod for an all-night recording, positioned it in the corner of his bedroom, and promptly climbed into bed.

The next morning, he uploaded the data to the server and left for the office after 08:00 a.m. At around 05:00 p.m. while still at work, his cell-phone rang. It was Milo.

"How's it going, Riccardo?" asked Milo. "Well, I mean, how is your physical condition?"

"My physical condition? Everything is okay I guess, except for the lack of sleep." replied Riccardo.

"Well that's fine. Riccardo, you know what ..."

"What's the matter?"

"The woman appeared in your room at 04:21:42 a.m. yesterday."

Riccardo gasped. "What? What are you talking about? Are you kidding me?"

"Have you ever heard of me joking around like this?" asked Milo.

"No, not really ... But how did you find her so quickly? Isn't the video's running time about six hours?"

"It is, but I watched it at double speed. Besides, it isn't really difficult to detect evil spirits in recordings using some mental focus."

Riccardo focused on Milo's voice. "Really? I never thought of it that way ... anyway, are you sure? So when was I possessed by her?"

"How should I know? Do you have any idea?"

Riccardo looked down in thought. "There are too many of them. In the past two days, I was invited by 25 different women."

"Do you remember their faces and names?"

"I never forget beautiful ones, but I never remember the plain ones either," said Riccardo confidently.

"I think you should be more serious in situations such as this."

"I am extremely serious now, but apparently it's too late. I certainly didn't expect to drag her out of her den this early. Is this a sign of good luck or bad luck? Anyway, Milo, what's your next plan?"

"Can you take a vacation? From this night on, we will all stay in Chloe's room in the other world. I want to see if this woman can enter the room created by Chloe's gift. But for the time being, keep recording yourself. We must find a way to deal with her."

“Okay. Today I’ll leave my office on time. Let’s meet in front of my apartment building at 07:00 p.m., all right?”

“No problem. I’ll ask Saya if she could take some time off from school for several days beginning tomorrow. See you later.”

After Milo hung up, Riccardo just stood there holding his cell phone and looking out the window, almost like he was in a state of shock or rather lost in thought. He thought, *Jesus, does my life now depend on whether Saya could skive off school or not?*

Suddenly, life seemed somewhat empty to him and he gave out a big sigh. At the same time, Riccardo felt as if he was being watched. Slowly, he turned around.

“What? May I help you?” asked Tatyana, one of his colleagues who was sitting behind him.

“No, no, never mind, Tatyana.”

Riccardo turned toward the display of his personal computer and started filling out an application for a paid holiday.

-4-

When Saya and Chloe arrived at the meeting place, Riccardo was pacing and smoking nervously in front of the building.

“This is definitely the first time that you have arrived early! How’s it going, Mr. Playboy?” Chloe started mock him immediately.

“You are late,” said Riccardo sullenly.

“Not one bit. It is still eight minutes to seven,” retorted Chloe indifferently.

“Where is Milo?” Riccardo glanced at his watch eagerly.

“You know Milo is always on time,” Saya reminded him.

“Thanks, Saya,” he said, relieved. “You staying with here assure me the hope that my life will be spared.”

“You can’t even withstand a haunting woman for more than two days. You are too timid as a decoy,” Chloe interrupted teasingly.

“Stop talking like that!” snapped Riccardo. “Suppose you were in my position haunted by that eerie woman. Jesus, I watched her image with my own eyes on the footage at 04:21 a.m. Who in the world permitted her to stare at my precious sleeping face free of charge?”

“Who else on earth would be interested in your sleeping face but her?” scorned Chloe.

“I said stop talking like that! I will never forgive her for making me take my precious paid holidays for nothing! The day I find that gifted, she’s done for!”

“Hey, Milo’s coming!” Saya could recognize a boy’s silhouette slowly approaching in the dim light. The closer he came, the clearer his platinum blonde hair appeared under the street lamp. He arrived in front of Saya exactly when her digital watch showed 07:00 p.m.

“You are the latest out of all of us, Milo,” Riccardo complained. “You need more focus, especially when I’m in such great danger.”

