

# The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four V - Part 2: Ranger's Return

by The Space Witches



Could you resist this Angel?

## Chapter 1

September 2274

Angel was sitting on the deck at the back of the house, reading a book, enjoying the late afternoon sunshine, when the comm. unit sounded. With a gentle sigh she laid down her book and went into the house, grumbling to herself as she went.

This was her first complete day off in months. Since the release of her first movie in the summer, she'd been in constant demand. The role she'd played in that movie may have been small, but it had drawn a lot of attention, and Angel had been working non-stop ever since. She'd completed three more movies since that first role, all of which were in various stages of

post-production, all due for release before the following spring. Her agent, Peter Williams, insisted that her last role could get her nominated for an Oscar, but Angel refused to think about that.

She had allowed Peter to accept every invitation they'd received for her to appear on chat shows, to open stores, attend autograph sessions and charity functions, and get involved in planning the promotion of her forthcoming movie releases. The result had been a whirlwind of activity that had filled the months since Matt and Demon had moved to England, barely allowing Angel time to breathe. She had eventually called a halt and demanded some time off to herself.

As she approached the comm. unit, Angel smiled, remembering her words to Peter.

*"I want a whole week off. No work, no traveling, no visitors, no nothing. I want a week of peace and quiet. I'll get up late, read a pile of books and be a complete slob."*

Peter had managed to rearrange her schedule to give her the time she'd needed, and now on her very first day off, someone was calling her. It had better not be Peter wanting her to work.

Angel had thought about turning the comm. unit off completely, but she hadn't wanted to be totally out of touch in case her sister needed to speak to her. Demon's successful writing career, and the demands it made on her time, seemed to be causing some friction between her and her husband. Neither Demon nor Matt had spoken directly to Angel about their problems, but Angel still wanted to be available to them if they needed her. She just hoped they could work out their issues, and that it wasn't one of them calling her now.

As she called out for the comm. unit to respond, the viewscreen cleared, and the face Angel saw there made her face light up in a broad smile.

"Mal! Oh, it's wonderful to see you! Where are you? Are you on Earth? How did you get this number?"

Her old lover, Ranger Mal Fillion, smiled back at her, his dark blue eyes showing his pleasure at seeing her.

"Yes, I'm on Earth. In fact, I'm nearby and I was hoping you might let me visit with you for a little while. The Rangers have this number as an emergency contact for Matt Gideon, but I don't have an address. I'm sorry to trouble you, but I need a little help and..."

Angel cut him off before he could finish his sentence. "Trouble me? Mal Fillion you get your ass over here at once! Whatever help I can give, you know it's yours." She quickly gave him instructions on how to find the house.

The Ranger looked relieved at her invitation, and after checking that she didn't have guests, cut off the call, saying he'd be there in half an hour.

Angel stared at the blank viewscreen for a moment after the call had ended, tugging at her lip and frowning. Mal hadn't looked well. He'd obviously lost weight since the last time they'd seen each other, although he was still as handsome as ever. More worrying was the look of haunted sadness in his eyes. Something had happened to Mal, and Angel was sure it hadn't been good.

Pushing those thoughts out of her mind, Angel dashed up the stairs to her bedroom, trying to decide what to wear for her reunion with her old lover. Since she had last seen Mal, she had only slept with one other man, and that had been over eighteen months before. That was another memory Angel didn't want to deal with, so she pushed that aside, too, as she pulled clothes out of her wardrobe, discarding one thing after another.

Angel smiled to herself, wondering why she was making the effort. If she was lucky, she'd be stark naked very soon after Mal arrived.

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When the doorbell sounded, Angel smoothed down her skirts, and smiled as she walked across to the door. She wondered if Mal would remember her dress. It was the one she had worn on the night they had first met. Red, clinging, and very low cut, it displayed Angel's curves to perfection. The raven-haired witch had to force herself not to think about how Mal had stripped her when they had taken a ride on the Captain's bike. Looking down at her erect nipples stretching the material of the dress, Angel realized it was too late. She was already hot, wet and ready for another ride with her cowboy.

As she swung open the door and looked up into Mal Fillion's handsome face, Angel barely had time to register how his face looked thinner and his hair longer. She was swept into a passionate embrace and kissed with the thoroughness the Ranger always applied to every task he undertook. For a few moments, Angel's mind was a blank as she lost herself in passion.

When they finally broke for breath, she looked up into Mal's eyes, noting again those amazing thick lashes, and she smiled. "Welcome back, cowboy. Don't leave it so long next time."

Mal smiled without saying a word, then suddenly lunged forward, sweeping Angel up into his arms. He paused for a moment, looking through from the open hallway into the living area beyond, obviously checking to ensure they were alone. Angel flung her arms around his neck, and saw his lips curve into a smile as he asked, "Where's your room?"

