

The Staircase to Nowhere

An Alternate Universe Fanfic

Von abgemeldet

A Melody of Melancholy

"Come..."

"What?" The space was black, slightly rippling as he stared at it. There was nothing here. No sight. No sound. No thought. No identity. He was nothing, no one. All around there was nothing but the continuing echo of that one, faint word, reverberating around unseen walls.

"Come... close...for you... are..."

"What am I? Who are you?" The voice was low, deep and he almost couldn't understand the speaker. He couldn't see who was speaking, but sight was no longer a necessity. He could almost feel the oppressive presence bearing down on him. "Where am I? What am I?"

"You... are... Necessary..."

"...What...? I don't..."

"... Epi...taph...Ava...tar...Guardi...an... You must... take on... the burden..."

"What?" He was being left with a feeling of stupidity. He couldn't see where or what the presence was, but he reached out, hoping to find the source of the voice. He touched the darkness, creating ripples like the waves of a pond, then it cracked like a huge pane of black glass, little miniscule cracks growing and extending outward, upward, downward, until the light began to filter in, like an enormous, glowing spider web. And then he was falling. Falling... Falling... Falling forever into the infinite abyss, where there would be no answers.

Only questions.

.hack//G.U. The Staircase to Nowhere

Chapter one: A Melody of Melancholy

Ryou Misaki awoke to find himself sweating. He panted slightly, still recovering from the shock of the dream. He lifted up his hand from underneath the quilt of his bed and wiped the sweat off of his forehead, pushing his pale white hair out of his face. He exhaled and sat up. Rubbing his temples, he tried to calm himself and stop his heart from pounding at six thousand miles per hour. His head throbbed, like someone had opened his head while he was sleeping and stuck a large rugged rock behind his brain. Or like he had fallen off the side of a building and landed on the back of his head. Either way, his head hurt really badly.

He looked across the room to his open door, which he had been certain he had closed last night before he had gone to bed and received his nightly torture. Light poured in from the door and also the window on the wall to the left of him, half-blinding him and causing him to lift his arm up to shield his deep red eyes. Sunlight had never agreed with him, and his hypersensitivity to sunlight was genetic.

Or in other words, inescapable.

Still shielding his eyes, he tossed the covers to the end of the bed, where they laid in a wrinkled heap. He stood up, slouched across the room, and drew the thick, black, felt curtains across the vicious sunlight that was restricting his sight. Immediately darkness fell on his bedroom, and he was able to relax and look across to the doorway. His bedroom, or his "cave", as his mother liked to call it. It was his space, where he could do whatever he wanted and keep it however he wanted it. He started towards the doorway, intent on restoring the full darkness to the room, when he tripped on something.

Hitting the floor with a resounding thud, Ryou cursed under his breath. He also hadn't remembered his chair being folded up on the floor when he had went to sleep. With a string of curses uttered under his breath, he got up and closed the door, giving him his sight back. He looked around the room, knowing that he should eventually just suck it up and adjust to the sunlight, but he put the thoughts out of his mind, instead focusing on the disturbances to his "ordered mess", as he liked to call it. Not only had the door been opened and the chair knocked over, but the phone had been knocked off of the receiver, the rather large pile of dirty shirts and pants was strewn across the floor, several of the hideous dolls his aunt had sewn him were knocked off of the bookshelf, and the analog clock, which was set five hours ahead as he preferred it, had been turned upside-down.

"If I didn't have an abominable little sister, none of this would have been an issue." He thought bitterly. He went to work, restoring his personalized order to the room. It didn't take long, Ryou had designed his system for convenience, not scrupulous organization where there wouldn't be a spot of dirt anywhere. Ryou's room was far from perfect, but it suited him fine. It was his one space where he could get away from the harsh stares, the stereotypes, the giggles and the gossip. It was where he felt he belonged.

He looked at the digital clock on his desk. The day read Sunday. The day where his mother dragged him and his sister to church, where they were taught to be good little children with no sins and the other youth spoke to each other in whispered secrets and pointed fingers. He loathed it and the people there, save for maybe one. His youth group leader was possible the nicest old man there could be. He taught Ryou the most amazing lessons, told him that he shouldn't let the other youth bring him down just because of how he looked, and was possibly the only positive influence in his life. He told him that being an individual was a good thing, and that he should stand tall and not be afraid to stand out in a crowd. The other youth hated him, thought he was a boring, rambling old man, but Ryou adored him. To Ryou, he was a beacon of hope.