“Well, if I remember correctly, it was you who decided what time we would meet,” said Milo calmly. “If you wanted to meet earlier, you should have said so.”

“Oh, of course you’re right,” Riccardo admitted. “I’m sorry, it’s my fault.”

“You’re right,” Chloe interrupted as usual. “Everything is your fault. Saya and Milo, let’s go!”

Chloe urged Riccardo to open the entrance door, and she led the way into the elevator.

Room 999 looked deserted as ever. It was an empty room that had only basic amenities such as electricity, gas, and water. Chloe used her gift to draw out pipes and wires from her own apartment so that they could cook, shower, and use basic home appliances in the other world.

Chloe placed her shopping bag on the table and began taking glasses and plates out of the cupboard.

As soon as she was done with her arrangement, Milo got right down to business. “Since we don’t have the slightest clue about our enemy, I suggest that we stay here together from now on. Chloe, you said that you couldn’t stay away from your work, so please take charge of supplies and investigation. Riccardo, you should be careful not to go out of the scope of the video camera. Even if you are in the bathroom, let the camera keep on recording at least your back. Saya, in case Riccardo is being attacked, use your gift as soon as possible. There is also the possibility that he could be attacked when you’re sleeping, so you and I will sleep in shifts. I’ll take the night shift, so Riccardo and you can sleep at night. Saya, you should never leave Riccardo, and in the absence of Chloe, if we need something from out there, then I’ll do errands. Any questions?”

“Keeping the two alone might inspire another crime,” remarked Chloe gravely.

“Stop talking like that!” Riccardo protested. “This is not a joke.”

“Don’t worry, Chloe,” said Saya. “I believe he isn’t that type of person. And if he’s gonna do what I don’t want, then I’ll just bite my tongue and kill him.”

“Saya, that’s not funny either,” mumbled Riccardo.

“Of course I’m joking,” said Saya smiling. But it was true that she could easily kill him if she wanted to.

“Knowing your gift, it still doesn’t sound like a joke,” said Riccardo. “By the way, Milo, what do you want Chloe to investigate?”

“For now, I want her to hang around the amusement area,” Milo answered. “She will follow the same route that you took and look for any suspicious looking women. And if she finds any, then she’ll take photographs and you will check the faces of them.”

“I see,” said Riccardo. “Maybe some pictures might remind me of something.”

“Well, any opinions?” Milo asked, looking at each of his colleagues in turn.

“I think it’s a good idea,” said Saya.

“No problem,” Chloe agreed.

“Me too. By the way, how do we pass our time?” asked Riccardo already changing the subject. “We don’t have anything to do for the time being.”

“It’s like going on vacation together,” said Saya. “Let’s have fun while we have the chance. How about Monopoly?” Saya was living in a girl’s dorm away from her family, so she felt rather happy spending the night with them.

“I hate the idea,” Riccardo complained, “because Milo is too good at it. You could become an excellent dictator.”

“No way. I believe that you just don’t think about consequences that much,” said Milo.

“I’ll make today the day I defeat Milo!” Saya declared.

“I think you guys should be a bit more serious,” Chloe sighed.

-5-

Three days had passed since Saya began staying with Milo and Riccardo in Room 999. She enjoyed her time with them playing video games and cards, even though she knew that she was just trying to divert her anxiety.

They were operating three video cameras simultaneously. Since each of them could record a total of two-and-a-half hours, they used them in turn to cover 24 hours and checked the footage at the same time. Milo was in charge and Riccardo took command while Milo was sleeping. During those times, Saya had nothing to do, so she read books or helped them check the recordings.

It was 02:33:42 a.m. when the woman appeared on the monitor, and it was Milo who discovered the sighting while the others were sleeping. “She appears to have the ability to jump into the space as I had suspected.” Milo was gazing at the monitor with great interest. “Or she is always with Riccardo.”

“She is not my type at all. What bad luck.” Riccardo turned away with a disgusted look.

