

*"The debt remains!"*

Holy shit, what was that?

The howling response iced up Philip's spine. He seized his flashlight and whirled around. Had some demented vagrant followed him? The voice came from everywhere, as if the bridge itself woke in a spectral rage.

East toward Marysville, the light's beam became a hazy bar as smoke erupted from the gravel railbed. Blue-green flames licked at the ties and reddened the steel rails along both tracks. He gagged at the smell. Sulfur? Philip's guts shook with the rumble of a birthing volcano beneath his feet.

On a bridge.

Above a river.

Had someone slipped him some acid? The eruption worsened, the tracks wrenching apart in a moan of agony.

Philip shivered from a sudden nearness and turned to gape at a figure standing beside him. A disheveled man glared back through shrunken sockets. He appeared to be in the process of dissolving, his bones crumbling into a yellow-white powder.

*"Curse you and yours to hell."* The apparition pointed a rusting metal staff at the jagged orange tear in the bridge.

Scorching heat and stench drove Philip back. His heart hammered as if trying to escape his ribcage.

Something answered in the same fast thumping rhythm from inside the glowing red tunnel. *Chug-chug. Chug-chug.* Each steamy exhale whooshed from the pit in suffocating gasps. Then came the whistle. One long piercing scream.

His father's tales about another world called Hobohemia caught up with his panicked mind. The Midnight Express. The train said to fetch damned souls for a one-way ticket to hell.

The nightmare was real, and it was coming for him.

He ran.