He walked into his closet, also a wreck by his preference, and selected a clean white dress shirt and black dress pants. He never really bothered with a tie, so he grabbed his black socks and left the closet. Walking back to the bed, he began to get dressed. He pulled his socks on first, then pulled his pants on. His shirt always came last. That way, if he was walked in on, then generally he already had his pants on. He was okay with people seeing his torso, but his pale, scrawny legs... He refused to allow something so awkward to happen.

Standing in front of the door, he took a deep breath. It was time for his eyes to adjust. The first few seconds were always the worst. All he really needed to do was make it across the hallway to the bathroom and he would be okay from there. Artificial light he could handle, despite there being no light bulbs in his room by his own choice. But it was natural light that hurt him. It felt like someone was stabbing needles in his eyes. He sighed, and turned the handle.

Sprinting across the hallway with his eyes closed, Ryou felt the bathroom door open in front of him. He sighed, turned around, closed the door, and flicked on the light. He opened his eyes slowly, adjusting to the light. He couldn't see for about three seconds, but slowly the blinding glare of the light subsided and he could see his reflection in the mirror. It was always the part of getting ready that he despised. He stood by the closed door, staring at himself. People had always commented that he would be so handsome, if he didn't have just that one flaw.

That's always what people saw. Flaws. Never the positive. Always thinking negatively. They never stopped to consider that he could be an amazing person even with that one completely irrelevant flaw. But they never did. They always judged on the outward appearance, never the light inside. It hurt him so badly, that people were so shallow. But he stared at himself in the mirror, hating himself for what he couldn't change. For what he would always be.

He was an albino.

Splashing water on his face, he stared at his deep red eyes. They always unnerved people. They never considered that just because he looked different, didn't mean that he was a bad person. He would have been pretty good looking if his shaggy hair wasn't pale white. He sighed, and turned to face the sun. Opening the door, he came face to face with the bad tempered witch that called herself his mother. She was

wearing her standard Sunday dress, a blue and green streaked dress that showed off a little too much of her cleavage for Ryou's comfort. He stared the woman in her face and she began her usual verbal smack-down.

"Just look at you." She spat, "You are completely indecent. You haven't ironed your shirt or pants, your hair is a wreck, and you look like you literally rolled out of bed. Do you ever stop for two seconds to look at yourself in the mirror? You clearly have no sense of fashion or hygiene. And you never come out of that cave of yours when I call you! Irresponsible, incompetent, arrogant wretch! Show some decency to your peers and your mother!" She then took the liberty of spitting in his face.

Ryou's face burned red. This woman wasn't even his mother! Where did she come off telling him what he could or couldn't do or how he should or shouldn't look? He wiped the spit out of his face as passively as he could, hoping not to hint at any rage. He had lived with the constant tear down for a year now since his father had died. His real mother, a kind, caring, loving woman, had died when he was fourteen. The shock had devastated both him and his father. His father, who was hit much harder than Ryou, basically went out and got drunk. He then met Tomoyo, who worked in the bar. She seduced him, tricked him into marrying her, and Ryou got a new Step-mother and Step-sister, the daughter from Tomoyo's previous marriage. His father, completely oblivious, didn't understand the depths of Tomoyo's cruelty. She didn't care two wits about Ryou, instead focusing on herself and her daughter's needs, but mostly on the former's. His father then died of heartache when Ryou was sixteen, leaving Ryou completely alone, starved for love and understanding. Tomoyo and her daughter, Mina, were horrible to him. Ryou sometimes wondered if his real mother and his father were watching from above, his father heartbroken over his mistake and the situation he had left Ryou in and his mother wishing quietly she could help him somehow.

He bit his tongue and endured the tirade, although he did let the rage inside of him swell to new heights. She then proceeded to drag him down the stairs of his house, as it had been very clear in his father's will that Ryou would be left the house, shove him out the door, and lock the door. He sighed, and knew the routine. He would be so glad to be rid of those two in six months. Once he turned eighteen, he knew, as he had looked it up many times, he would be his own legal guardian and would be able to legally kick the demonic woman and her equally demonic daughter out of his house. He walked to his car, as he could drive, and got in, starting the engine and getting away from the house. It was like an enormous weight had been lifted off of his shoulders. As he drove the winding streets, he remembered quite suddenly the dream he had had.

He had been floating in an empty darkness. He hadn't been able to see or feel. All he was doing was standing on nothing. Then the voice. The deep, barely understandable voice that had spoken to him. What had it said to him? Something about necessity, and about a burden... What was the last thing it had said? Epitaph? He didn't know what to make of the dream. But it always ended the same way. He would reach out into the darkness, but it would harden and crack, and then he would fall. The dream would be over then, after reaching the end of infinity.