“She is standing closer to you by one meter compared to when she was spotted at 04:00 a.m. yesterday,” said Milo. “Maybe it’ll be of some help to measure the length precisely.” Milo directed Riccardo to stand at a particular spot in the room as he put scale marks on the floor behind him. Then he moved the camera to where it could shoot Riccardo’s left side.

On the second day, at 01:39:42 p.m., the woman was spotted again. The distance between Riccardo and her was approximately two meters and 66 centimeters. She appeared a bit closer than she had last time. The interval time was 11 hours and six minutes.

On the third day, at 12:45:42 a.m., she appeared again. The distance was one meter and 99 centimeters, which was roughly 67 centimeters closer than the previous time.

“She was caught again after 11 hours and six minutes,” said Saya.

“As I said earlier, she appears at regular intervals,” said Milo calmly. “Three days have now past, so Riccardo should die within the next few days.”

“How can you say that so callously?” grumbled Riccardo. “You should be more serious about it. Saya, you’re my only hope.”

“Her next appearance will be at 11:51:42 a.m., which is 11 hours and six minutes from now. I think the reason why she keeps haunting Riccardo in spite of us watching is that the gifted placed the woman’s spirit into the victim without actually controlling her or the woman does not consider us potential threats. Next time, let’s keep a closer and more careful watch on her.”

On the third day, at 11:51:35 a.m., Saya was gazing at Riccardo's back and holding her breath out of anxiety. The clock was ticking away second by second. Saya began a countdown to herself: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 ...

All of a sudden, out of nowhere, the woman appeared in front of them without any sign and then disappeared in the same manner. Saya felt the goose bumps on her arms and chills up her spine.

"Milo! Did you spot her?" Saya exclaimed in horror.

"Yes, I did. She can materialize in this dimension as I had suspected. That's why we can take her images with optical devices. She reflects light," concluded Milo in a calm manner.

"Does this mean that we can physically attack her?" asked Riccardo instantly.

"Maybe we can, but no one can attack her in only two frames," answered Milo. "I still suggest that we find the gifted who is manipulating this woman."

"But how will you manage that?" asked Saya. "The distance between them is almost one meter now. She will probably attack Riccardo during the next appearance, or the one after that."

Saya looked at Riccardo worriedly. The woman's withered hands were nearly touching Riccardo's head.

"Precisely, the distance is one meter, 33 centimeters and two millimeters," said Milo. "So according to my estimate, Riccardo will die of cerebral hemorrhage at 10:03:42 a.m., tomorrow morning." This simple pronouncement made Riccardo's brows become closely knitted.

"How can you be so indifferent? Can you really guarantee that Saya can save me?"

"Hmm, I guess that no one can guarantee such a thing," replied Milo. "For example, if the evil spirit is one of those who cannot be stopped until you die, you will not survive. Because, as you know, Saya can't cure you with her gift."

"What? Then, how do you intend to save me? You didn't tell me that I would be in such great peril!" Riccardo looked back at his back nervously even though he knew no one was standing there.

"Of course you wouldn't die, because I've located the gifted," said Milo. "Since our overnight surveillance is over, I'll take a nap. All of us should go to the den after I have a good sleep. See you later."

"What? Wait a moment, Milo." Saya stopped him since she did not understand anything of what he just said.

"Hey, explain to us what you just said again," said Riccardo in a flurry.

"I said see you later. There is no point in telling you'll now because without Chloe we can't settle the case. Besides, you guys aren't going by yourselves at once, are you? Now, do you understand? Thanks. And again, see you later." Milo lay down on a mat on the floor and promptly fell asleep.

-6-

"So, who is the gifted?" demanded Chloe.

Chloe returned around 06:00 p.m. While Saya was looking at Milo's sleeping face, Chloe shook him out of his sleep without a moment of hesitation.

"Hmm, Chloe? Good morning," said Milo sleepily, rubbing his eyes.

“Did you sleep well? Did you really identify the gifted?” asked Chloe as she sat down in front of Milo.

“Well, I think so.”

