The Burning Line by Kenny Goliff

Scott led a traditional life.

He went to school, got a job, got married, had a kid. He didn't think he was capable of much more than what he and his family considered to be 'the norm.' He knew greater things were within reach, but he never tried to grab them. He didn't think he could.

On the 7th of July in 2042, Scott woke up at 7:00 A.M. He brushed his teeth, took a shower, and poured cereal for his daughter, like any other morning.

Scott's wife, Erica, came downstairs and turned on the T.V. It was the middle of a philosophical advertisement, the same one that played all the time.

A man in a brown business suit walked into the screen. He looked happy, but not the *real* kind of happy. He looked like he *had* to be happy. His mouth slid open, almost robotically, and monotonous words spilled out. The same words Scott and his family heard every other morning.

"No two things are more opposite than life and death. Life is interaction, emotion, consciousness, creation, and existence. Death is devoid of all of these." The commercial showed images of laughing children, crowded sports arenas, and public markets by the ocean. All smiling faces. The man continued to speak. "The two are exact opposites, but they both exist in the same world with the same people. Everyone who has ever existed has been in both of these stages, and, to do so, they had to cross a line. A line so thin that it stretches to infinity across only two dimensions. A line where, if crossed, enough friction is created to ignite it, causing the plane to explode.

"When someone dies, that space becomes more than a border between life and death.

"It becomes the Burning Line."

Chills ran down Scott's back. That had never happened before, and he wasn't sure why it happened then. He itched his spine to try to get the unsettling feeling to go away.

For a second, he swore he could feel blood running down his fingers.

He looked down at his hands. They were clean. No blood, nothing out of the ordinary. But he knew- he *knew* he felt something dripping.

"Weird," Scott muttered to himself.

"You okay?" Erica asked him.

"I think so," he lied. Scott's daughter, Anna, cautiously ate her last pieces of cereal, looking almost afraid of him.

"Okay," Erica sighed. "Anna, ready to go to school?"

Anna responded with a quiet "yes." She stood up and walked out of the kitchen to grab her backpack. Scott's eyes drifted up at Erica as she stood up from the couch. He looked back down at the counter. Anna's bowl of cereal was gone.

Huh, Scott thought to himself. *She must have put it away when I wasn't looking.*

"Bye, babe," Erica said before giving him an insincere kiss on the cheek. She grabbed her car keys out of her purse and followed Anna to drive her to school. Something was off about the way she walked, but Scott couldn't put his finger on what it was.

He walked to the front door after them and waved goodbye as Erica drove away.

Maybe I just need coffee, he thought. *Yeah. Coffee.* It was 8:30 now. He needed to get

going to work. He downed a cup of espresso, threw on his work clothes, and got into his car.

Crap, he thought. *Forgot to lock the door.*

Erica was always teasing him for being so forgetful. More confused than frustrated, he got back out of the car and walked to the front door. He grabbed the knob.

It didn't move.

Oh, he thought. *I guess I did lock it. God, what's going on today?* Like the rest of the weird things he saw, he shrugged it off as a result of being tired.

Scott went back in his car and turned on the engine. He backed out of the driveway and left the neighborhood. He pressed the radio button to turn on his usual station, but no song played. It was static. The station never had dead air.

He listened to the static all the way to work, expecting it to change to music at some point. It never did. *Stuff like that happens,* he thought. *Airwaves get disrupted, maybe the station went out of business over the weekend.*

Scott parked the car in the employee lot in front of his office building. Out of nowhere, the static in the radio turned off. He heard Erica's voice come in through the car's speakers.

"Scott?" she asked. *"Scott, can you hear me?"*

He couldn't let this one slide. It wasn't like the other stuff. Hearing his wife on the radio, that freaked him out. "Wh- what is happening today?" he asked the radio. "Am I dreaming or something? I'm dreaming, right?"

"Scott, you have to get out," Erica's voice said over more rising static.

"Of my car?!" Scott yelled. "What are you talk-"

"No, not your car, idiot! The world! Get to- oh, crap, Dave, shoot it! Scott! Get to the 41st floor! You'll find it there, okay?! GET TO THE-"

Her voice abruptly cut out and the static came back. Then, in the back of his mind, he heard a few words enter his consciousness, like a thought that wasn't his.

> execute:command
> active_request:start
> > //delete:Erica
> > //delete:Anna
> > [save]:Scott
> execute:renewal
> execute:process[burning_line]

Suddenly, Scott couldn't remember his family anymore. He tried to think of them, but every time he remembered a detail, like the particular way his wife walked, the memory ran further away. He ended up figuring that they never existed. Maybe he was just imagining it. Dreaming of having a better life than he did. Dreaming of a life that was just out of his grasp. He tended to do that when he was left to his own thoughts.

Scott turned off the engine and got out of the car. He walked into the building, said a quick "hello" to the receptionist, and got in the lobby elevator. Like always, he pressed the button to take him to floor 40, but he noticed another button with a 41 on it. He didn't remember seeing that one before, but that wasn't too strange.

His brother was always teasing him for being so forgetful.

The elevator stopped and let Scott out at floor 40. He stepped into the office and sat down at his desk. "Morning, Scott," his friend, Dave, said as he walked by. "Have a good weekend? Do anything with the family?"

"Hey, Dave," Scott said back. "No, my family's still in Vermont."

