

# **WEHRDRAGON: LIBERATION**

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*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, incidents and events, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.*

*To my Calliope crew – Kylie, Toni and Raelene*



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# Prologue

*Newsfloor, Indigo Times Headquarters – Monday 22 November, 2021 – 12:17 pm*

‘Heads up!’ Harry Jones cries as he ploughs his wheelchair through the bustle of the newsroom. His eyes are fixed on the footage of the tangled ruins on the overhead screens.

Journalists scatter, leaping out of the way of the veteran reporter as he zips across the floor.

‘You people call yourself journalists?’ Harry shouts. ‘Have you not noticed the screens?’

Within a metre of the news wall, he yanks the wheel of his chair, spinning to a stop. The wiry female journalist at the desk closest to him snaps round to survey the screens, and gasps.

The government’s prestigious science precinct is now just crumbled concrete, twisted metal and shattered glass. One screen shows a helicopter flying a low pass through the dust haze over the site. On another monitor, a first-aid truck with flashing lights manoeuvres its way painfully slowly across the debris-strewn landscape. Dust-caked people run, limp or stumble about. Some carry or drag injured colleagues.

A cameraman pushes his way through the crush of stunned journos to reach Harry’s side. ‘What the hell happened there?’ Jasper asks, cocking his thumb at the screens.

‘My money’s on an earthquake or an asteroid strike,’ Harry says, basking in the glow of the screens. He lives for this.

Jasper nods slowly. ‘Either that or there’s a demolition team out there that got the address catastrophically wrong.’

Harry shrugs. ‘I’m happy to run with any of those stories.’

‘Arrogant prick,’ the young woman at the desk beside them mutters.

‘What’s that?’ Harry says, a smile curling his lips.

The woman swipes her tablet off her desk and stuffs it into her knapsack. ‘I love the way that you *assume* this scoop is yours.’

The PA system beeps twice, heralding an imminent announcement. Everyone freezes.

‘*Jones! Why are you still here?*’ the chief editor barks. ‘*Get on it!*’

Harry smirks at the woman whose name he doesn’t remember. ‘You really thought *you’d* get the scoop on this?’

She sneers at him. ‘I reckon I’m due.’

‘Then of the two of us,’ Harry says, ‘I’d say *you’re* the arrogant one.’

The woman scoffs. ‘How the hell do you figure that?’

Harry spins his wheelchair round to face her. ‘I’ve been in this game longer than you’ve been alive – *and* I’m the best journo around. Actually, I can’t decide if you’re arrogant, stupid or deluded, thinking that you’d get this story over me.’

‘You hate women,’ she says.

‘I don’t care about gender, colour or religion,’ Harry retorts. ‘I just hate idiots.’

As the woman fumes to herself, Harry shouts at Jasper. ‘Bring the car round! We’re rolling!’

‘I assume we’re collecting Felix on the way?’ Jasper says.

‘Of course!’ Harry yells. He pats his wheelchair, adding, ‘Though this baby is top-of-the-range, it can’t get me everywhere I need to be. We’re definitely gonna need legs to get what we need for this story!’



# Chapter 1

## *Felix*

‘Message on the bat-phone, Felix.’

I look up from my tablet to find Elvira staring intently at hers. Neither of us is actually working on our English assignments, but I hope we look like we are.

‘Since we’re in the library, Elvira,’ I say, ‘my *work* phone is on *Do Not Disturb*.’

Elvira looks up and squints at me through her pink glasses. ‘Yes,’ she says slowly, ‘that’s why *you* didn’t hear it. But I know things.’

Elvira is the most infuriating person I know. Tight corkscrew ringlets sprout from her head, and though she’s always cursing her unruly mop of wiry curls, if it weren’t for the Sideshow Bob hairstyle, you wouldn’t find her in a room full of hobbits. Her eyes, like her skin, are the colour of pecan nuts, but people rarely notice them since they are behind thick, round barriers of pink glass.

Elvira’s wardrobe consists mostly of reinvented items from local op shops, so everyone thinks she’ll be a designer one day but Elvira wants to be an actor. She’s constantly trying out new personas, claiming that it is easier acting like someone else than pretending to be herself ... whatever that means. Sometimes I have no idea who she really is, and we’ve been best mates for ten years, since I punched her and broke her nose when

we were six. But I trust her; she's always had my back. And she's the only person I can say that about.