“How? Especially since you were only watching the monitor all this time,” said Chloe.

“You’re right. But the obvious regularities in the spirit’s appearances allows us to reason the situation rather easily.”

“What do you mean by that? Who is she?” asked Riccardo. Saya was staring at Milo’s face and waiting for an answer.

“The gifted is Pablo,” said Milo nonchalantly. Upon hearing this, the other three were all dumbfounded.

“Pablo? The security guard? But he isn’t a woman!” retorted Riccardo in confusion.

“You know, men can invite men,” said Milo. “There is no possibility other than Pablo if you reason inductively.”

“What do you mean?” asked Chloe still puzzled.

“All you need is a close examination of the appearance pattern. Do you remember how long the intervals were?”

“Well, they were 11 hours and six minutes,” answered Saya at once.

“Correct. How many minutes are there in 11 hours and six minutes?”

“There are 666 minutes,” said Riccardo in an anxious tone.

“Correct, and the distance the spirit traveled each time was about 67 centimeters. I guess we can get an accurate value of 666 millimeters. Probably, when she emerges the next time,” Milo looked into Riccardo’s face calmly, “the distance between you and her should be exactly 666 millimeters long. And after the next, when the distance is reduced to zero, she will attack your blood vessels.”

“But how can you say the gifted is Pablo?” asked Saya hesitatingly.

“Why, once you analyze the regularity, you can trace it back easily to Pablo.” Milo looked at Saya’s face, which was a bit surprised.

“Trace it back?” asked Saya quizzically, looking back at his face.

“Let me see ... The spirit was recorded with Riccardo’s camera at 04:21:42 a.m. on June 22nd for the first time. We already know that she appears every 666 minutes since she is caught at the 42-second mark each time. The last appearance was at 05:15 p.m. on the 21st and the second last was at 06:09 a.m. on the 21st. This means that the third last should be 07:03 p.m. on the 20th, right? Do you remember what time we met on the 20th?”

“It was 7:00 in the evening,” Saya remembered the exact time since she looked at her watch when Milo suddenly appeared. Her watch showed that it was 07:00:07 p.m.

“We met Pablo shortly after that. I remember that Riccardo turned down his invitation to join us,” said Milo.

“Wait, wait. Why do you say that the woman possessed me at that particular time?” asked Riccardo. “Isn’t it possible that she could have possessed me at any other time?”

Saya thought about what he had said and was confused since they couldn’t tell the specific time of when she did it.

“No, it isn’t,” said Milo indifferently. “Because, taking the other five cases into consideration, the spirit’s appearances had clear regularity. Though we don’t know the exact time of their deaths, they also center on the cycle of 11 hours and six minutes. As we already know, she travels 666 centimeters every 11 hours and six minutes until she kills her victims. If the gifted can control her to kill them anytime and anywhere, it would make no sense for him to do it in this manner. So, we could say that he required a certain amount of time and space to make the spirit haunt and ultimately kill each victim. Now, Herbert’s case, after she was recorded, took the longest amount of time: 99 hours and 54 minutes. We could conclude that she can’t kill people until at least four days and three hours and 54 minutes had passed after she first possessed them. Thus, as for Riccardo’s case,” Milo looked at Riccardo, “the time when you were possessed was before 06:09 a.m. on the 21st. You should have still been in your room during the previous opportunity, at 07:57 a.m. on June 20th, since you usually do so after 08:00 in the morning. So you had not met anyone that day. Am I right, or did you bring a woman into your room?”

“Of course I didn’t,” said Riccardo instantly as Saya stared at him.

“Saya, don’t gaze at me like that.”

“I know because you yourself said you almost overslept that morning,” said Milo evenly. “And, you also said that you were watching the videos the entire day on June 19th. So, it could not have been the day when you were possessed.”

“Isn’t it possible that the day was June 18th?” asked Riccardo.

