

Where One Belongs – Wing Commander Saga Excerpt

Written by Viper61

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The noise of the bustling flight deck was deafening. Fighters engines powering up, afterburners being lit off, ordinance and armor plates being clanged around, it was a wonder all the techs weren't deaf. Sandman quickly weaved through a few pieces of diagnostic equipment before he caught sight of his ship. The Longbow bomber wasn't a pretty craft by any stretch of the imagination. It was a slow, huge target that turned about as well as a pregnant elephant. On the other hand, it was armored like a tank, shielded like a corvette, and armed to the teeth . . . everything a good bomber should be.

His fighter tech, "Red" Rockhold already had the ladder ready for the young lieutenant.

"Ready to rock-and-roll, sir?" the fighter tech asked him as Sandman began climbing the ladder.

"As always, Red," Sandman answered.

"Your tail gunners already strapped in and ready to protect your ass!" Red yelled over the din of the flight deck.

Sandman reached the top of the ladder, stepped in through the side entrance of the bomber, and gave a short salute to Red before closing the access hatch. He made his way to the cockpit and plopped down into the heavily cushioned pilot's seat. It was always funny climbing into a Longbow cockpit and seeing a bulky control yoke instead of a fighter's joystick, just something else that reminded Sandman how much of a fighter jock he really was.

Sandman attached and sealed his gloves and helmet, then strapped himself into the chair harness. After he was comfortable enough not to break anything if he had to punch out of the bomber, 'riding the crazy chair' some pilots called it, he started powering-up the huge bombers electrical systems. As he was doing so, he caught glimpses of Red scurrying around his bomber, no doubt pulling the arming pins on each of his missiles and torpedoes. Sandman brought the comm system fully online and keyed his mike.

"Rio, you back there?" Sandman asked.

"Damn straight, sir," came the reply from Senior Spacehand Raul "Rio" Rodriguez, Sandman's tail gunner.

"Did you remember your glasses this time?" Sandman joked to the man operating the Longbow's 'tail stinger'.

"Yes, sir, and they are where they should be ... planted firmly up your ass," Rio said with a laugh. Sandman chuckled at his gunner, a seasoned enlisted man, who really shouldn't talk to a superior officer in that way. But a good relationship between the pilot and gunner quickly forms in a Longbow, as each - as corny as it sounded - held the life of the other in their very hands.

After all the electrical systems had been brought online, Sandman turned his attention outside his cockpit to see Red holding a few handfuls of colorful cards and pins. The fighter tech fumbled with his headset control due to the sheer amount of ordinance tags in his hands.

"I'm holding, and periodically dropping, 16 missile tags and 4 torpedo tags," Red called over the comm. channel.

Sandman switched to his weapons status VDU. Now, this was the one redeeming quality of the Longbow for a fighter jock. What this beast lacked in dogfighting skills it made up for in missiles.

"Red, I count 16 birds and 4 bulldogs, just ready to be let loose on a Kilrathi," Sandman said with a grin.

"Alright, Sandman, send one of them to hell for me. You are 2nd in line for the catapult right now. Spool them up," Red informed him.

"Thanks, Red. Have some paint ready when I get back, Rio's been playing hell with the finish lately," Sandman jokingly provoked over the comms.

"You know where you can stick that paintbrush, sir," Rio stated.

"Up my ass?" Sandman asked, the smile on his face evident in his reply.

"Give the man a prize!" Rio laughed.

Once red was clear, Sandman powered up his ion engines and let them cycle up while he was waiting his turn on the catapult. A yellow-jacketed 'shooter' deck crew member directed Sandman to the number two catapult position. Once the area around Sandman's Longbow was clear, the shooter signaled Sandman to bring his engines up to full. He then gave him a salute, which Sandman returned, and crouched behind his blast shield. The 'shooter' signaled the catapult operator to engage Cat 2, and, within a heartbeat, Sandman and Rio were hurled out the atmospheric screen.

"Damn, I will never get used to a full combat catapult launch," Sandman muttered under his breath as he started his slow, clearing turn.

“Yeah,” came Rio’s inevitable sarcastic response, “you should try it as a passenger sometime.”

Once through with his turn, Sandman took up position in formation and waited for the rest of the squadron to form up. He flexed his fingers in his gloves, the adrenaline rush from the combat launch pounding through his veins. Fighter, bomber, joystick, control yoke . . . whatever he was flying in or with didn’t matter. This was where he belonged, among the stars.