I shake my head and drag the phone out of my bag. She's always right about the phone – I don't know how she does it – and whenever Harry texts me with a job, it's best to respond pronto. He's not supposed to contact me when I'm at school, but Harry thinks I should prioritise my part-time job at the *Indigo Times* over my schoolwork.

'You better hope it's not a call-out,' Elvira says, returning her attention to her tablet. 'Your Unattainable Senior hasn't done her presentation yet.'

She means Liberty Fox. At least Elvira didn't refer to her as the Ice Queen, which is her other favourite name for Liberty, but I still glare at her before turning my attention to the conference room across from our workstation.

Liberty is working with five other seniors on a physics project. Only a few metres and a glass wall separate us. I ignore my phone for the moment. Harry can wait. Elvira is right about Liberty Fox being unattainable but I'm not willing to concede defeat yet, despite my recent encounter with her.

I interviewed her for the *Indigo Times* after she was accepted into an elite stunt training academy. Harry wasn't thrilled at the prospect of me interviewing my 'crush' as he calls her, but he eventually gave in and assigned me his cameraman.

Liberty had just finished a two-hour workout at the local karate dojo, but she looked so fresh she could have just arrived. Her black singlet and tights hugged her athletic frame and her blue eyes glowed in the freckled landscape of her face. And not a single strand of her red hair had dared stray from her ponytail.

She's like a cobra – mesmerising, radiating power. But I'd prepared for the interview. I would stay cool no matter what. I'd be the Ice King. Epic fail.

My glacial armour didn't just melt under her gaze – it sizzled and hissed as it steamed away. For me, the interview was a blur. I had to watch the raw footage from the cameraman afterwards to find out what had actually happened. I'd stammered through all my questions and, as

## WEHRDRAGON: LIBERATION

Liberty had detailed the countless hours of weight-training, karate, rock-climbing, sky-diving and gymnastics that had paved her way to Lourdes Stunt Academy, my gaze had never strayed from her chest – where a shiny Liberty half dollar coin hung on a silver chain.

Across the hall, Liberty gets to her feet. I can't hear her but just watching her is awesome. My pulse rate quickens and I sigh.

Elvira groans. 'You're pathetic, you know that?'

'You're just jealous,' I say without taking my eyes off Liberty.

'Negative. She's not my type.'

'We're not in competition then,' I say. 'Lucky.'

'Yes. Lucky for you, Felix, because I'd win.'

'Uh-huh.'

'She might actually be more interested in someone like me,' Elvira continues, 'rather than someone like you.'

I ignore her. She's tried that angle before.

'Another message,' she adds.

Reluctantly I look at the phone. Two identical messages from Harry.

I frown. 'Crap.'

'Call-out?' Elvira says, one eyebrow arched.

'Yep.'

Elvira rubs her hands together. 'Where?'

'NSA,' I say, staring at the screen.

Her eyes widen. 'Oooh! The National Science Agency! Please tell me it's something exciting! Has your stepmother been arrested? Did she blow something up?'

'Looks like something's blown up,' I say, tucking my phone in my pocket and reaching for my tablet. 'The whole precinct has been levelled.'

Elvira recoils. 'Really? I was just joking.'

I tap the phone in my pocket. 'Well, unless Harry's in on the same joke ...'

'You're going there?'

I nod.

'If it's that serious,' Elvira says, 'you won't get past security.'

'Harry will get us in.'

Elvira adjusts her glasses. ‘Keep me posted,’ she says. ‘I want to know everything.’



The white van with the *Indigo Times* logo emblazoned on the side pulls up at the kerb. I hear the click of the automatic latch a second before the back side door slides open to reveal Harry Jones in his wheelchair in the dingy, cluttered interior. I swat an empty soft drink can and a crumpled burger wrapper from the bench seat behind the driver before I sit down.

Harry grins at me. ‘How is my favourite apprentice today?’ he asks as Jasper, the cameraman/driver, swings the van out from the kerb.

‘I thought I was your only apprentice,’ I say as I wrestle with my seatbelt buckle while avoiding knocking my knapsack off my lap.

The floor of the van is like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and I’m afraid if my bag falls amongst the filth, I’ll never find it again. And even if I did manage to rescue it, I’d never get the smell out of it. Harry bathes in patchouli aftershave but it does nothing to cover the van’s signature aroma of greasy takeaway food. As always, Harry is immaculately dressed. He is all tailored suits and silk ties, and not a hair out of place. How he endures the filth inside the van is beyond me.

‘Of course, you’re my only apprentice,’ Harry says, slapping his palm against his forehead. ‘How could I forget?’