Milo answered promptly as if he had expected it. “No, it isn’t. I’m almost positive that the woman could haunt only one target. Basically, when someone is being haunted, others are not. This curse can’t be transmitted through pictures on the Internet since there is no evidence that more than one person was killed at the same time. On June 18th, she was still haunting the other victim named Gregg. Besides, if you record the time span between the time when Gregg was first invited by a strange woman and turned her down and the time he died, then you can easily calculate the number of her appearances: 10 times for each victim. The spirit or the gifted? or both? has a deep obsession with the number 666. If you count the 10 appearances from the point when you were first possessed and the moment when you die, then the total time would be 6,660 minutes and the distance would be 666 centimeters. It’s just the way he or she likes to curse people, isn’t it? I suppose that the reason why she appears only in two frames is that she can only materialize in this dimension for only 66.6 milliseconds at a time. This type of obsession is a bit ridiculous, isn’t it?” said Milo smiling.

Epilogue

Pablo Colsa was completely cornered. He had never believed that there were others with supernatural powers living in City. By the end of April, he found himself with his gift and lost his lover Barry in an accident at the same time. Then, he learnt to use his gift after he tested it on Edward, but he couldn’t find a substitute for Barry. So he dressed as a woman and hunted for a lover in the amusement area at night, and killed men every time they refused to follow his will. He even threatened to kill them, but no one succumbed to him. It was time for Pablo to pay the price.

On the doorstep of the guard’s room stood Riccardo and his friends. They were accusing Pablo of being a serial murderer. One of them, a boy with a handsome face, was blaming him with a logical argument, which

ordinary people might have regarded as mere nonsense. Natria, an evil spirit, was still haunting Riccardo and she could only attack after 6,660 minutes had passed from when she first started haunting her target. They had already known that he used Natria to curse and kill people. There was no other way but to shut their mouths and run. Pablo slipped the gun out of his hip holster and aimed it at the boy's head.

"You can't shoot me with the safety on," said the boy smiling. In haste, Pablo released the safety catch. But, he could tell that it didn't switch on.

"I said, you can't shoot me with the safety on," said the boy as Pablo aimed the gun at the boy's forehead. Glancing at his gun, he found that the safety was somehow reset. He was gripped in genuine fear.

"If you behave well, I guarantee your safety. If you don't, then I don't either," said the boy with an innocent smile. And the moment Pablo tried to release the safety again, he received a mighty blow on his jaw. His field of vision revolved in a complete circle and it trembled. Although he didn't know when and how, his gun suddenly disappeared from his hand.

"How about we make a hole in your shoulder?" Leaning against the wall, he noticed that the boy was holding his gun.

"Okay, you win. Please don't hurt me," Pablo fell on his knees and pleaded with the boy for mercy.

"First of all, release Riccardo from that haunting woman," demanded the boy.

Pablo hesitated for a second since he thought that he would be killed as soon as he did it.

"I said, release Riccardo from her," repeated the boy. Pablo felt as if he was being overwhelmed by an inexplicable coercion.

"Let's make a deal. If I do as you say ..."

Pablo was shot in his shoulder before he could finish his proposal. The bullet went through his shoulder blade and lodged into the wall behind it. The impact threw him against the wall.

"The next target is your forehead. I can shoot you at point-blank range I assure you it hit the mark. Even though you won't release Riccardo, with you dead, he will become free anyway."

Pablo could discern a subtle but unquestionable intent to kill in the boy's eyes, which made him shudder uncontrollably.

"Wait, wait. I will do as you tell me to. Please don't shoot me, please." Pablo was weeping unsure of whether it was pain or fear.

"Okay. I have released him. I swear."

"Could you make your beloved Natria stand behind you?" asked the boy still aiming the gun at Pablo's forehead.

"Sure, she stays with me until she haunts."

"I see. Now, prove it to us. Have her stand behind you."

Pablo saw the girl with black hair, who stood silently by the boy's side. She frowned slightly when he let Natria appear behind him. Riccardo took a picture of them.

"How did the photograph turn out?" asked the boy.

“Excellent,” said Riccardo looking at the display of his camera.

“Now, get on the elevator.” Holding the gun, the boy urged Pablo toward the door of the guard’s room.

