

# BALLAD *of a* SHINIGAMI *memo: the god girl of death*

VOLUME 1

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LOS ANGELES

## **BALLAD OF A SHINIGAMI VOL. 1**

*(Shinigami no Ballad Vol. 1)*

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—**R**ing.

The soft tinkling of a bell. A faint sound, a mere whisper of a ring.

He opened his eyes and saw three grade-schoolers running noisily by. His sight was drawn to the good luck charm dangling from one of the children's backpacks. It bounced in an irregular rhythm.

It seemed he had been asleep for quite a while. Nearby, a train crawled forward. The rattling it made on the tracks was the same rhythm as the beating of his heart.

The sound of a train running on a designated track at a designated time. The air that never changed. The sound of laughter that always made him gag. The people who drifted off to sleep, their brows painfully

furrowed. The unchanging scenery.

*Me, the same as always. I'm used to it. I've gotten used to it.*

His home was still a few stations away, but an in-car announcement blared that everyone had to get off at the next stop. It was a normal, mundane announcement, yet he wondered how many people experienced the sort of tension that made it hard to even breathe. That was how Ikuma Daiki felt.

The train slowed and entered the station platform. Inertia kicked in and bodies were pushed and pulled, all at the mercy of unseen forces. Daiki stood and approached the door. He could still see light outside, an indication there was still some time left before dusk set in. Inside, the train was heavy with a lazy atmosphere. But when the doors opened, the bracing February air could be felt on one's cheeks.

*How many times have I descended upon this very platform?*

He had been here several times now, and each time he felt as if his breath would be stifled. The very first time, he had managed to find the place by following newspaper and magazine articles and photos. It wasn't very far from the station. Now, just like a

local, Daiki easily navigated his way to the right exit. He walked towards his target destination.

After a while, a peculiar-looking building came into view, contrasting somewhat with the quiet surroundings. It was a building that, several years prior, had been abandoned even before construction was completed.

Although it didn't have a "no trespassing" sign, a chain-link fence encircled the building. Daiki slid his overly thin frame through a small opening and entered the facility. In several places, there was evidence that others had entered in the same manner.

There was graffiti on the walls, but nothing that could remotely be called art. It further heightened the effect of abandonment. It seemed to be some kind of message, but outsiders had no way of understanding its meaning.

The windows on the first floor were all broken; bits and shards were scattered about the ground. Glass crunched under Daiki's feet as he entered the building. His gaze fell upon a mountain of obscenely discarded trash.

A small path that snaked away from the garbage led to a stairway and the upper floors. Both Daiki

and *that* boy had taken the same path. He proceeded to go upstairs.

Unlike the psychological feeling of suffocation he had felt at the station, this time it was a physical shortness of breath that Daiki felt as he used his legs to go upstairs. No way would there be any working elevators here.

Ninth floor. Most trespassers would never even bother coming this high. So, unlike the floors below, this one was not cluttered with garbage or broken glass. On the other hand, there was a carpet of dust and words written in magic marker.

Those words had remained, without disappearing.

The boy had committed suicide about a year ago. At the time, he had been a third-year student in junior high. He had leapt from the ninth floor.

He had scrawled countless words on the walls of this floor. Words which could have been poetry or could have been his final will and testament.

*Crap.*

*It's all crap.*

*Living is crap.*

*Life has no meaning.*

*None. Nowhere to be found.*

*Crap.*

*Why doesn't anybody realize this?*

That was his last message to the world.

Daiki approached the window where the boy had leapt into the dusk sky. After the boy's suicide, the police had covered all of the windows on this floor with tape. Daiki removed part of the tape so he could peer outside. He wanted to see the scenery the boy had seen. He forced open the rattling window.

Daiki's hair had grown irritatingly long, as if to erect a barrier against all human interaction. From between the countless black strands, he viewed a distorted world.

The sun began its descent. The sky would soon be painted a bright Bengal orange.

One year ago, the boy had seen this same view. He had realized he had no wings, yet, still, he had tried to fly.