He pulled slowly to a stop in front of a stoplight that had moments before been yellow. He sighed. The faster he got to church, the faster he could talk to Old-Chan, as he liked people to call him. He needed to talk about what Tomoyo and Mina did to him, or he would have probably gone insane a long time ago. Thankfully, Old-Chan was very content to talk to Ryou and offer him advice. He understood Ryou's situation and needs. The light turned green, and Ryou was about to turn the corner when a tiny, deep, almost inaudible voice screamed as loud as it could, which albeit wasn't that loud;

"NO! NOT YET!!!"

Ryou pulled his foot off the gas pedal and watched as approximately five seconds after the light turned green a dark blue truck came barreling through the intersection like a bullet. There had been people honking at him to go, but as soon as the truck came through, all of the horns stopped abruptly. Everyone understood. Ryou was shaking. Tentatively he put his foot on the gas pedal, and turned through the intersection. He was sweating slightly, understanding the weight of what had happened. It seemed impossible, but if it was impossible, then how did he explain what had just happened? There was only one explanation for it.

If Ryou had turned immediately after the light had turned, he would have been rammed from the side by that truck and it's crazy driver.

But Ryou had been warned by a little voice.

And Ryou listened.

Still shaking slightly, he turned into the church parking lot. Finding an empty parking space close to the side door, he pulled in and turned off the engine. The church building that Ryou and his "family" went to had four doors, one in the north, south, east, and west. Ryou preferred to enter by one of the side doors, the east or west door, rather than the front, to avoid people. Walking up the steps to the door, he was about to push it open when he heard a soft and familiar voice call from behind him;

"Well, good morning, Brother Misaki."

He leaned against the door and couldn't help but smile. The old man was good.

"Good morning to you as well, Old-Chan." He replied turning around to face the only person on the face of the earth that treated him like a human being. "How is your morning so far?" He asked, walking down the steps to help the old man. Old-Chan always waited for Ryou at the west door, the only door with stairs. Even though he walked with a cane, he never complained. Ryou always helped him up the stairs, and the two of them would talk about their mornings.

"It's been alright so far," He started, sounding slightly tired, "However, Brother Misaki, it seems as though my hip has been bothering me more as of late. It has been a rather uncomfortable affair."

"Your war wound, right?" Ryou asked, expressing sincere concern. "I hope it's not serious. I'm going to need you for a long time to come." He laughingly put an emphasis on long.

The old man smiled. They had reached the top of the stairs and Ryou was about to pull the door open for him. "Quite so." He replied. "Either way, I plan on being around for a long time. Alas, you haven't told me about your morning yet."

Ryou lost his grip on the door. His morning had been strange to say the least, but he wasn't sure he felt comfortable telling Old-Chan. He sighed, and began to recount his morning. "Well, I woke up and Mina had screwed up my room and left the window and door open. So I fixed everything, got dressed and went into the bathroom to wash my face. When I opened the door, "mommy dearest", "Sarcasm was layered thickly in his voice when he referred to the witch, "started telling me off."

"Oh my..." Old-Chan gasped, "What did she say?"

"Oh, the usual. I'm pathetic, I disgrace my father's name, I'm an irresponsible, incompetent, arrogant wretch, I need to show decency to my peers and my mother, the works." He practically spat out the word "mother". He opened the door and helped Old-Chan through the doorway, taking care to make sure that his cane didn't get stuck. Gratefully, he listened as Old-Chan gave him the advice he so longed for.

"You just need to be patient. Not just with time, but with Tomoyo as well. I can't really understand why she treats you so horribly, but perhaps she is merely misguided. All I can tell you is to be patient with her. She is a terrible woman, hardly a human being, but the world is a cruel place, and all you can do is be patient. Understand, Brother Misaki?" He smiled kindly.

"Yeah." Ryou responded slightly absentmindedly. Patience? With that demon? Was that even possible?

"Now," Old-Chan continued, "Continue telling me about your morning, if you don't mind, Brother Misaki."

"Oh, right." He said, eyeing the clock on the wall. There was still ten minutes until the sermon started. "Well, after she had given me a suitable tirade, she kicked me out as usual, and I drove here." He paused, debating whether or not to talk about the would-be car accident.

"I see." Old-Chan said quietly. "Did anything else happen?"

"He's good." Ryou thought.

