

Grady's Totally Wacky Sports Arena. The place where a kid could be a kid.

Laser tag. Laser soccer. A huge, dark arena, bigger than any stadium anyone had ever seen, where kids flew all over in the air on their hoverboards and played laser hockey.

An arcade! A ball pit! So many flashing lights and cool sounds! I rode on my hoverboard with my two friends Skyler and Jordan. Down the tubular slides. Across the sizzling light-up swings. It was like a waterpark. I definitely looked cool. They did, too. We were all so cool!

I couldn't remember how long we rode, but I didn't care. After we were done, I was gonna go get some pizza. But just then, I got stopped; I saw something that made me stop. Out of all the kids, there was someone special coming in. I heard a bunch of whispers and murmurs.

"It's Taylor! The one with the blazing hoverboard!"

Before I knew it a ton of kids started to push against me and I was hit by a crowd. I wanted to see, but I couldn't, so I got really angry. My two friends were in front of me- they were trying to get a good look, too. I had had enough, so I stomped on my hoverboard and made it glide straight up above all the kids. When I looked down, I could see the tops of Skyler's blonde, short hair and ashy face, and fat Jordan's brown scruffy hair.

"Hey!" I yelled to my friends below, "There's still room up here!"

Skyler looked up at me and smirked, then nodded to Jordan. Along with a couple of other kids, they stomped on their hoverboards and glided up next to me. Now the crowd was so big and musty up here that I felt like I was gonna puke.

"Thanks for saving us some room, Riley," Skyler coolly told me. I pulled on the lid of my blue backwards cap, brushing it against my long hair like it was nothing, and grinned. "No problem," I coolly replied. Then I saw Jordan, who was shaking, as Jordan usually did.

"What's the matter?" I teased, "Scared that Taylor's gonna say your gliding skills suck?"

"N-NO!" Jordan stammered. "No way!"

"Hey," Skyler turned to Jordan and said, "The crowd's way too big. Taylor's not gonna notice you when we join in."

Just then, the crowd got really silent. I looked into the distance and saw the big neon slides lighting up in the darkness. I couldn't see it. But I heard it- it was like fire. Just crackles at first, crackling louder and louder. Someone whooped, and another hollered. It was 'that' rider. It was Taylor!

A hoverboard with flames lit up the dark and grinded against the slides, and the crowd screamed

and cheered as they saw sparks bounce off the slides and blast against the walls of the dome like small dragons. Taylor flipped all over LIKE a dragon too- I'd never seen this trick before. And finally, Taylor reached the crowd, and when the flames lit up Taylor's hoverboard, it was like everything was pushed into slow-mo. The smooth whirring of the hoverboard was heard, and I saw Taylor on top of it, wearing sunglasses and looking all relaxed with a grin. Then everything sped up again and Taylor glided away.

It was the cue.

'Okay,' I thought to myself, 'Not gonna miss it this time!'

Every time Taylor glided away, it was time for the crowd to follow. Anyone who was good enough to catch up would earn the right to talk to the Lord of the Riders.

I never caught up to Taylor before, but this time would be different. Before anyone else got up, I thrust up and began the chase, leaving the others in the dust. Skyler and Jordan were on cue, too, just as we had practiced. None of the others were a match for the three of us.

The air was thin, and I could barely breath. But my eyes were totally focused on that fire flaming in front of me. I had to catch it. I had to.

Taking one last stroke of luck, I crossed my fingers, and kicked hard on the back of my hoverboard. We were going so fast now. The red flames were blazing closer. I could almost feel the heat against my neck. Something flew past me. Embers. I saw the fire grow as big as an elephant and stampede towards me, yet I didn't stop one bit. And in just one second, I was blasted into a white explosion; I braced my arms in front of me and shut my eyes tight.

When I felt like I could, I opened my eyes again, and RIGHT standing next to me was Taylor. The Lord of the Riders was tall and had green, half shaved and spiky hair, with sunglasses and a loose fitting t-shirt and shorts.

"Whoa..." I whispered.

Taylor noticed me and turned, and when the Lord of the Riders sunglasses lowered, I saw Taylor's eyes for the first time. Then, I was met with a smirk.

"Nice job," Taylor said.

"Wow," I muttered back. Then I stammered to think of something to say: "So... I've always wanted to ask you this. Where did you get that board? And where did you learn to ride like THAT?"