What had caused him to do so—as he had looked down upon the world he hastily dismissed as crap—Daiki wondered. For one whole year, he

thought of it, until he turned the same age the boy had been.

He gazed upon that very same view.

And as he did so, Daiki spat and looked down at the world.

The boy had died. He had taken his own life and ended his path forever. But Daiki was not dead, yet neither was he truly alive. The boy's poem was one of despair, but Daiki had been strangely touched by it. It was as if he had discovered a "light" amidst his dark despair. And so, Daiki saw the boy as shining brightly.

Suddenly, he felt as if he had discovered something, a simple answer. He might even have known it for a long time now.

"I am...the same as him..."

"I want to become 'light' just like him. But what must I do to become light?"

The boy, to bring his thoughts to the surface, had left his "poem."

It was later discovered that he had several other poems and thoughts, scribbled in notebooks he had left behind. Those feelings remained in this world too, as light.

"Then, what should I do?" Daiki asked himself.

He decided that merely standing there, doing nothing, was not an adequate form of acceptance of the boy's poem. Daiki removed his sketchbook from his bag and began to violently draw on the empty white paper with a piece of charcoal.

"It's a nonsensical world. So I'll draw a nonsensical picture."

*Everything is crap. This is my final scene.*

"I'll draw a picture to end it all."

He scrawled shapes that appeared in his brain, in his retinas--tattered patterns that fell into black lines, surfacing on paper as black and white masses. Roughly, violently, yet at times delicately, the lines began to come together under the influence of Daiki's guiding hand. Hardly pausing for breath, he drew a world that was utterly dark. Something deeply mad to the point of sadness, steeped in loneliness, a broken world. Although drawn in deep blacks, portions of white jumped out vividly.

"Huff, huff." Daiki tried to catch his breath.

He closed his eyes and slowly lowered his hands; the sketchbook tumbled to the floor. Shortly thereafter, the charcoal followed—now worn down

smaller than his pinkie fingernail—and dropped to the ground with a quiet plink.

A carpet of dust billowed in the air. Only the quiet sounds of his breathing, pumped out by his heaving lungs, could be heard.

“Huff huff. Huff huff...huff...huff...huff... huff...”

As Daiki opened his eyes once more, he saw in front of him the white clouds of his breath and the sky outside turning to dusk. As if to shake loose his thoughts, a strong wind blew forth. His body responded instinctively. Daiki put his hand on the windowsill and leaned half of his body outside.

“.....”

The ground below seemed far away. The height was enough to make him dizzy. This was a place cut off from the world.

He had no wings to fly. Scattered tufts of dust drifted in the air like feathers, but they were not his wings. He had no wings. He’d realized that about himself for a long time now.

Crap.

Crap.

Crap.

Crap.

Crap—

Like a chant, the words rang over and over again in Daiki’s head.

*Fly. Reach for the sky. You can do it, he thought.*

“I’ll never see this warped twilight again... Goodbye, fleeting world—”

Just as he was about to hurl himself out the window, it happened.

—Ring.

The tinkle of a bell. And then, a voice.

“Do you want to fly?”

The voice came from somewhere nearby. No, it was whispered in his ear. Not expecting this, Daiki swallowed hard.

*There shouldn’t be anyone else here, Daiki thought.*

No matter how focused he was on his task, he would have noticed if someone had come near. His body froze, but he managed to move his eyes towards the direction of the voice.

A face was there. Close enough for him to feel an exhaled breath on his cheek, if there had been any.



She had big eyes, mostly pupils, and faintly red lips. Her skin was the same hue as snow. Her jaw was rounded yet straight, framed by her dangling, vividly white hair. She was small and appeared to be a child, but what a breathtakingly fantastic child she was.

“...Wha...” Daiki stammered.

He couldn’t form words, let alone blink.

“If you’re going to fly,” the girl continued, “then you need to spread your wings. Or...would you just rather die?”

She fixed her large, black eyes on his. Her childish, soft voice sounded strangely mature.