“The elevator? Why? First let me take care of my injury.”

“Your injury? What are you talking about?” The boy’s words surprised him so much that he instantly stared at his shoulder. The wound was no longer there. Pablo was lost, he couldn’t understand what was going on; but at the least, he could tell that the boy had supernatural powers. However, the realization didn’t bring any good. On the contrary, it worsened his mental state.

“I said, get on the elevator,” urged the boy.

Without a choice, Pablo headed toward the elevator, pressed the button, and waited for the elevator to come down. He got on it and the other four were standing outside watching him as if sending him off.

“Then, farewell,” said the boy evenly.

“Please take care of yourself,” said the girl with black hair sadly.

“If we meet again alive, then tell me about your adventure,” said the blonde woman meaningfully.

“Bye, I promise you that I will make use of this snapshot of lovers.” Riccardo raised his hand and the pair of doors closed slowly.

Pablo pressed the button of the 2nd basement where he had parked his car. But the elevator kept on rising.

Damn, what’s happening? I want to go down!

Even though he frantically pressed the button, the elevator kept going up. It moved to the 4th, 2nd, 4th, 6th, and 10th floors, until it finally stopped on the 5th floor. The doors slowly opened and there before him was a woman wearing a black hat. Her presence sent a chill down his spine. He realized intuitively that her nature was the same as that of Natria.

Pablo quickly took a step back from her as the woman stepped into the elevator without a word. Crying out in terror, he tried to slip through her, but the elevator doors closed unmercifully. He was trapped in a box with the woman in black and there was no way out.

The woman stood in silence.

As his knees crumbled beneath him, he fell to the floor. Like a shadow, the woman’s right hand extended and pressed the button for the 1st floor but instead, the elevator went up.

The elevator passed the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th floors before gently coming to a stop on the 10th floor. The doors opened slowly and quietly.

At last, the woman looked at him. Her face was almost expressionless, but it appeared that she was sneering at him. She started to leave the elevator silently as if not walking but sliding. At the same time, Pablo felt his ankle being dragged violently by some unseen force.

“Aargh! Noooooo!”

As Pablo’s voice echoed in the elevator, he continued to be pulled out regardless of his panting and screaming. The woman was standing in front of him eye-to-eye without a word as before. Pablo watched helplessly as the doors of the elevator closed slowly, and then they vanished completely without any trace.

The End

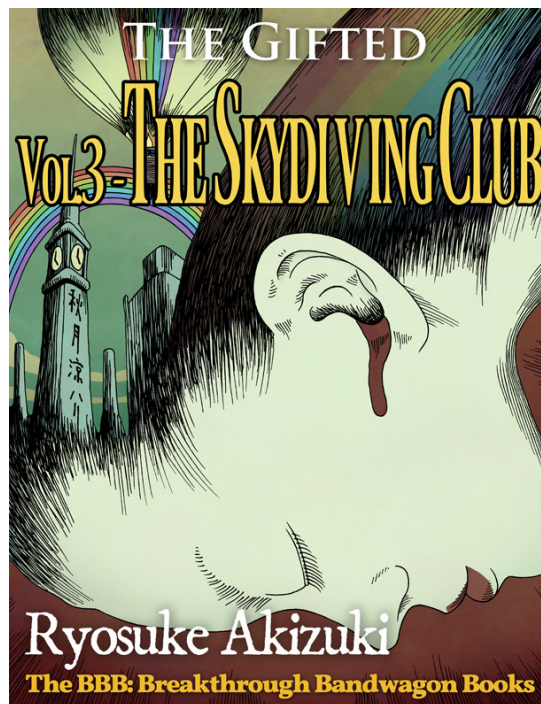
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Ryosuke Akizuki Works List at The BBB



The Gifted Vol.2 – The Return of the Dead Kitten

<http://thebbb.net/ebooks/the-gifted-vol2.html>



The Gifted Vol.3 – The Skydiving Club

<http://thebbb.net/ebooks/the-gifted-vol3.html>
