

Crossing Lines. A Dark, Cold Night.

Chapter 1.

A revised edition

It's rained all this week, with temperatures near freezing... and I forgot my damned raincoat.

My name is Allen. Allen Devin Rosten. I'm an arctic fox with a little bit of white tiger mixed in. But just looking at me you wouldn't know about my tiger blood, until you got to know me, and not many do. Honestly though, I'd rather people didn't know. It's an annoying bit of imperfection that I have had to live with all my life. I'm not a pure bred Arctic Fox, as my Mother and two Brothers never miss an opportunity to remind me. To top it all off, my eyes are icy blue, while everyone else in the family are brown. To be looked down upon as unwanted by one's own mother is a feeling I can not describe, so I won't bother trying. But it's normal for me, and when I got old enough to get a job I got out of that damned house. I never looked back. Which means, I didn't go to college. Another bit of ammo my family uses against me at every possible turn.

Back in High School, I was the only Arctic Fox with blue eyes and the only one who's fur didn't change color with the seasons. My fur stays thin and white year round. Oh I do have some black fur. My hands, feet, ears, chevrons on my nose and those two damned stripes that go across my back and frame my belly button. The ends point down to my crotch like some sick joke the gods played on me. So going shirtless is like me saying, "Hey everybody! Look at my crotch!" Which most kids thought was really funny. I was made fun of a lot, so I always keep my shirt on. Kids can be cruel. To this day, you'll never see me at the beach or in a pool or outside without a shirt on.

So that was me, growing up. Always hiding. Always laughed at. Always different. And one of the few that had to wear a coat in the cold winter months.

Then there was Dad. He always looked after me as best he could. After all, I got these two damned tiger stripes, soft thin fur and blue eyes, from his side of the family. His Mother's Mother, to be exact. Great Grandma, I used to call her, before she passed. The sweetest tigress on the planet. They both tried their best to cheer me up, but after being scrutinized for so long and by so many people, you start to believe the things they say. After a time, there was nothing my Dad or Great Grandma could say that would cheer me up. All they could do was hug me on my worst days.

But enough about the past. Right now I'm at work. It's Seven O'clock PM, February 10th 2278. I drive a Hydrogen tanker truck for Sabre Gas company. I guess I'm pretty good at what I do. I've been here for Ten years and have earned my place with the company and other workers. But even today, I don't really trust anyone. I just know any minute now, they're going to turn on me. So I keep my distance so when it does happen, it won't hurt as much. Oh, I still smile and joke around with them, but it's just a

cover. I don't associate with anyone outside of work. Not that I wouldn't, just, no one's ever asked me to join them. Which only enhances the distrust I feel.

Did I mention that I'm gay, to? Single and still a virgin... well, with guys anyways. Yup, I'm a gay guy who's only had sex with a woman. Boy am I fucked up. But more on that later. Right now, it's cold as hell and raining, and as I said earlier, I forgot my rain coat. 'sigh' Go me...

I back my tanker up to the fence with, leaving just three feet between the rear bumper and the gate. Just enough room to allow the gate to open between the fence and the trailer's dirty and scared bumper. This would allow me to use the lighter short hose as my arms are very sore and tired. It's rained all night, there's mud everywhere, and it keeps getting colder. There'll be ice soon.

I glance at the clock on the radio. An amber light illuminates the numbers. It's now 7:27 PM. It's already dark. There's a small flash from outside the windshield, a faint rumble of thunder. The heater feels good, I don't want to leave the warmth of the cab. My clothes have almost dried out from the last time I was outside, about 30 minutes ago. I grab my log book and log the arrival time as 7:30 AM. I'm running later than usual. The slick wet roads posing a hazard. I grab my heavy coat. It was never meant for rain. It's fabric soaked through and through, but it would be better than nothing. I swing the coat over my shoulders, it's cold, but not as cold as it will be outside. I put my hard hat on pressing my black fox ears down flat and click the head light on. Then I grab the door handle and brace myself.

The area that I'm in is known for it's high winds. The lack of trees allows the wind to blow at full freezing force. Before opening the door I engage the pump. A loud clatter and a drone vibrate the truck as the pump starts up, pulling a vacuum on the empty tanker trailer. I pull the door handle and the wind jerks the door out of my hand. It's shockingly cold.

I climb down and push the door shut against the wind. The bright orange safety cone I place out in front of my truck serves to make my truck more visible. I look around, but I am alone. I'm always alone. Even the wild animals have found refuse somewhere, out in this barren field. But I place the cone down none the less as I also place wheel chocks under the large heavy drive wheels of the truck. Not that they'd do any good. If the truck's brakes were to fail, the chocks would not stop it from rolling. But, rules are rules and I follow them without question.