“If you fall from here, it will be quite painful. Unless you wish to kill yourself, of course.” The girl laughed softly.

Daiki quickly regained his senses. In trying to maneuver away from the girl, he ended up edging away from the window.

The girl had appeared, to begin with, as if she had popped out of his head, then tumbled into this world. She looked to be a bit younger than Daiki. She wore a white, one-piece dress and seemed to float in the air like some bizarre dandelion seed. She was overwhelmingly white, the monotony broken only by the shiny red shoes that adorned her feet.

In her hand, she held a long pole, which was about as tall as she was. At the top of the pole was a dull-colored, exaggerated L-shaped blade.

As his eyes began to focus, he saw a cat beside the girl. It was a black cat, with golden eyes as bright as the moon in the night sky. It wore a red collar with a large bell attached to it. Only the tip of its tail, which pointed towards the sky, was white.

The cat nimbly hopped onto the windowsill, which Daiki had perched himself upon just moments before. The bell hanging around its neck tinkled with the creature’s movements.

And then, it *spoke*.

“Whoa, it’s pretty high up here...”

The black cat opened its eyes wide and deftly put on an expressive face, shaking its body. Its voice was that of a young boy.

“Daniel, come here,” called the little girl, and the black cat scampered over. She seemed to take no notice of the unbelievable occurrence of a cat speaking. To the girl, this was apparently a normal event. Or rather, the girl herself was *not* normal. She emitted a mysterious aura that was even stranger than the fact that the cat had spoken.

And what’s more, she wore only a thin dress... in the middle of winter! Regardless, she stood there casually, as if everything was quite ordinary.

A tremor, something close to fear, raced through Daiki’s body. Though his heart was beating fast, no blood flowed to his brain. Or at least that’s what it felt like to him.

*What the hell is with these guys...?!* his brain screamed.

“Oh, we haven’t introduced ourselves,” she answered, perhaps hearing Daiki’s thoughts. Or was it because Daiki had, without noticing, actually voiced them out loud?

“Daniel...”

Prompted by the girl, the cat named Daniel stood on two legs and curled his tail to the front. He then skillfully grabbed hold of the white tip with his front

paws. Thus, the cat formed a “ring,” and into this ring, the little girl inserted her hand.

“...?!” Daiki almost lost his breath.

The hand the girl inserted into the ring did *not* emerge on the other side. It was as if the ring had become a link to another dimension.

“Huh?” the girl muttered. “Where did I put it?”

“Hey...! Stop moving so much! Ow!”

Ignoring Daniel’s struggles and protests, the girl inserted her arm further inside until half the length of her arm, up to her elbow, disappeared inside the ring.

“Owwwwwwwww,” Daniel bawled.

“Oh...there it is,” she announced. “Oopsy daisy...”

“Hnff!” the cat snorted.

“You don’t have to fuss about everything,” she answered back. “That’s why I hate doing this.”

She removed her arm from the ring and withdrew a white object, which looked like a card case. Frozen like a doll, Daniel plopped to the floor. The girl continued to ignore him; she fixed her attention on Daiki.

“Here...”

She opened the case, took out a card and brought it to Daiki's eyes. The card appeared to be some sort of identification, large-sized, with a photo of the little girl wearing a surly look.

*“Shinigami #A-100100.”*

“Er...shini...gami...?” he asked, perplexed.

“If saying #A-100100 is hard for you, then you may simply call me ‘Momo,’” the girl explained. “Daniel calls me that. And I do like it better.”

The girl—Momo—spoke these words, which under normal circumstances might have sounded like a joke, without the hint of a smile. She was dead serious. That made it even harder for Daiki to believe.

“A shinigami?”

That word seemed larger than the rest of what she'd said and tugged at something in his heart.

“Yes, I'm a shinigami.”

Momo nodded as if nothing else could be more ordinary. If what she said was true, then this was—beyond a doubt—a genuinely idiotic situation.

In this world, the only persons who went around



calling themselves something like that were either martial artists with a chip on their shoulder or complete nut jobs.

