

VILLAINY PREVIEW STORY # 6

Trapped in Amber

By Jaleta Clegg

Sargandon brushed lint from his best robe. The counter spells woven into the black velvet crackled with power. He smiled, his thin lips curving upwards in unaccustomed movements. He slipped the robe over his head, smoothing it over his lean hips.

He posed in front of his full-length mirror, twisting to see every angle. Yes, the red lining glowed like blood, the black drank in light. He stroked the gold embroidery lining the collar and sleeves.

“Too gaudy?”

“Ye look like a vision of evilness, a true powerful sorcerer of the blackest arts.” His faithful henchman, Blaine, squinted with his one eye. He smiled as he gathered up scattered articles of clothing, draping them over his arm. “A dream of loveliness, that’s what ye are.”

“What did you say?” Sargandon eyed him, suspicion in his dark eyes.

“Er.” Blaine licked his lips, attempting to remember his last comment. He’d been thinking of Maude, down at the tavern. Not wise to let your concentration lapse around an evil overlord. “I quake in my boots at yer horribleness and decrepitude.”

Sargandon flicked one hand. Magic seared the air around Blaine. The old, half-blind henchman squealed as he transformed into an old, half-blind squirrel.

“Choose nuts more wisely than you chose words.” Sargandon returned to his preening.

The squirrel watched him with a baleful eye.

The evil sorcerer smoothed gel over his thick, black hair, slicking it back. He frowned at the effect. “Everything must be perfect today. I will not defeat my arch rival with bad hair.” He licked one finger and sculpted his hair into waving curls. He nodded, pleased. His hair moved like a helmet, glued into a single mass.

He leaned close to the mirror, examining each pore on his face. He poked at a red blotch next to his left nostril. A single word of power and the spot vanished. His fingers pinched, plucking a stray hair from his eyebrow.

Sargandon raised his arms high, flourishing his wide sleeves dramatically. He watched his reflection, twisting to examine his back side. “Blaine! My belt!”

The one-eyed squirrel chittered. The noise resembled curses.

Sargandon rolled his eyes. “Oh, very well. You are forgiven. But do not make such a slip again.” He snapped his fingers.

Power surged across the room. The squirrel stretched, changing into a one-eyed hunchback. He leered at Sargandon. “#%\$*!” He spat on the floor.

“I said, fetch my belt. Or would you rather live as a goat?”

Blaine, a foul caricature of his former self, lurched across the room. He slammed open a closet door, retrieving a twisted rope of silver and gold spangled with crystals.

Sargandon looped the belt around his slim waist then smiled at his reflection. “Perfect,” he murmured. “My triumph shall soon be complete. That wretched wizard shall learn the full extent of my powers.”

He delicately lifted a knob of amber, holding it to the light. It glowed the color of honey. The weak imbecile, Gurandor, said amber was too delicate, too dangerous for magic. Amber twisted time. No wizard should touch it. Their Code forbade its use in spells. Cowards, all of them, afraid of the sheer power locked in the golden stones.

Sargandon laughed. Their silly wizard rules did not bind him. Decades of careful work and study yielded this precious stone, an impossible melding of amber, time, and power. Its creation proved that he, Sargandon, was the greatest sorcerer to ever breathe. Soon, Gurandor the Ninny would be forced to acknowledge him supreme. The most powerful wizard would bow and concede defeat, forced to his knees by Sargandon’s undeniable superiority. He laughed at the glorious vision.

He clutched the stone in his fist as he strode from the room.

“Gurandor, my arch rival, today is the day you reap your just desserts.”

“Does that mean you’ve brought cream jellies?” Gurandor carefully shifted his

bubbling potion to the back of his work counter. Hours wasted, if it were spilled.

“You mock me, the Lord High Sorcerer Sargandon?”

“If it will make you feel better.” Gurandor wiped sticky hands on the stained apron around his waist.

“Your impudence will no longer be tolerated. Let the duel begin!” Sargandon flared his wide sleeves, flashing the red satin lining. The gold trim along the edge sparkled, adding nicely to the effect.

“Not in my work room, please.” Gurandor frowned. “How did you get in? My warding spells are unbreakable. You shouldn’t have been able to surprise me.”

“Silly wizard, always trusting your spells. You were not paying enough attention to your housekeeper. She was easy to bribe.” Sargandon buffed his manicured nails on his black robe. “You’re getting sloppy, Gurandor.”

Gurandor sighed. “Bribing the help is not allowed under the Wizard’s Code.”

“You forget, I’m not a whiny, impotent wizard. I’m the Lord of Evil, Darkness Incarnate, Supreme Overlord of the Black Arts. I don’t have to follow your foppish Code. I can do exactly as I please.” He smiled his best evil smirk.

“I do hate it when you put on airs. You will have to pay the piper eventually. How much did corrupting Elspeth cost you?”

“One potion of youth, beauty, and sex appeal. A trifle, really. You should pick your underlings more carefully.”

“You’re one to talk. You hire incompetent buffoons, like Yurt who completely destroyed your Castle of Doom when he attempted cleaning the potion lab.”