Licking her lips, Angel whispered, "Upstairs, second on the left."

Mal took the stairs two at a time, apparently unhampered by the weight of the woman he carried in his arms. Shouldering the door to Angel's bedroom aside, he strode across to the bed, where he dropped Angel onto the soft mattress, then lowered himself to lay alongside her.

The next hour was a haze of heat, passion, sex and satisfaction, as the lovers reminded themselves of how much they had enjoyed each other during their previous encounters. Mal was everything Angel remembered him to be, a wonderful lover, kind, gentle, considerate, but passionate and demanding.

In the aftermath of their lovemaking, Angel lay in Fillion's arms, her head on his shoulder, wondering why she couldn't love this man. She liked him a lot, and certainly enjoyed his attentions, but she didn't love him. Perhaps that was for the best, as Mal was a wanderer, and he could never settle for a life that bound him to a single planet. Or to a single woman.

After a few moments of companionable silence, Angel roused herself to ask, "So what was this help you needed? Or did you just need someone to take a hold of your plow?" Reaching down, Angel ran her fingers across Fillion's cock, giving him a mischievous grin.

Mal laughed softly, taking her hand and kissing it gently as he said, "It's been a while since anyone handled my plow other than me, but that wasn't what I needed help with. When will your sister and her husband get home? I need to speak to Gideon."

Angel sat up abruptly, frowning down at Mal as he lay back in her bed. "Matt and Demon don't live here any more. They moved to England in the summer. Didn't you know that?"

Mal closed his eyes and cursed softly. "No, I didn't." He sat up wearily and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry, Angel, I have to go. If I'd realized Gideon wasn't here, I'd never have come here. I have to get off Earth and back to Minbar, but I can't use public transports, and I can't contact the Rangers. There are people watching every spaceport, and they'll be monitoring all Ranger stations. I'm hoping Gideon can use his Earthforce contacts to get me a lift off this planet. I have to get to him, although I don't know how I'm going to reach England without being spotted." As he spoke he stood and reached for the black shirt and jeans he had abandoned on the floor next to Angel's red dress.

Before he could start to dress, Angel stopped him. "Wait a minute. Why do you have to get off Earth? Who is after you, and where is the Lion? Why can't your ship come and get you?"

Fillion paused as she spoke, and Angel saw his eyes fill with pain as she asked her last question. The Ranger sat down on the edge of the bed with a thump and dropped his head into his hands. He sat silently for a moment, while Angel moved to sit beside him, putting her arm around his shoulder and pulling his head down so she could stroke his hair and comfort him. It was obvious something terrible had happened.

After a few moments, Fillion took a deep breath then lifted his head and said quietly, "It's a long and complicated story, and I won't bore you with the details. A mission on Mars went wrong. I was down on the planet when we were betrayed. The Lion was in orbit, with Teri, Pierre and Andrei waiting for me to call them to come down and collect me. Before I could call, they were shot out of the sky." As he looked up, Angel could see Mal's eyes had filled with tears as he choked out, "They didn't stand a chance. There was nothing I could do."

Angel pulled the Ranger back into her arms and pushed him down onto the bed, laying herself next to him, holding him, comforting him, and soothing his pain. Inevitably, her caresses aroused him again, and soon they were making love, but this time with tenderness and gentleness, comforting each other in the darkness that had fallen.

When they lay quietly again, Mal went on with his story. "I managed to get on a transport off Mars, but I was followed. They nearly caught up with me at LAX spaceport, so I knew I had to find somewhere to hide quickly. I remembered you and your sister lived in Santa Monica, and I thought maybe Gideon could help." He hugged Angel gently where she lay in his arms and went on, "I'm safe as long as I stay here, but if I try to get to England, there's a good chance I'll be caught. And I'm not sure I dare make a call from a private house over a public comm. circuit. They're too easily tapped and traced. I took enough of a risk calling you from a public terminal. Why the hell didn't Gideon notify the Rangers when he moved?"

Angel stroked Mal's cheek and whispered, "Matt has had a lot on his mind. He nearly lost his wife and his daughter earlier this year. Don't blame him, please."

Fillion hugged her again, then they lay silently while Angel tried to think of a way to help Mal.

She was curious to know what information the Ranger was so desperate to get back to Minbar, but she knew enough about his undercover activities to know better than to ask. Angel was also deeply saddened by the news that the Lion and her crew had been lost. She had warm memories of Teri and Andrei, and John Matheson had talked fondly of the fourth member of the Lion crew, Pierre, whom she had never met. She could sense that Mal was still in shock and grief at his loss, and she was desperate to help him. An idea came to her that was spectacular in its simplicity.

Turning to look at her lover, Angel smiled gently and ran her fingers down his face. "Does it have to be Matt who helps you? If I could find someone else who could get you back to Minbar, would that do instead?"