But Daiki was flat out of sighs and couldn't possibly manage to expel one more, despite the absurdity of the situation.

In any case, he thought, *Did they think they'd shock me with something like this? Or maybe this is someone's idea of a bad joke? I must've come across some people on a totally different level of wattage.*

Still, Momo looked neither like a martial artist nor a complete nutcase. Although she definitely held a large sickle-like thing in her hand, Momo's appearance was nothing like the publicly held image of a shinigami.

Rather, she wore a white, one-piece dress and cute shoes. There was no way this innocent-looking little girl could be an instrument of death or bring about a person's demise. She couldn't possibly be a shinigami.

"Don't mess with me." Daiki's throat was parched, and he spoke in a low, croaking voice.

"I'm not lying," Momo retorted. "Though, yes, I *have* been told I don't look the part."

Daniel spoke, shifting his weight from his hind legs to all fours. "That's right. Momo is the genuine article, a bona fide shinigami. Of course, she doesn't quite look like one, though."

At this point, with all the craziness going on, the fact that a cat was speaking seemed but a small part of it.

"Ha ha, a shinigami? A shinigami? I see. Okay, shinigami. Then you came here to kill me, is that it!?" Daiki asked, somewhat hopefully.

"No," Momo answered flatly. "I felt the presence of death. And then here you were. That's all."

Without making a sound, Momo approached the boy. "You're trying to kill yourself, aren't you?" she asked.

"Er..." Daiki hesitated. And it wasn't because his throat was dry.

"That's odd. You do want to die, don't you?" Momo asked. "Then why don't you just do it?"

The boy's body trembled upon hearing such words uttered without even a hint of emotion. Without warning, Momo giggled and moved away from him. She pointed towards the open window.

"Go ahead."

As if hypnotized, Daiki was unable to look away from her childish yet straightforward gaze.

“If you jump from here, your wish will come true... Right? Then you’ll surely be dead.”

That word again. Death.

“Momo,” Daniel interrupted in a small, albeit urgent, tone. “Don’t you think this is wrong? He’s not on the list. If we take back an extra soul, we’ll get in trouble with the director again.”

“Are you talking about the fact that Heaven’s packed with so many souls they can’t accept any extras?” Momo asked. “The important thing is if he wants to die, I think it’s better to just let him have his way.”

“But Momo...” It was Daniel’s turn to stammer, as his head spun from the words of his mistress.

Turning back to Daiki, Momo urged, “Now, come on. Why don’t you just jump?”

“.....” Stunned, Daiki was unable to move a muscle.

“What are you doing? You were about to jump because you wanted to die, weren’t you?” Momo let out a big sigh. “I guess you can’t kill yourself after all. What was that now, just some spur of the

moment thing? You can’t even kill yourself of your own free will. How sad.”

Momo looked at him with cheerless, pitying eyes. “At this rate, you won’t get the death you so desire. You probably confused the aura of death around you for your own, didn’t you?”

Momo’s words rang in Daiki’s ears and then slowly traveled to his brain. Slowly being absorbed. Melting.

“As proof, even though we’re supposed to be invisible, you can see us,” Momo continued. “You are surely emitting the scent of death. But it isn’t yours. Remember that. Okay then... See you.”

—Ring.

In an instant, everything went white. Daiki was taken aback. He looked around, and, of course, nobody was there.

“So what was that just now?” he asked. “A dream?”

He felt sick and dizzy, and struggled to avoid collapsing.

“...It was just a bad dream,” he said to himself.

“I had a bad dream. Maybe I came too close to death...”

He had let his chance slip away. Death was now estranged from him. Now it seemed better to get far away from this place. At least for today.



The bell rang as he descended onto the platform. The train he had just been on began to move towards the next station. Waving his train pass, he went through the turnstile. It was only about ten-odd minutes to his house from here.

Daiki’s brain refused to think; he was unable to clear his mind.

The ninth floor of the building. He had no clear memory of what had happened after he began drawing. Fragments of images, like photographs, formed layers in his mind.