"Well, I almost got into a car accident." He admitted. "I was at an intersection and the light turned green for me to turn. I was about to go, but..." He let the thought trail off.

"But...?" Old-Chan asked, urging him to go on.

"A voice in my head told me to stay. So I waited for about five seconds, and this idiot in a truck came barreling through the intersection like a rabbit on crack. Then I came here and talked to you." He finished.

Old-Chan was silent. Ryou looked at his eyes. They were hazy, distant. He gently grabbed his arm and helped him to his usual place in the front row of the tabernacle. Bowing, he told him he would see him during class, and walked to the back of the room, where he noticed his usual spot had been taken. He liked to sit in the back right corner, where he could see the minister, but nobody could see him. Instead, a skinny girl with shoulder-length black hair sat, looking slightly uncomfortable. She was wearing a black silk skirt and a black silk top, with black leather boots to complete the ensemble. She had a black purse as well, which was resting on the floor.

She noticed Ryou staring at her, and looked up. Her dark eyes met his deep red, but none of the usual shock was present in her facial expressions. She instead smiled, and greeted him cheerfully.

"Good morning!" She said happily, standing up.

"Uh, good morning..." He said, slightly taken aback. Nobody ever greeted him cheerfully before, especially not a girl. "Are you visiting? I don't think I've seen you here before."

"Yes, I'm visiting." The girl replied cheerfully. She didn't seem to be much younger than he was. "I don't like sitting where everyone can see me, though, and I take it you don't either. Right?"

"... *Don't...*"

"Huh?" He thought he heard the voice again. Maybe he really was going insane.

"... *Don't... Trust... Her...!*"

"R-right..." This day was just getting weirder and weirder. "I guess I'll see you later, then?"

"Yeah, later." The girl sat down and began to fiddle with her purse. Ryou walked over to the opposite side of the room, his sense of unease growing stronger and stronger.

The girl looked over at Ryou. She sighed, and delved into her thoughts, trying to straighten things out.

"It's him alright." She thought-spoke. Thought-speech was a gift she had. *"I can just tell. It's written all over him."*

"Yes..." The voice in her head responded. *"He has the mark of the Terror of Death on him. There is no mistaking it. He is the one."*

"We'll have to watch over him carefully." She replied. "It might be dangerous to leave him by himself right now. He's at the transition stage."

"I hated that stage." Voice input. "But if we don't help him transition, it could be disastrous, my lady."

"Yeah..." She agreed. There was a pause, before Voice spoke up again.

"He's... Already communicated."

"What?!" She nearly jumped in shock. Thankfully, she managed to keep her composure. *"That's impossible. Communication can't happen without the medium."*

"Then how do you explain this morning's... incident?" Voice replied. She was silent. *"He communicated just now, as well, when you were addressing him. He's exerting far more power than I ever had. Big Brother may have been asleep the longest, but he's also the most dangerous."*

"So, you're all siblings now?" She asked sarcastically.

"It was a metaphor. Show some sense of humor, my lady." Voice replied. There was another pause. *"My lady, his fatal flaw is worse than we had anticipated."*

"Yeah, I know. Thankfully, it's avoidable..." She paused for a moment before continuing the thought. *"... And exploitable."*

"I suppose it's better than being physically debilitated like we are, right, my lady?"

"Yeah. Way better." She glanced down at her wrist.

"Don't forget, we have to gain his trust. That is crucial."

She sighed.

"I know, Innis. I know."

Ryou was only half awake during the sermon. He never really listened intently to the stupid priest saying crap like all sinners must and will go to Hell and that God would strike down the unworthy and the blasphemous. When the closing hymn came around, Ryou was almost completely asleep, only to be awoken by the slightly out of tune organ at the front of the tabernacle blasting out a very badly played version of "The Spirit of God". After the prayer, everyone immediately began talking and leaving to go to their various classes. Ryou immediately walked to the youth hall, where he eagerly awaited the lesson from Old-Chan.

Taking his seat at the back of the room, he watched as the other youth came in, snickering at him and turning to their friends and whispering. He supposed that

people like the black-haired girl were one in a million, as rare as people like him were. He sighed as everyone took their seats. Old-Chan stood up in the front of the classroom, waiting for silence. Everyone quieted down, and he began.

"Welcome, everyone. I'm so glad to see all of your wonderful faces. But I'm especially glad to see a wonderful new face." He turned his head to the black-haired girl that had sat in Ryou's spot during the sermon, who was standing by the door. She blushed as everyone looked at her. Old-Chan continued. "Come up the front and introduce yourself, dear." She stumbled up to the front nervously, with her hands clasped together in front of her chest.