Mal looked at her in surprise. "Do you know anyone with a ship which can travel that distance, who would be willing to risk carrying a passenger as dangerous as me? And who can keep a secret? Come on, Angel, why would anyone do that for me?"

Angel laughed. "The person I'm thinking of might just consider it to be fun. And yes, he has a ship and can keep a secret."

The Ranger narrowed his eyes. "So who is this mysterious helper then?"

The raven-haired witch smiled mischievously again. "Have you ever met a Technomage?"

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With her red silk robe pulled tightly around her, Angel made her call to Alwyn and Sarah's house, mentally crossing her fingers and toes that they would be home. You never quite knew with that pair. At any time they could just take themselves and their son off somewhere, and disappear for weeks on end, reappearing at some time with mysterious smiles, picking up their friendships as if nothing had happened. Angel often wondered what they got up to during these trips, but she'd learned not to ask. She never got an answer anyway.

Angel let out a sigh of relief as the viewscreen lit and Alwyn's face appeared. He glowered out at her, demanding, "Who is it? Go away and leave me alone!" Angel sat back in dismay, then relaxed as Alwyn recognized his caller and went on in a much friendlier tone of voice, "Oh, it's you. That's all right then. Can I help you?"

The Technomage's face shifted from a threatening glower to a charming smile in an instant, and Angel had to laugh. "Who were you expecting, Alwyn? You frightened me half to death with that glare."

Alwyn chuckled softly. "We've been suffering from a spate of telemarketers. I'm rather hoping word has got around to all these pests that this is not a healthy number to call. For some strange reason any telemarketer who gets through ends up afflicted by a mysterious case of boils. Rather nasty boils in rather unmentionable places. As well as some festering pustules on the tongue and in the ears." The Technomage's smile became malicious and Angel recoiled.

"Ouch! Hmm, could you teach me that spell? There are a few people in the industry who would benefit from a dose of boils and pustules."

Alwyn roared with laughter and asked Angel what he could do for her. Angel smiled ruefully at

the viewscreen and said, "Is there any chance you could come over? I don't want to explain over a comm. channel, but I have a favor to ask. Rather a big one. It will involve a journey of a few days, but I don't want to say more until I see you in person."

The Technomage raised an eyebrow. "Intriguing. And why should I do this? Do I not have enough troubles in my life these days, with people demanding my time and energy?"

Angel laughed aloud. "Stop teasing, you old fraud. You know you love your life these days. You have a wonderful home, a doting wife and a beautiful son. The only trouble you have is when you do something to annoy Ishtar and she nips your ear."

As she spoke, the tiny golden dragon appeared from her hiding place among Alwyn's robes, and climbed up his arm to perch on his shoulder. She lifted her head and gave a little chirp, which Angel was sure indicated agreement and approval.

Alwyn laughed and caressed Ishtar's head, rubbing gently behind her eyes, just in the place where Angel knew the little dragon loved to be rubbed. Ishtar's eyes closed and she began to croon her satisfaction.

"Very well. I will arrive tomorrow, prepared for a journey of several days. You have piqued my curiosity, Ms. Denier. I will expect a full explanation in the morning."

As Angel leaned forward and cut the connection, Mal emerged from the shadows of the hallway from where he had observed the entire exchange.

"So that's what a Technomage looks like, is it? And tell me that wasn't a real dragon on his shoulder. It was a hologram, right?"

Angel stood and flowed into Mal's arms, laughing. "Yes, that's what a Technomage looks like, and that's a real dragon. Matt made the mistake of thinking Ishtar was a hologram once, and he got his ear flamed as a result." She reached up and ran her fingers through Mal's hair, caressing his ear. "I like your ears just as they are, so you should be polite to Ishtar when you meet her." She wagged her finger at him in admonishment, then went on, "And I'd better check the kitchen to make sure I have some peanut butter around."

The Ranger looked puzzled for a moment then pulled Angel more tightly into his arms and kissed her thoroughly. When he lifted his head, he touched her cheek with his fingers, whispering, "I wish I didn't have to leave so soon. We only ever seem to get snatched moments together. And every time I see you, I remember how I always want more of you. You remind me of Cleopatra. *She makes hungry where she most satisfies*. I think I'll start calling you Cleo."

Angel laughed and swatted Mal's arm, but before she could reply, his stomach gave a loud and prolonged rumble. Laughing again, Angel pulled Mal toward the kitchen, saying, "It looks like I need to satisfy a different hunger right now. Let's see what we have..."

She trailed off as she opened the door of the refrigerator and saw how empty it was. Turning, she gave Mal an apologetic grin. "Oops. I don't like grocery shopping very much. I don't think there's enough in here for me to cook anything substantial."