"Vermont?" Dave asked. "I thought Erica and Anna were back here with you. Isn't that why you took Friday off?"

"Erica and Anna?" Scott repeated. "Who are-"

      execute:command
      active_request:start
          //delete:Dave
      execute:renewal
      continue:process[burning_line]
      rewind:nineteen_seconds

The elevator stopped and let Scott out at floor 40. He stepped into the office and sat at his desk.

Scott turned on his computer and opened his e-mail. He had one new message, from someone called 'Erica.' He didn't know anyone by that name. He was about to delete it before he read the subject line: "FLOOR 41. URGENT."

He clicked open the e-mail.

"011010010111010001110011001000000111100101101111011101011100100010000 00111011101101001011001100110010100100000011001110110010101110100001000000011 1010001101111001000000011001100110110001101111011011110111100100010000000011010 00011000100100000010011100100111101010111."

Scott flinched in his chair, startled by the inhuman numbers. He recognized it as binary code, but he didn't know how to read it. He copied the string of numbers, opened up a browser on his computer, and pasted the message into a binary-to-text conversion website. The numbers changed into words.

"its your wife get to floor 41 NOW"

Scott had never been married. *Maybe this 'Erica' got the wrong address,* he wondered. *Whoever that is must have wanted to send it to someone else.*

He remembered the elevator and the 41 button he didn't think he had seen before.

Or, he thought, *maybe it really was for me.*

He stood up from his chair and walked back into the elevator. Whatever it was, something was happening at floor 41. He pressed the new button.

      execute:command
      process_interrupted
          //logout:[burning_line]
          //login:[Erica]
      terminate:process[burning_line]
      commence:process[Erica]
      active_request:start
      execute:renewal

The elevator doors reopened immediately, showing Scott a dark gray room full of huge, black boxes with blinking lights, like old computer processors. He stepped inside, ignoring the feeling of apprehension sneaking up behind him.

"Hello?" he called out to the room. No response. *This is too weird. I'm getting out of here.* He turned around.

    execute:command
    active_request:start
        //delete:door
        [build]:wall
    execute:renewal
    continue:process[Erica]

The elevator wasn't there anymore. The place Scott had just walked out of was solid wall. He was trapped.

    execute:command
    active_request:start
        [build]:table
        [build]:button
    execute:renewal
    continue:process[Erica]

A table appeared in front of him with a red button on top of it. Scott couldn't see anything connected to it, but he had a feeling that it did something important.

    execute:command
    active_request:start
        //add_RAM:Scott
        [replace]:death-simulation
        [replace]:life-reality
    execute:renewal
    continue:process[Erica]

A memory from that morning flew into Scott's mind. He was watching the commercial. That one about The Burning Line.

No two things are more opposite than [reality] *and* [simulation]. *The two are exact opposites. Everyone who has ever existed has had to cross a line. A line where, if crossed, enough friction is created to ignite it, causing the plane to explode. When someone* [enters the simulation]*, that space becomes more than a border between* [reality] *and* [simulation]. *It becomes the Burning Line.*

    execute:command
    active_request:start
        //inform:Scott
    execute:renewal
    continue:process[Erica]

It's not a commercial, Scott thought. *It's a warning. A caution. Maybe an instruction.*

His hand flew out in front of him and slammed out on the table, making a satisfying *click*

with the red button.

Fire spat out from the table, engulfing his hand. It spread to the rest of his body in an instant. Before he even felt any pain, the table, the computers, the room, the office, the building, his house, the whole world, erupted in fire.

execute:command
active_request:start
//delete:The_Burning_Line

Scott's eyes flew open. He felt some kind of hospital bed underneath where he was laying. He tried to look around, but he couldn't move his eyes.

"He's out!" a woman yelled.

It was Erica. His life flooded back to him. Anna, breakfast, T.V., e-mail, radio. He saw her and Dave, his friend from work, standing next to her with a shotgun in his hands. The two ran to the sides of his head and pulled a machine off of him. As soon as they removed it, he could move again. He took a deep breath and sat up.

"What's going on?" he asked them, looking back and forth between the two.

"The Burners," Dave said. "Bastards made a simulation of the whole world, started trapping people in it."

A black door in the room burst open and an eight-foot tall blue humanoid screamed inside. Dave cocked his shotgun and blasted it in the chest.

"Holy sh-" Scott yelled. "What the hell was that?!"

"A Burner," Erica said, helping Scott out of the bed. "Aliens, lab experiments, no one knows. They just started showing up and putting people in the simulation."

"Simul…" Scott started putting the pieces together. Everything that had happened to him that day started to make sense. They were glitches, coding sent to him, probably by Erica. She saved him.

"Now, come on," she said. "There's a group of a few dozen of us who got out. I wanted to get you, too, before going to the military camp."

"Military camp?" Scott asked.

"There's no time for this!" Dave yelled, shooting another Burner running into the room. "We need to go! Now!"

"I-I blew up the world," Scott said. "Did you have to do that too?"

"We all did," Erica told him. "Look, we can answer the rest of your questions later. I know you're confused and disoriented, but we need to go. Now! Come on!" Scott nodded at his wife. Dave aimed his shotgun forward and walked out of the room. He pointed the gun to the left and the right, then gestured for them to follow him. Erica went first.

Scott followed her.