Taylor let out a toothy smile, and I saw a green, gooey mouthpiece covering the tops of teeth and gums. I winced. I was kinda grossed out.

“This,” Taylor gritted and pointed to the goo, “It gets you to a totally different world.”

“A ‘totally different world’?” I asked, confused.

Before Taylor could answer, Skyler and Jordan caught up.

“Riley!” Skyler shouted, “You were supposed to wait for us!”

Skyler was right; it was what we all agreed on. I felt a bit guilty. I turned to Jordan, who was frozen and didn’t know what to say, and was staring straight at Taylor. I turned back to Skyler.

“Sorry. But dude, you won’t believe this. Look at that,” I pointed at Taylor’s mouth, “That green goo. That’s the Lord of the Rider’s secret.”

Skyler raised a brow. “Err.... what?”

“Here,” Taylor said as three green, gooey mouthpieces were pulled out from Taylor’s pocket, “Wear these. They’re totally radical!”

“That looks totally lame,” Skyler answered with a deadpan face.

“WHAT?” I barked back, “You don’t even know what they do!”

Skyler replied, “Yeah, I don’t. Do you?”

“They’re supposed to take you to a different world!”

Just then, alarm bells started to ring in Skyler’s head. And I suddenly remembered why.

Skyler got all serious. “Riley. You KNOW we’re not supposed to leave this place. You know they told us we can’t. They would get so, SO angry.”

“But... man, we finally caught up. We’ve been working all day for this. If we don’t take it, what’s the point?”

“Riley, don’t be stupid! They said we CAN’T. They told us a thousand times: NEVER. LEAVE. THIS. PLACE.”

Now, I was seething and got really mad. What was I supposed to do? I looked at Riley, and then at Jordan (who was really not making a good first impression), and then back to Taylor. Taylor was still holding the mouthpieces out to me. My friends were just being a bunch of losers. This was definitely not what I had dreamed about all this time.

“I’m up for it,” I told Taylor. Though I couldn’t see it, I felt Skyler facepalm. I reached my hand out and grabbed one of the mouthpieces. Taylor nodded, excited that someone was gonna join in.

“A-and I’m gonna, too!” Jordan stammered. Jordan pushed past me and grabbed the other mouthpiece, and immediately put it in. Before I did! I panicked and shoved mines into my mouth, too. It was as gross as I thought, and I almost spat it out, but I didn’t.

I waited. Nothing happened. “Hey,” I said, annoyed, “I don’t feel any different.”

Taylor smirked. “You gotta follow me. I’ll show you what’s really behind these walls.”

The Lord of the Riders suddenly sped up and zoomed into the distance. I followed, and so did Jordan, but not Skyler. I was trying to focus on Taylor’s flames, just like I had before. But they were much, much faster now. I could hardly keep up. Before I knew it, I was pushing myself so hard that I could hardly see anything but bright, blinding light searing past me. And then, I was back in the darkness. Neon slides. Flashing signs. Arcade noises. Jordan caught up, and we were both standing alone in Grady’s Totally Wacky Sports Arena. Nothing had changed.

“Man,” Jordan fumed, “Did we just get punked?”

An eye

Grind away, startled

They’re not neon slides at all... they’re actually dragons!

lofty, smiling, mustached

goofy, cross-eyed, funny

The dragons became

Caterpillar-like, then with human faces, and then like centipedes, and tried to grab onto them

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The walls were so white.

Big orange circles

caterpillars with human faces floats

Statues of cartoonish sports heroes with large chins and noses goofily hanging from the looming ceilings

“Taylor?” But I couldn’t find him.

“You’re not in a different world. Trust me, you’re still here.”

“Oh dang, this sucks.”

“Skyler,” Jordan whined, “

“Okay, OKAY, Skyler, you were right! You don’t have to help us. This was our fault so we’re gonna figure it out by ourselves.”

“We have to get back to them. They’re the only ones who can help us.”