The pictures he drew in black. The orange-colored sky. Sunset. Uneasiness. An impulse. Red shoes. Sad eyes. A line. Tied up in knots. Unfeeling. That impulse. White clothes. Black cat. Little girl. Words.

Wind. Dust. The impulse of death.

It was all surreal, and his brain was rejecting it. It couldn’t possibly be real.

*Don’t touch what’s real to me.*

He realized he was at the front gate of his house. He inserted the key and turned it, placing his hand on the doorknob. For an instant, he hesitated in opening the door. It had been quite a while since he had last felt this way.

A long time ago, when he was still in grade school, he had thought, *If I open this door, it’ll happen again.*

But nowadays, he felt nothing and had not felt like that for a long time. He opened the door and stepped inside.

“I’m home...” He said it to no one in particular. Removing his shoes then lining them up properly, he went into the living room, which he had to pass through first in order to get to his room.

Upon stepping into the living room, a person’s senses would be assaulted by various antique furniture and accoutrements, acquired in accordance with the *bastard’s* tastes. These were uselessly distorted and served no function at all. They were beyond

Daiki's, or any normal person's, comprehension and were crammed everywhere.

Today, something else was crammed in there. As Daiki entered, he saw the backside of "the bastard." His father—Ichiyo—was nestled deeply into the sofa, one hand clutching a brandy glass.

Ichiyo rarely ever drank alcohol. If he did, it would be to sip a little at some event or party. But he almost never poured himself a glass at home, alone. Yet here he was today. He must have been in an especially good mood.

His work, though he had already done dozens of overseas exhibitions, must have been a particularly big success. After all, he was the world-renowned painter, Ikuma Ichiyo.

Regardless of an artist's qualities as a human being, if his paintings were splendid, he would be recognized.

"Father, you're home." The words coming from Daiki's mouth sounded flat, with no hint of emotion.

Remaining seated, without even turning to face his son, Ichiyo spoke in a low, resonant tone. "What were you doing, staying out until this hour? There

isn't much time until your exhibition. Neglecting your work while I was away?"

His voice rang with dignity and strength; it had a largeness to it. In contrast, Daiki's sounded indifferent.

"I'm fine. Don't worry, I won't ruin your good name, Father. I've been drawing."

"I see," Ichiyo replied. "Then show me."

As ordered, Daiki took out his sketchbook and flipped through the pages. Though nonchalant at first, his indifferent manner quickly disappeared in the next instant, while his emotions began to pulse rapidly.

Staring him in the face was the scene he had drawn at the building. The black, warped landscape that was supposed to be his last will and testament to the world.

Daiki suddenly realized the illusory incident, which he had dismissed as a dream, was reality. He struggled to suppress feelings of panic.

*It couldn't be real. It couldn't possibly be. It was just a dream. An illusion.*

His brain replied, *Don't touch what's real to me.*

"What's the matter?" his father prodded. "Hurry up."

Daiki hesitated, but Ichiyo quickly snatched the sketchbook from him. Without a word, Ichiyo lowered his eyes and examined the drawing.

Thump, thump... Daiki's heart beat at an exaggerated pace.

He wanted to ask his father, "What's the matter? Why the big hurry?" but he couldn't.

*What are you afraid of?* a voice in his head answered back. *So what if he sees it? Who cares what he says? What are you so afraid of at this point?*

But in the next instant, Daiki's emotions suddenly dissipated.

"...What is this...?" Ichiyo focused his gaze on his son. "Are you clowning around, Daiki? What is this nonsense?"

"I'm sorry."

"The upcoming exhibition is your debut as a painter," Ichiyo spat back. "You should know how important your first exhibition is. So what is this crap? What are you doing doodling at a time like this?"

"...I'm very sorry," Daiki managed to say.

"You just said you wouldn't ruin my good name, didn't you?" Ichiyo demanded.

"Yes."

"Ruining my name aside," Ichiyo continued, "this can't even be considered garbage or dirt. Aren't you ashamed of yourself for doing this? You, the son of Ikuma Ichiyo!"