Mal laughed and pulled her into his arms again. "You mean you cook? I somehow never expected you to be able to cook."

That earned him another swat. "Of course I can cook!" Angel protested. "I may not do it as often or as well as my sisters, but I can turn out a decent meal if I try."

Mal grinned down at her. "But only if you have something to work with." He waved at the empty refrigerator. "What had you planned to eat tonight?"

Angel grinned sheepishly. "I'd planned to call out for pizza. Would that be OK with you?"

Mal nodded. "That would be fine. But how do you keep that stunning body so slim if you eat pizza all the time?" He slid his hand inside Angel's robe and started rolling her nipple between his fingers, bringing it instantly erect.

Angel pulled Mal's head down into a passionate kiss, and when they parted she grinned up at him. "I take plenty of hard exercise. So you'd better be ready to ride, cowboy, as I'll need to work off those calories."

Heaving a melodramatic sigh, Mal moaned, "Work, work, work. A Ranger's life is full of woe."

For a moment, pain filled his eyes again, but vanished as Angel pulled him down into another kiss. This time they didn't make it to the bedroom. The kitchen table took quite a battering that night.

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"I thought there was some kind of emergency here? Or should I go away and come back again when you're more prepared?"

Angel's eyes flicked open to see Alwyn silhouetted against the dawn light streaming through the window. He stood at the foot of her bed with his hands on his hips, glaring down at her and Mal as they lay tangled in the sheets together. Ishtar sat on the Technomage's shoulder, chirping in what sounded like a thoroughly disgusted fashion.

Grabbing the sheet, Angel sat upright, holding the covers in place with one hand while she rubbed her eyes with the other. "Hello, Alwyn. I thought Matt and Demon had trained you to knock before entering a lady's bedroom. Obviously I was wrong." Angel had heard her brother-in-law's vociferous complaints about Alwyn's tendency to barge into his bedroom without notice on more than one occasion.

The Technomage snorted, indicating his contempt for the idea of knocking on doors, then turned his gaze to Angel's companion. Mal was sitting up in bed, and to Angel's dismay, she saw he had a PPG trained on Alwyn, with his finger covering the trigger.

Wondering where Mal could have possibly concealed the weapon, Angel reached out to push the gun down, just as Alwyn snorted again. "If I wanted to harm you, that wouldn't do you any good you know." With a derisory wave of his hand, the Technomage somehow made the PPG glow with heat, and Mal dropped it quickly, cursing softly as he nursed his burned hand.

"Alwyn!" Angel protested as the heated PPG started to singe her sheets. With another wave of Alwyn's hand, the heat dissipated and the smoke that had started to rise from the bed wafted away.

Reaching down, Angel grabbed her red silk robe from the floor and pulled it around herself quickly. That left Mal with the sheet, which he wrapped around his waist as he rose from the bed, watching with narrowed eyes as Angel approached the Technomage and hugged him.

"Thank you for coming. This is Ranger Mal Fillion, and he needs your help."

Alwyn raised an eyebrow then bowed slightly toward the Ranger. "I am pleased to meet you. The Rangers do valuable work. Now tell me how I can help you."

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Angel stood on the deck with her head resting on Mal's shoulder as he held her tightly. After Alwyn had agreed to take Mal to Minbar, they had dressed hurriedly, and gone downstairs to join the Technomage. To Angel's surprise, breakfast was laid out on the kitchen table, with juice, croissants, fruit and coffee. It all smelled delicious, although it had confused Angel, as she knew that the only ingredient she'd had in the house was the coffee. The ways of Technomages were a wonder to behold.

After a quick meal, Alwyn had announced that it was time to leave, and that his ship was waiting for them on the beach outside, cloaked from observation. Mal had taken Angel's hand as they'd walked out onto the deck, and now he held her close.

The Ranger moved his hand to Angel's chin, lifting her face toward him for one last passionate kiss. When he finally released her, he gave her a sad smile. "Parting is such sweet sorrow."

Angel smiled at the quotation. "We always seem to be saying goodbye, don't we?" She lifted her hand to his face and gently stroked his cheek, rough with stubble as he hadn't had time to shave that morning. "Try to forgive yourself. It wasn't your fault."

Pain flooded Mal's deep blue eyes and he said nothing, just stooping to kiss Angel's forehead, then turning to face the Technomage who had stood waiting for them, unusually patient.

Angel watched as the two men strode down to the beach, and disappeared inside the cloaking field surrounding Alwyn's ship. She smiled to herself, thinking that it was fortunate Alwyn had arrived so early, before any runners were out on the sands.

A rush of air whipped Angel's raven hair around her face as the invisible ship lifted from the beach and departed. With one last sad smile, the witch turned back into the house, wondering if her Ranger would ever return again.

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## The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four V

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