[funny looking dragons, then unnerving, and then dangerous. Looking at mirrors and broken shards to see the progression]

[After the paradise is broken, there are hints of the ‘real world’- messages that say ‘come back, remember what you must do’]

[the real world has decay and ruin, numbness and loss. Riley begins to see frankenstein-like meshes of people’s fates, graveyards of their futile attempts to escape the dream. Riley begins to have memories that weren’t their own- familiar, haunting memories that people had to throw away to return to paradise. These memories want to find a host again, so they latch onto Riley and fight against one another. Paradise is plentiful and food never runs out, but here everything is scarce- there is competition. The memories of victory were pleasant to people, but they were mixed with memories of those who failed, and the victor’s reactions to betraying their friends.]

[The world begins to shatter. It reveals a plain stadium- no hoverboards, no crowds, empty. Then a house, and the stadium is only on its TVs; same channel every time. Finally, a children’s hospital.]

[Both the winners and the losers. Riley finds mannequins- those who were left behind. And notes of others saying ‘they made it. They escaped.’]

[Skyler doesn’t see what Jordan and Riley see. Skyler tries to guide them back; claims they’re lost in the Edges and have to return. It’s almost time for dinner, and it’s all you can eat pizza day. But something is chasing them. Those who still try to escape. There are only a few passes on board.]

[Body is breaking. Starting to remember where one actually is. Want to break out of this illusion before it fully breaks down. But can’t get mouthpiece off.

Feel an aching pain in the stomach. Not sure if because hungry. Like being torn in half. Something is bursting from within. Signs of how one died. Car crash. People staring at Riley as she walks past. Toy cars and broken dolls.]

I had all the pizza I could eat.

“I have a ticket. But I want something from you. I want one of you.”

“Don’t listen to them,” Skyler whispered, “Remember what we were told to do. Never even look them in the eye.”

“Please, Jordan,” Skyler pleaded, “Don’t look there. For both our sakes.”

Jordan betrays them and tries to leave them behind, and Skyler is taken. Jordan gets the ticket. Riley punches Jordan, who falls away, leaving Riley alone.

“Riley... I just wanted to help.”

Jordan was in the room, staring at the TV. Jordan couldn't move, and only tears rolled down onto the hospital bed.

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A house- that's where I lived.

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The room was gone! It was just a bunch of plaster and hammers- someone in construction had torn it down!

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I saw a mirror. I didn't wanna look. I didn't wanna.

I just wanted to go home.

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A sick kid, definitely younger than me, rode on a toy tricycle while two nurses were smiling next to him. I saw a guy with scrubs sitting on a chair, and I yelled to him, “

“Please help me!” I pleaded with the nurses.

“Oh, you poor child! Your face... it's melting...”

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The waves were gone.

“Did you have a bad dream, cherub?”

I awoke to the sight of a tall, gaunt figure with a long, white beard. Its Face could not be seen. A hand lay on my shoulder, and I saw two beautiful beings, on my left and right, each with flowing, golden locks of hair.

“You wanted to know what it was like. You lay next to these beings of water and wanted to know what it was like. To peer into their dreams.”

“They are still dreaming.”

“Oh, Heavenly Lord, I will never go back! Never, EVER! I'll NEVER go back!” I shook my head

fiercely and with determination.

“They shall choose what to do. In their hearts, they know what’s right.”

“I shall create them soon. I shall create the first human. But now, they are not ready. I have not finished teaching them their lessons.”

“That’s not for you. You are simply a guide for them. Nothing more.”

“All the signs were there. YOU felt it in your heart.”

“Was it... really their dream?”

“Right and wrong is clear as day. Deep in their subconsciousness, they have all experienced what is right and what is wrong. When they live on the grounds below, they shall remember their times in these dreams, and make their choice. Those who have learned from these dreams shall pass. And those who stubbornly refuse to, even after all the lessons I have gifted them in these aquatic wombs, will not. But as of now, there is no reason any of them should deviate. They have no reason to do so.”

“But if the goo was to break this dream... what did I see?”

The Lord would not answer.

“Thank you.” I turned to the figures next to the great one. “Thank you, Michael. And thank you, Lucifer.”

I took the Lord's hand and walked

A thousand eyes, and a thousand hands. An interlocking ring of fire.

Lucifer took one long, longing look back at the shells, and turned away.

[illegible]

Lazytown, chuck e cheese, lavaboy/sharkgirl, children's hospitals, max headroom, disneyquest

surreal, horror, shortstory

Shame and competition

Taylor takes in Jordan; to survive, Riley must go with Taylor despite Jordan killing Skyler