And in one swift motion, Ichiyo ripped the sketch apart. Instead of getting angry, Daiki reacted coolly.

"I am sorry, Father," he said quietly.

But Ichiyo was not done. He proceeded to rip the drawing into little pieces, over and over, before tossing the bits of paper into the wastebasket nearby. Satisfied, he let out a big grunt and sat back down on the sofa.

"Don't ever draw anything like that again..." Ichiyo spluttered angrily. "Anything like that... that..."

He was about to say something, but thought better of it. Instead, he just swallowed his words.

"That's enough," Ichiyo managed to say. "Go."

"Yes, Father..."

Daiki left his father behind and headed towards his bedroom, thinking, *The bastard only thinks of*

*himself anyway.*

Daiki believed his father only wanted to save face, the face of the world-renowned Ikuma Ichiyo. He knew those were the words Ichiyo wanted to say to him, but never did.

*That's why it's all crap,* he reasoned.

Left alone, he finally found the words he never bothered to confront his father with.

*I just have to do what you tell me, right? That's reality. It's the reality that I live with. And that's how I'll end. You're going to lead me there. And you'll realize that the rails you set for me go through a very dark tunnel.*

“It’s all crap.”

It was as if the words were whispered to him.



Painting was a life destined for him, a life that was set for him before he could even remember. He existed only to paint. And now, no longer able to express himself through painting, he attempted to

reject his own existence.

He was now nothing more than a portion of what Ikuma Ichiyo was worth. He could not communicate, nor was he allowed to defy.

In grade school, after school was out in the afternoon, while his classmates would go out to play, Daiki would head straight home. That was because Ichiyo forbade him to play with his friends. Ichiyo reasoned that consorting with his peers would result in the loss of his artistic sensitivity. Or he could even get hurt. So Daiki was forbidden from participating in the normal activities children around him got to enjoy.

At first, drawing was a purely enjoyable pastime. But it gradually became painful for Daiki.

He pretended to look down on his classmates, but, in truth, he envied them for being able to go to cram school and do other extracurricular studies. Those otherwise ordinary activities were enviable to him, even if the others complained that they were such a bore.

The strain of coercion, the difficulties—he tried to forget those by drawing.

There was also the presence of Ichiyo. Whether

it was trying to live up to his father's expectations or trying to win his praise, those things began to loom above Daiki—too large, too heavy—and began to tear at his heart.

When he drew to his heart's content, he was rejected and told it would never be accepted. When he was certain he could satisfy Ichiyo and joyfully showed off his work, he was told harshly it was a “useless” drawing. He was taught to suppress his visions, thoughts and feelings, and was required to produce universally acclaimed paintings that were guaranteed to win awards.

In order to escape from the pain, he suppressed his emotions, performed automatically—like a machine—held no interest in anybody, and simply waited for time to pass by. He sacrificed the things he wanted most. In so doing, he acquired superb painting skills.

After winning several awards, he was granted the opportunity to hold his first exhibition, one that was to be sponsored by a major publishing company. Still, it wasn't something he found fulfillment in. He was unable to smile from the bottom of his heart.

*This is a crappy life. A worthless world. This*

*is my reality. And this is the only reality I have. This must be...some kind of karmic revenge, Daiki reasoned. I should never have been born. This must be revenge.*



“—Ikuma.”

It was break period. Daiki stood up to go to science class, when someone tapped him on the back. Turning back, he saw two of his male classmates looking at him with smirks on their faces. Behind them were several other boys and girls, all looking towards Daiki. Perhaps they wanted to talk to him and these two were their representatives.

The one who had tapped Daiki spoke up.

“Hey you, you're going to do some kind of art exhibition soon, right? I heard you got interviewed on TV or something. Is that for real?”

“Well, yeah...” Daiki replied.

“You were always good at art. Come to think of it, that's your painting hanging on the wall of the principal's office, isn't it?”

“...Yeah...” Daiki nodded vaguely.