"M-my name is Atoli." She said quietly. Apparently speaking in front of groups wasn't her forte. "I'm just visiting today from... out of town."

"I see!" Old-Chan said happily. "And are you visiting anyone in particular?"

"... A friend." Atoli said cryptically.

"Wonderful! You can have a seat then Miss Atoli. I believe there is an empty chair beside Ryou in the back. That's him with the white hair."

Snickers and whispers ran through the group, and Ryou's face burned bright red. Angrily, he shot them all death glares and silently wished them horrible painful deaths. Atoli walked back and sat down next to him, her face still bright red from the embarrassment of having to introduce herself. Ryou tried to ignore her, and was quite successful. He listened as Old-Chan began to teach his lesson, about loving who you are. Ryou sighed. It was as if he always focused the lesson on something that Ryou had trouble with. He began to talk about being an individual and that there is a reason no two people are alike. That our spirits are unique and so our bodies are unique as well. He then held up a wicker basket that had what looked to be Dollar Store hand mirrors. Old-Chan passed the basket around the room.

The basket started in the front, and snaked its way towards the back. By the time it reached him and Atoli, there was one left. Atoli took the basket as it was given to her, looked inside at the mirror, and passed it to Ryou with what seemed to him like a look of hidden shock. He took the basket and looked at the mirror. He reached inside and pulled it out to take a better look at it. As his fingers brushed it, he could have sworn that he felt a pulse of warmth rush up the veins in his fingers, through his arm and toward his heart. The warmth stayed there, right around his heart, giving him a warm feeling of safety and comfort. He looked at the mirror in his hand.

It was round and painted smoothly in shiny black paint. It was inlaid with round, deep red stones, one large one in the center, and seven around the edges, which Ryou assumed were fake. Either way, they were pretty, and there was gold paint trimming the edges and around the jewels. He looked at the bottom of the mirror and found it was solid black. Turning it back over, he stared at the large round jewel. It almost seemed like it was alive with fire, and he saw that it was almost the same shade as his eyes. He wondered why the Dollar Store had something so pretty.

His ears perked up as Old-Chan began to tell them to close their eyes and open the mirror. Ryou did so, shutting them tight. He then opened the mirror, and held it up in front of where he knew he would be able to see himself. He heard Old-Chan tell them to open their eyes, and opened them, only to be blinded by sunlight. He squeezed his eyes shut, cursing at himself for being so stupid and reflecting the sunlight in his eyes. Making sure to angle the mirror so the sunlight wouldn't blind himself, he opened his eyes and stared at the reflection of himself in the tiny mirror. He saw the messy white hair, the blazing red eyes, and the sad expression on his face. He looked at himself in shame.

The rest of the class Ryou sat in a daze, wondering why he had been born with such a horrible life. He didn't notice anyone, not even Atoli when she tried to talk to him quietly. He felt dead. He wanted to be dead. He wanted to be alone. With nobody else around, maybe he could finally be at peace. It seemed as though the world was against him, nothing offering him comfort or solace. He suddenly heard that same voice in his head, whispering to him, seeming somehow stronger than the last time he had heard it.

"Finally..." It said, seeming to sigh in relief. *"It seemed as though I would never be able to freely talk to you."*

Ryou nearly fell out of the chair. He managed to maintain his composure, and think back to the voice.

"What are you? Who are you?"

The voice seemed to chuckle. *"I'm you. Well, sort of. It's kind of a touch and go relationship. Hey, you're pretty good at thought-speech already! I might just get used to this."*

"You still haven't fully answered my question." He thought irritably.

"True. But all things shall be revealed, and I think I'll let fate take this wherever the heck it wants to. I'm gonna let this play out and see how it ends."

"Wait! What are you talking about?" He thought. He was getting even more confused by the second.

"Heh, well, I guess I'll give you one spoiler. If you want to talk to me, just hold on to that mirror. It's our medium. With it we can talk freely. Without it, I have to expend power to talk to you, which is rather quite a pain. But for now, I'm pretty sleepy from having to yell at you so much today. See ya." He could feel the presence of the voice fading. Feeling slightly cheated out on answers, he didn't want the voice to go.

"Wait! Don't go away!" He thought desperately.

"What?" The voice responded irritably.

"Just answer me one more question." He thought firmly.

"Alright, I'm waiting." The voice replied.

"What are you, really?" He asked, hoping for a straightforward answer.

There was a pause, before the voice seemed to sigh and reply wearily;

"... Your Epitaph."