

Death Park  
*Marie Brown*  
Smashwords Edition  
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I glanced behind me and panicked. Closer, they gained ground as I watched, no escape. . . I ran, lungs burning, and felt the first sting of one of their forcewhips on my calves, urging me to increase my speed beyond what I'd thought possible. I could hear them now. They had breath for laughing and taunting, riding their skimmers. I stumbled, almost went down. Muscles in my back wrenched with the effort of not crashing to the pavement.

"Run, little flitter," one of them called out, bloodlust dripping through his voice. "Run faster, you might get away!"

Cruel laughter followed, growing louder when I missed another step. I looked at the low wall beside the roadway, hardly worth calling a barrier. Dare I go in there? Was anything worth the risk of going over that low wall? I wondered in the space of a split second, then I cast a glance back over my shoulder.

I could see their faces. Their warpaint picked up the eerie almost-glow of the streetlights, standing out in chilling contrast against the dyed-black haloes of their hair. The lights reflected random glints off the fluorescent patches sewn on their black bodysuits.

But the stingers concerned me most, and the forcewhips, and the retro, low-tech blades, just as deadly as the modern weaponry and more satisfying to these twisted scroungers.

And then, of course, the naked bloodlust visible even through the thick warpaint.

Not much of a choice, after all. Behind me lay the certainty of death. Over the wall? Only a possibility, a rumor, a superstition left over from my grandparents' parents' day. I vaulted the fence into Death Park.

It shouldn't have happened, but it did. Instant, total silence fell around me, shutting out the cries of my pursuers. The silence felt strange—tense, listening, waiting for *something*. I couldn't even hear the humming motors of their skimmers. But I could feel the *waiting*.

I looked back, just in time to see the shock on their faces shift back to the obscene hunt-joy. The skimmers cleared the low wall with even less effort than I.

Then the waiting ended. I hit the ground, some instinct of self-preservation sending me face down into the dirt. A howling wind engulfed all of us. It had teeth, the wind did, ripping at my back and my arms in their protective curl over my head. And it carried voices, shrieking with unholy glee and yet despairing at the same time. And then came the blood.

"No!" I tried to curl into a ball, trying to make myself as small as possible as the wind's teeth tore into me. Then the tearing pain stopped, a moment before something ripped deep into me, right into my mind where it was supposed to be *private*, dammit, and turned me inside out. I think I screamed. I know they did, because I could feel it echo in my very bones. Then it cut off.

Dirt.

I could smell dirt. And with the smell came a sensation of something spiky poking into my face. I opened my eyes to moon-silvered grass, seen at very close range.

Cautious, heart pounding, I pushed myself upwards and looked around, only to immediately wish I hadn't. The wind, the screaming, howling whirlwind that had engulfed me and the scroungers, remained. I could see it as it whipped around, shrieking with a palpable joy that made me want to vomit. Pieces of what had once been human flew by in the killer wind, spraying blood. Moonlight picked out darting fluorescent streaks, shredded scraps of the clothing the scroungers once wore. The wind picked up and amplified intermittent human screams, echoes of the ones who had lasted longest in this brutal maelstrom.

I wanted to burrow back into the ground and hide, but morbid curiosity wouldn't let me. I had to know why I still lived.

Someone loomed over me. That was my first impression, anyway, then I noticed that I could see right through her. I wriggled around and tried for a closer look, then gagged on a fresh wave of nausea.

She looked normal enough, at least as normal as someone from a picture in a history book would look. She wore a pale pink dress, one that exposed her legs from the knees down, and those wretchedly impractical high-heeled shoes that women used to love so much.

But her chest. . . and above. . .

It looked like acid burns, at least on the still identifiable parts of her chest. It got progressively worse, from pockmarks and raw-edged holes around her collarbones, to exposed tendons and melted flesh on her neck, all the way to an oozing mass that had once been a face. The part of my mind not frozen in horror noticed that she had softly curled blond hair blowing gently from the back of her head.

And then, just when I thought I couldn't take it any more, she spoke inside my head.

/You are not one of them, are you?/

"N-n-no," I stammered, fighting the nausea down and closing my eyes. Her voice sounded pleasant, if wary.

The whirlwind slowed, the screams fading into wisps of moans and whimpers.

"Thanks," I said, wondering if ghosts understood irony.

/You will help us,/ she commanded, suddenly imperious. /We need a live person to solve our problem. If you don't help me, I'll let the others at you. Will you do it?/

"Y-yes." The stammer returned. Anything to prevent the horrible death the scroungers had suffered. But what could a ghost, a supernatural being conventional wisdom knew didn't exist, want from me? "What do you want me to do?"

/Open a door,/ she said.

"A door," I repeated, dubious. "That sounds simple enough. What's the catch?"

/You have to get through us to do it./

I gulped. "Why do you need a door opened?"

Hot and virulent, her instant fury engulfed me in a wave. /Because,/ even the thought hissed, /the door blocks us from reaching the bastard that did *this* to us./

They surrounded me then, done with the predators, their hatred pounding at me. Each ghost, and there were too many to count, had been horribly mutilated. I gagged, fought it, lost control and vomited on the grass.

/What've you got here, Penny?/ A man with his eyes burned out and his throat slit emerged from the angry horde. /Why do you shield this one?/

The semi-transparent crowd growled and surged forward.

/Because he is the Opener,/ Penny declared, sending a wave of shock rippling through the ghosts. /We must go to the Tunnel now./

She gestured, a clear command: follow me. I picked myself up off the grass, staggering and wiping ineffectively at the sour taste in my mouth. My muscles burned and twitched, protesting the exhausting run through the city to this accursed park, but I forced them to obey my commands and followed.

A small boy ghost stepped in front of me and held up his arms. They ended in ragged stumps, dripping blood that vanished before it reached the ground. I gasped and averted my eyes, only to see a woman with a gunshot wound in her face.

/Help my son,/ she said, /set him free./

"What is happening here?" I cried, surrounded by horror.

/Free us,/ a bloody, dripping ghost said.

/Free us,/ others repeated, picking up a chant. /Free us. Free us!/

/The Tunnel awaits,/ a dismembered ghost said. I tried not to look, but my eyes refused to turn from the horror of his body, just a collection of pieces floating near each other but not quite touching. /The Tunnel and the Killer./

/The Killer must pay./

/Pay,/ echoed through the crowd.

They lead me through the park, beautiful even by night. The full moon rode overhead, lighting the ordered flowerbeds and smooth concrete walks. I wondered who maintained it all. It looked just as pristine as the day Death Park had been dedicated as a memorial, although no one currently living could remember exactly when that had been. Maybe our parents' parents knew, but not us. . . All we, my generation, knew was to avoid this place at all costs. Crossing the wall into Death Park meant risking your life.



and spirit.

The perverted bastard's soul made hideous sounds as the ghost-wind ripped it apart, one tiny shred at a time, paying him back sevenfold for the torment he'd inflicted on them. I ran, but couldn't outpace the psychic noise.

I came back to myself out in the grass, the fresh clean scent clearing my head as the pale light of dawn broke over me. Flickers of running up the stairs, through the park, stumbling and falling. . . had I slept? Or just passed out? Whatever, I lay facedown in cold, wet grass now. I tried to get up, collapsed again, then pushed myself to my knees. I drew a deep, shuddering breath and looked around. In the gentle light of dawn, the horror of the night receded, leaving behind a lingering sense of revulsion.

Penny appeared before me, misty and perfect, smiling as sunlight bathed her in radiance. /Thank you, Opener,/ she said, then faded from view.

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