Harry Jones is the *Indigo Times*’ chief weapon in the broadcaster’s war on public ignorance. The Malaysian-born reporter is tolerated in media circles, feared in political circles, and ridiculed by pretty much everyone else; his obnoxious and offensive manner overshadowing his towering intellect.

He’s been in a wheelchair since a diving accident when he was fifteen, but that doesn’t stop him chasing down big stories. His wheelchair is a V6 four-wheel-drive, all-terrain vehicle that his rev-head younger sister built for him, which if NASA ever finds out about, will probably become standard issue for Mars missions.

Harry tosses me a plastic-wrapped package. ‘Put those on,’ he says. ‘What is it?’

## WEHRDRAGON: LIBERATION

‘EMT coveralls. Hopefully not too small for you.’

‘EMT? I’m going undercover?’ I say, ripping the plastic to get to the uniform.

Harry snorts. ‘Let’s not get carried away, Junior,’ he says. ‘We just need you to NOT stick out like a dog’s balls when you’re in the field today.’

‘Do I get a first-aid kit?’ I ask.

‘Don’t worry about that,’ Harry says. ‘It’ll be such a shit-show out there no one will be looking that closely – lucky for you.’

‘So, what’s the shit-show about?’ I ask as I place my knapsack on the seat beside me and unbuckle my seatbelt. ‘And what exactly do you want me to do?’

‘Well, something catastrophic has befallen the government’s National Science Agency today,’ he says officiously.

Jasper turns in his seat as he takes a corner. ‘That’s a bloody understatement!’

‘All the buildings in the precinct have been reduced to rubble,’ Harry says. ‘It’s like a war zone apparently. Army’s on its way.’

‘An explosion?’ I ask.

Harry shakes his head. ‘Implosion.’

‘What caused it?’

Harry shrugs. ‘That’s what you’re going to find out.’

‘What will you be doing?’ I ask.

‘Interrogating whomever I can while adding to the general confusion. Jasper will wield his camera like Excalibur and get us some award-winning footage.’

‘And my stepmother?’

Again, Harry shrugs. ‘I can’t imagine some bureaucrat who spends her days rubberstamping energy leases being of any interest to us.’

‘I don’t know that she would approve that many leases,’ I say. ‘I’m sure she’d rather deny stuff. She’s an antagonistic, power-crazy bitch.’

‘Well, in any case,’ Harry says, ‘you should probably prepare yourself for the fact that she is dead.’

I roll my eyes. ‘Don’t get my hopes up.’



## *Liberty*

As I make my way across the ruined landscape, a skulking figure appears from behind a giant slab of concrete about fifty metres away. I recognise him immediately, even though he's wearing an EMT uniform. It's the guy from school who interviewed me for the *Indigo Times*. When he spots me, he stops skulking and starts what is probably supposed to be a nonchalant swagger but ends up looking like a drunken pirate impression.

'Hello, Felix,' I say when he reaches my position.

'Li-Liberty,' he stammers. He clears his throat. 'What are you doing here?'

'Looking for my parents.'

Felix cocks his head to one side. 'What would your parents be doing here?'

Seriously? Does he not know that my parents are the lead scientists on his stepmother's project? Maybe the 'Cinderfella' rumours are true.

My folks say his stepmother, Karina Warhurst, talks incessantly about Felix's older brother, but rarely mentions Felix. Adam Warhurst joined the air force after school and although he's been there less than two years, according to Karina, he's close to becoming the Air Commodore. Felix is – allegedly – the result of an affair his father had with a local hairdresser, and when Felix's birth mother died, he had to go live with his father. Karina pretends he doesn't exist, while blatantly lavishing her time and energy on Adam. That's what has earned Felix the nickname, 'Cinderfella'.

'My parents work here,' I say.

'Really?' he says, eyes wide. 'I hope they're okay.'

'I got a text from my dad,' I say, 'so once I locate him, I'll find out how they are.' I point to the uniform. 'You're undercover for the *Indigo Times*, I assume?'

His forehead crinkles and he breaks eye contact. 'Yeah, something like that,' he mumbles.

He's so awkward. Felix is easy to look at – take off his shirt and stick a puppy in his hands, he could be Mr July in the fireman's calendar – but his conversation skills are abysmal. He should stick to sport; his reputation on the cricket pitch, tennis court and football field is unmatched. Cinderella might never *be* the belle of the ball but *give* him a ball and this bumbling goat becomes a gazelle.