I eye the truck and trailer as I walk to the rear, looking for any damage or loose bolts, wiping the side turn signal light clean as I go by. At the back of the tanker I check the tank pressure gauge. Negative 15 pounds... that was fast. I open the fence with a sign that reads;

Sabre Gas Company
Bradford 1-H

CAUTION
H2S Present
Poisonous Gas

Radiation Warning
N.O.R.M. present

The signs are meant to keep the public out, not me. I have a job to do. The wind blows hard and I know it will take the poisonous gas with it. Still I check my gas meter to make sure it's working.

The compressor, powered by a large hydrogen gas engine glows red hot off to the side of the tanks, as it works hard to pump the gas out of this well. It looks like an angry beast as the rain turns to steam on contact. It rains harder as I climb the stairs to the top of the tanks. My legs are numb from the cold and I can't feel my ears as I reach the top of the stairs and step onto the catwalk.

The first tank I come to, rumbles as I reach for the access hatch. Saltwater, a byproduct of pumping Hydrogen gas out of the ground, blows hard into the tank with such force as to make the huge tank and catwalk shake violently. The water blows in surges so I wait for it to stop. My paw pads can feel the warmth coming from inside the tanks. At this particular well the saltwater comes out of the ground at nearly 200 degrees Fahrenheit and is cooled down to 140 deg before it enters the tank.

I open the hatch and peer inside. My headlight illuminates the surface of the dark liquid. It's much higher than I expected... too high. If water were to surge into the tank while I had the top open, It would most definitely splash out and I'd get soaked. I quickly drop my gauge line into the tank to get the measurement, though I have a pretty good guess what it will be.

The rain obscures the measurement and I have to start over. Time is running out, the surge is coming soon. I know this Well, and I know she's angry. I quickly try to dry off the gauge line with a small towel, wet with rain. I try again...

"Thirteen feet, Eleven inches..." I write it down on a wet notepad. "Great... just one foot before this tank overflows on to the ground." I say to myself in a sarcastic tone, knowing that it would make a horrible mess, and the contract company I work for would get into trouble.

The compressor bogs down and growns. The surge is coming. I quickly grab the wet towel with my numb fingers and wipe the gauge line off as I pull it out of the tank, tossing the handle and the line over the railing of the catwalk. The gauge line is fifteen feet long. The water separator hisses angrily as the surge passes through it. It tries desperately to separate the gas from the water. The pressure gauges jump to their maximum, I know this even though I can't see them. This is the Bradford... the angry Well. The surge is coming, six feet left on pulling the gauge line out. My fingers hurt.

"Come on.. Come ON!"

I pull the line up as fast as I can with numb and frozen black furred fingers. Four feet. The metal pipes rattle and shake as the surge moves from the separator. High pressure emergency release valves hiss and relieve excessively high pressure. The sound is like a rapidly firing shotgun. This is going to be a big one. Two feet. I yank the last bit of the gauge line out of the tank and slam the hatch shut, locking it as the surge hits. Pressure explodes from around the hatch as the suddenly compressed air inside the tank looks for an escape.

I back away from the tank as some water spews through the gasket around the hatch. I back towards the second tank, but as the two are tied together, and they are at the same level, the surge hits the second tank as well. I stand, trapped between the two tanks as the surge threatens to shake the world apart. My numb hands grip the cold steel hand rails on the catwalk as everything shakes violently, threatening to toss me over the edge. This surge is abnormally long and hard. I hear a bolt on the catwalk break and hit the ground fifteen feet below me. A second and third bolt are shaken loose.

Finally the surge subsides... I drop my arms as the well goes eerily quiet. Too quiet. I wipe the gauge line clean. I measure the second tank in the same way. Fourteen feet, ten inches, that was fast. It just made 820 gallons in about thirty seconds. Something doesn't feel right, it's too quiet.

It's so cold. I walk carefully down the metal stairs. The only noise is coming from my truck and pump. I connect my shortest hose, a ten footer. Then open the valve on my trailer and then the tanks. The hose jumps as the water is pulled into the tanker.

I'm cold. My black paw pads are blue, my ears are numb and the cold biting wind stings my dark nose and eyes. I need to find out why it's so quiet all of the sudden. Did the well just go through a surge and now it's done? I walk up to the tall narrow separator tank. It's littered with gauges of different sizes and measurements. Most of the gauges read way too low. Something is wrong and I can't seem to put my finger on it. It's so quiet.

Then, it hits me like a freight train. The compressor engine has stalled. I scramble over pipes and conduits to the large yellow engine still smoldering and hot, in the rain. A red light blinks on the control panel, "Failure". My coat is heavy with rain. Rain drips off my hard hat as I stare at the Failure light, blinking an angry crimson red.

Failure... Failure... Failure.

My cell rings. It's the office. They know. And now I'm in trouble. I wasn't fast enough...

