SWIFT
the
STORM,
FIERCE
the
FLAME
A Novel
Meg Long
The storm is unstoppable.
But so is she.

Swift the Storm, Fierce the Flame

A Novel

MEG LONG

WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

Iska, calculating the auditory range of her ears. "Or vonenwolves, probably. But it does keep a lot of hearing-sensitive preds, especially the swarms of anacrocs or batimalu apes, far away. So, the magnetic zone that exists around this rail line is essentially the safest area on the planet."

Going back to the right side of the crate, I continue. "There's a small corpo city, Verem, at the top of the plateau here. And a syndicate outpost tucked into the caves underneath it. Those are the only places we'll be able to find parts for the ship. Everything else is a mess of crowded slums or endless jungle. And based on what I saw on the holofeeds, we're not near the plateau or the sprawl, what they call the slums under the mag tracks. We're somewhere to the south."

Sena studies the utensils, then looks up at me.

"So, are we going after your ex-partner or are we chasing down the parts first? Either way is a trek, right? At least we crossed worse terrain on foot on Tundar."

"They really don't teach much about the other worlds on Tundar, do they?" I hold in a chuckle. Tundar may be one of the most trying worlds I've ever been on. Below-freezing temperatures, predators in every shadow, and an endless white tundra under constant threat of blizzards and ion storms. But every Edge World has its own dangers. Maraas is no exception. I cross the communal space to the airlock door. I need fresh air at this point, even if it's wet, sticky jungle air full of memories. Sena follows me, the wolf on her tail.

"The problem isn't the terrain. It's the storm," I say, punching in the activation code and holding my breath until the closed system whirs back to life. At least the crash didn't knock out all the onboard feeds.

"The storm? You say that like . . . it's just one storm?"

"It is. One giant storm. The hellstorm." The holoscreen controls flicker on as I explain. "It covers a third of this entire world. It circles around the whole planet and hits the livable areas every twelve days or so, grinding everything to a halt and changing the entire landscape of the jungle. What was solid ground before turns into rivers or lakes or swamps and then is gone the next cycle."

Iska sniffs at the edges of the door and paws the ground. She's ready for fresh air, too. The holoscreen dies and I smack the side of the panel hard enough that it comes back on.

A long breath escapes Sena's lips. "So, you're saying we'll have to find some way to get to this Verem place and back in less than two weeks or the ship gets blown away?"

"Or flooded or pushed farther into the swamp. You get the basic idea, but yeah." I nod and swipe at the holoscreen to open the airlock door. With a beep, the system starts the routine atmosphere checks needed before deactivating the lock. Finally.

"On your world," I continue, "no one had flyers because the ion storms knocked them out of the sky. On this world, no one outside of Verem can afford flyers, let alone maintain them, because there's nowhere to keep the ships safe from the storm except in the one hangar that's built into the side of the plateau."

"We have no choice but to head for the city then," she says. "And we'll have to get there fast."

"Verem isn't exactly like the Ket, though." I think back to the frozen city held together by syndicate gangs and desperation. "While there's a heavier corpo presence here, the syndicates hold the true power on this world, just like on Tundar."

The substation in orbit we almost collided with pops into my head, as well as the corpo logo that was plastered across it. "Or

at least that's how it was two years ago. Things might've changed. But it doesn't matter; I'll figure out a cover story that explains us and the ship. Hopefully, we can get the parts we need and track down my ex-partner Kiran's location without too much trouble."

I can't help but smile at the excitement humming through my veins. It's not only the anticipation of finally catching up with Kiran; it's the complexity of our situation. A dozen moving parts that could change in an instant. The test of my skills and reactions. The whisper of chaos and trouble. All things I was engineered to excel at.

The door beeps, finished with its scan of atmo conditions. The airlock clicks and the door panel opens with a whoosh. An immediate blast of hot air hits me in the face, but that isn't what causes me to take a step back in hesitation.

Half a dozen commandos are positioned around the door, automatic guns pointed right at us. I was so focused on our own problems I forgot to listen before opening the door, and now we're completely surrounded by bloody commandos. My ears pick up the hum of flyer engines, too. I let some adrenaline flow into my blood, but my smile doesn't dim. This is just another moving part for me to maneuver.

"Tell me you've already solved that cover story problem," Sena whispers as she scans the troops around us. I square my shoulders, hoping she catches the movement and understands that we're going to be fine.

"Hands up where I can see them," a broad commando shouts. Another flyer, larger than mine and with mounted guns, hovers into view behind him. That same corpo logo is marked on both wings of the ship. The green, leafy outline I saw in orbit. My mind whirs through facts as I raise my arms. TerraCo. Third-largest

corpo on the Assembly worlds. Biggest corpo presence on Maraas. Specializes in energy and resource development. Which is basically corpo-speak for resource plundering to fuel the Assembly worlds' power. Guess things aren't exactly the way they were two years ago if the commandos greeting us are TerraCo chumps instead of syndicates.

Pulses and heartbeats fill my ears as I bring the commandos into focus over the usual sounds of the jungle. I don't have to see them all to know that twelve commandos and now two flyers face us down, everyone armed to the teeth.

I keep my palms open and facing the man who spoke. Sena follows suit next to me, whispering to Iska, but my focus is on the broad commando now stepping forward. His ruddy white face is peppered with scars, much like how his roughed-up armor is covered in scratches. Unlike the others, his buzzed head of straw-colored hair isn't hidden under a helmet. Must be up the chain of command high enough to not bother with protocol. His beady green eyes look me up and down.

"What are you doing flying in restricted airspace and landing without a permit?"

I shrug, keeping my movements slow. "Didn't know we needed a permit for crashing."

The commando stares dead at me, his eyes devoid of any emotion. "We've shot people for less."

The words, meant to intimidate and scare, only serve to ratchet up my adrenaline while a distant part of my brain is calculating just how much the power dynamics on Maraas have changed in two years.

The leader nods to a few of the commandos on our right, who begin to move closer to us. I hatch a dozen escape plans as I watch

them, searching for an option that doesn't end with us getting shot at. My fingers itch to reach for one of the flash bombs in my pockets, but instinct tells me to wait for a better opening.

"What's your business on Maraas?"

My eyes jump back to the commando in charge, and the plans in my head shift as an idea for a cover story suddenly snaps into place.

"We work for Dekkard Shaw," I say.

A few of the commandos exchange a glance, though their pulses remain steady. No signs of fear or uncertainty. Guess a syndicate head boss's name doesn't hold as much weight around here as it used to. Which means the power has truly tipped in favor of the corpos. Doesn't matter. I've got their attention.

The lead commando taps his ear as a message relays over his comms. I zero my focus in on filtering out all other sounds so I can clearly hear the feminine voice crackling into his earpiece.

"Interesting," the voice says. There's a pause.

"Bring them to me."

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by Wednesday Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

SWIFT THE STORM, FIERCE THE FLAME. Copyright © 2023 by Meg Long.
All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.
For information, address St. Martin's Publishing Group,
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

Designed by Michelle McMillian

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Names: Long, Meg, author.
Title: Swift the Storm, Fierce the Flame: A Novel / Meg Long.
Description: First edition. | New York : Wednesday Books, 2023. | Audience: Ages 12–18. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2022043586 | ISBN 9781250785121 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781250785138 (ebook)
Subjects: CYAC: Missing persons—Fiction. | Revolutions—Fiction. | Science fiction. | LCGFT: Science fiction. | Novels.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.L6653 Sw 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022043586

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use.
Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales
Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email at
MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: 2023

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1