'Okay,' I say. 'I'd best leave you to your job. Good luck.'

He frowns and nods. 'You too.'

I leave him and go in search of the best way to access my parents' lab. Eventually, I find the evacuation point and, once underground, I dispense with stealth. There'll be no security. It's a full evac and everyone who could escape – has. With only the *whoop-whoop* of the evacuation siren for company, I race along the corridors in the ghoulish glow of the orange emergency lighting, the shards of the original lights crunching under my boots. Apart from shattered glass, there is relatively little debris down here. These subterranean labs are designed to withstand seismic shocks, so the air here isn't filled with concrete dust like the upper levels.

Perspex panels line the corridors, and a glance in each dimly lit lab reveals no movement. The federal government's top-secret space, engineering and biosecurity research happens here, but it is only secret from the outside world. Anyone with access to these levels can view the workings of any lab. Dad's text message said Lab 17. As I check off the numbers I pass, I wonder what my fellow physics students would think of this. Much more interesting than our presentation which is due tomorrow.

I slide around a corner and my skin puckers into goose bumps. I'm close. Three labs down, the perspex is bowed outwards. I slow to a jog and steady my breathing.

I reach the lab, and I see it. The portal.

The massive vertical steel ring – my mother's creation – draws my gaze. It's big enough to drive a truck through. Sketches and design specs for this monstrous cosmic gate have littered our house for years. I used to find mathematical equations scrawled across my bedroom mirror when I came home from school. Mum would have been in my room performing some mundane domestic chore, had an idea and then written on



whatever was at hand to preserve her inspiration. Having a quantum physicist for a mother has had its moments.

None quite like this one though.

The lab could accommodate a football field if required but, at the moment, it resembles the set of a Hollywood sci-fi disaster. The pliable, shock-proof putty used for the walls and ceiling appears to have melted. Elongated teardrops of gelatinous goo hang from the ceiling, the bulbous ends suspended at different heights like creepy Christmas baubles. Goo from the walls has congealed on the floor, carpeting the mass of cables snaking their way from the power grid to the portal. The portal itself is showering white sparks, which turn orange in the intermittent flashing of the hazard lights.

I dismiss those details to focus on the only thing moving inside the lab. In the dark belly of the portal, a glowing nimbus surrounds a pulsating mass. It's like a knot of eels made of fluid metal. But it's unstable, glitching like a television picture during an electrical storm.

This is the source.

All the devastation at the NSA precinct can be traced to here. Lab 17.

And whatever happened here ... I don't think it's finished yet.

I step forward and press my hands on the perspex. It's soft under my palms and I pull them away again, rubbing my fingers together, the sticky residue balling on my fingertips. As I wipe my hands on my trousers, I return my attention to the lab and notice a body lying on the floor amongst the cables.

'Dad,' I whisper.

There'll be no back up. There's no option but to go in.

I wrench the sliding door open – thank God all locks are released in an emergency evacuation – and step inside. It is zero Kelvin cold in here – okay maybe not quite that cold, but it's definitely chilly – and it smells like cinnamon. I cup my hands over my mouth, trying to warm the air on its way to my lungs, and pick my way carefully across the floor so I don't trip on any cables.

As I kneel beside my dad's body and take his icy hand in mine, the glowing mass in the portal blips and I look up. The superfluid snakes



slip around each other and I squint to study the mass more carefully. It's more chilling up close. And not actually metallic. Nor are the writhing ribbons uniform in shape or size.

I notice something beyond the glowing mass now. Stars. Thousands of them. I don't recognise any of the constellations – Dad would know them. He's been gazing at the heavens since he was a boy. It was no surprise to anyone he became an astrophysicist.

Something pokes free of the jumble, catching my eye. A flailing arc of ... skin? Though I can almost feel ice crystals in my lungs slicing the delicate tissue with every breath, I don't take my eyes from the seething mass. I squeeze my father's unresponsive hand as another protrusion breaks free. It looks like a tiny arm. A tiny human arm.

'Liberty.'

Dad's voice. I drop my gaze but his eyes are closed. Did he say my name or did I imagine it? It doesn't matter. The priority is to get him out of here, then look for Mum. I try to stand but my legs refuse to cooperate. Weakness consumes me. I collapse on top of Dad, my head resting on his chest. He's still alive. I count his heartbeats as I reach into the pocket of my trousers. My fingers close around my phone and I try to muster the strength to pull it out.

But I can't.

'What the hell is happening to me?' I whisper.

No one answers.