"Hello?"

"Hey... I need your gauges." The female's voice says sternly.

"Umm... okay..." I fish my wet notepad out of my top pocket. "Tank One had a top gauge of Thirteen foot Eleven inches..." There's silence on the phone but I continue. "Tank Two had a top of Fourteen, Ten." There's silence again and I hesitate before adding, "...and the compressor shut off. A failure light is blinking."

She sighs deeply. "Yeah... When the levels get that high the compress shuts off so the tanks don't overflow. Day shift forgot to tell us that they didn't get around to picking it up and that the levels might be high. The bastards..." The collie cursed.

Did this mean that I was off the hook? This was day shift's fault, not mine? I started to feel a little bit warmer.

She sighed again as if there was something she needed to do now that she didn't want to. "I guess I'll have to call the Pumper and let him know the Bradford is shut-in. He'll have to come out and restart it. He's not going to be happy about that. Well... sounds like there's about four loads of water there, that should keep you busy the rest of the night."

"Heh, yeah, I guess so." It was so cold, I shivered.

"Okay then, be careful out there, some of the bridges are icing up. We'll see ya when you get in. Bye!"

“Bye.” I pocket my phone.

A truck drives by on the darkened highway a few hundred feet away. The driver tooting the horn happily. I wave and flash my headlight at him, a nighttime hello signal. That was probably Sousuke, the goof. I smile, remembering a joke he told earlier.

Ten hours later, I finally make it back to the office. Everyone I know who works the night shift has already gone home. Even the dispatcher. I turn in my paperwork for that night's work and I clock out. Exhausted, wet, and cold I make my way to the bus stop. It's still raining, and now mixed with sleet. My white fur is gray with dirt, mud, and a hard night's work. The bus stop is uncovered, I stand in the cold sleeting rain, waiting for the bus. The sky is a cold, dark gray, which only serves to match my mood.

I suddenly check my watch, feeling the panic that I might have missed the bus. I breath a sigh of relief, I'm early. I look around, my eyes wet with frozen rain, I can hardly see. I am alone at the bus stop, standing next to the sign marked, 'Route 2243' in green letters with an oak tree in the background. I lean against the sign post, I'm so tired and the bus won't be here for another eight minutes. My nose and eyes burn. I feel a cold coming on as I close my eyes for a short rest.

My left ear perks up as the unmistakable whine of my bus echoes off the buildings in the industrial part of the city. I can hear it as it accelerates from a distant intersection. It has a distinct sound and I'd know it anywhere. I crack my left eye open, just to make sure that my ears are not deceiving me. I open my eye as the long white bus completes it's turn and accelerates towards me. I check my watch again. He's six minutes early. The driver has a reputation of being very punctual, but never early. What's so different about today?

The transmission screams as the bus accelerates towards me. The bus's headlights reflect off the wet puddles in the road before it splashes through them. It's finer details are obscured by the heavy rain, but I can make out the familiar blue oval in the center of the grill. The bus is very old, with the engine mounted up front like a large school bus. This dammed city doesn't throw anything away. Despite the antique nature of the vehicle the driver operates it gently and without a breakdown.

The bus stops in front of me with a whimpering down shift of the automatic transmission and squeaky brakes. The door splits, the front half swings out while the other half swings inward. I wait to see if anyone is getting off. Two guys exit the bus. A short gray Kangaroo rat with black hair and tail tuft and a dark gray fox. They're both dressed for the cold. The fox dawns a yellow rain coat while the rat pops open a green and white umbrella. They wave their good-byes and walk in opposite directions.

I shake the excess water off before I step on board. The dark forest green interior and brown seats reminds me of a forest, for some reason. It's warm, so nice and warm. I smile and nod at the driver. A blue and white feline with an odd topping of green hair smiles back. His white dress shirt and slacks looked too big for him. His black tie too long. It reached all the way down between his legs and the seat below. He looked too small to be able to drive something so big.

I bow my head slightly, “Thanks for being early.”

He smiles. “No problem, I thought you might appreciate it. Since this is one of the few stops that doesn't have a shelter.”

I'm taken aback. He did this for me? But he doesn't even know me. I mutter a thank you, and take a seat, alone, next to the heater vent. The bus is less than one quarter full and there are at least two separate conversations going on. One of them about the cold winter weather.

The bus accelerates. The gears whine loudly, then I'd swear you could hear the hydraulic valves in the transmission make the shift into second gear. The transmission's second gear whines louder, reaching a high pitch, like an opera singer. Then just before the crystal glass shatters there's a metallic chirp and a thunk as the third gear is obtained. Damn this thing is old, but it gets me home, and that's what's important. The heater feels good and I make myself comfortable, leaning against the window. It'll be almost an hour's ride before I get home, and I can't help but fall asleep.