Sargandon sniffed. If Yurt hadn’t perished in the blast, he would have lived the rest of his life as a rabbit in a cage of hungry weasels. “I never liked the floor plan anyway. My Fortress of Indescribable Torment is much more to my liking.”

Gurandor held a bottle to the light, examining it closely. “Your fortress is a drafty heap of stone, if you want my opinion.”

“I don’t want your opinion. You live in a piggish hovel. You wouldn’t know good architecture if it fell on you.”

“At least I don’t get chills walking to the privy. Did you plan to put them on the wrong side of the drawbridge?”

“A minor detail.”

“And what do you do when you’re under siege? Use the kitchen pots? The smell must be horrific.” Gurandor ladled green syrup carefully into the jar.

“I’ve never been under siege. No one would dare challenge me. I’m too powerful. Today I prove it, once and for all.” Sargandon cracked his knuckles. “Enough chitchat. Shall we begin? Where was I? Oh, yes. Gurandor, today you meet your doom!”

“Would you mind terribly if I bottled my potion first? I’ve been slaving over it for months.” Gurandor held the bottle out. “It needs just another few minutes to finish cooling.”

“No.”

“Bother. Couldn’t you wait? I do so hate wasting time. The recipe takes days to cook.”

“Stop whining and prepare for your ultimate defeat.”

“Can we duel out in the main hall? Just this once?”

Sargandon shook his head, his black hair moving as a single mass. He cocked his hands, fingers twisted in the opening moves of a spell.

Gurandor tried one last time. “Tradition dictates duels be fought in the main hall of the castle, not in the work room. Think of the magical backlash if your spell misses.”

“I do not miss! Due warning has been given. Tradition has been satisfied.”

“All right, then. Give me the speech about my imminent demise.” Gurandor crossed his arms, leaning one hip on the workbench.

Sargandon chuckled. “You won’t die, Gurandor. I have a much more devious end for you.”

“You’re going to talk me to death with bad clichés.”

Sargandon’s smirk died, replaced by an angry frown. “You will pay for your insolence, Gurandor.” He cast the traditional opening spell of Magic Missile.

The bolt arced across the room. Gurandor nonchalantly flapped one hand, absorbing the dart. He twitched the fingers of his other hand. A fiery snake flashed into being, slithering towards Sargandon.

The Dark Lord stomped on its head with his Boots of Pain. The snake squealed before exploding in a cascade of sparks. Sargandon clapped his hands then spread his

arms wide, his sleeves sweeping the remnants of magical snake into the air. Sparkling bits caught in the vortex he sent spinning towards Gurandor.

The white wizard snapped his fingers, calling up his invisible shield. The vortex howled as it split to the sides. Bottles and jars whirled on the raging wind, slamming into the stone walls. Glass smashed. Spells exploded in colored rainbows of raw magic. Reality shimmered. Strange shapes crept through the fog of power as it dissipated.

“Drat! Fifteen years work wasted! I warned you, Sargandon!” Gurandor removed a vial from a cord around his neck. He popped the stopper then poured the white powder into the air, his voice raised in an archaic chant.

Sargandon snickered in his twisted black beard. “You are a fool, Gurandor. Not even Vortigern’s Blindness can save you now. I have a new spell.” He raised his fist, slowly opening it to reveal the lump of amber.

Gurandor stopped mid-spell, eyes wide. “You harnessed the powers of amber? Impossible!”

Sargandon threw back his head and laughed. “Your fate, wizard! Trapped in amber for all time!”

“You’re a fool, Sargandon. Magic and amber don’t mix. Too dangerous. You’ll pay for your presumptuous and imprudent act. Tampering with time is forbidden.”

Sargandon tossed the amber into the air.

The stone caught the light as it tumbled, glowing like autumn fires. The spell stretched into the air, lazily spreading as the stone fell. Gurandor stared, mesmerized by the magic, his mouth open wide. The amber touched his forehead, clinging and spreading like syrup, until it encased the wizard in a thick skin of resin.

Sargandon smiled in satisfaction as he finished the spell. The amber hardened. Sargandon tapped on the shell. Gurandor’s disbelieving gaze showed plainly. No hint of reaction or pain, no sign of breathing fogged the amber.

“You shall remain for all time, locked in your prison, preserved as a trophy of my superior intellect and magical skill. I have triumphed. You are defeated, Gurandor the Weak. You shall watch, impotently, as I rule the world.” He clenched his fist, thrusting it skyward.

Gurandor’s expression remained frozen.

Sargandon lowered his fist. “Drat. You can’t hear me. You’re trapped in time. No matter.” He stroked the silky surface. “You’d look marvelous in my front parlor next to the Iron Maiden. I’ll fetch my henchmen to carry you forth.”

His dark robe swept dramatically through the lingering magical snake as he strode from the work room.

Sargandon spread his fingers on the wide stone sill. He stared unseeingly at the desolate landscape of burnt villages and dying swamps. The stench of rotting vegetation filled every sluggish breath of air. Sargandon sighed.

“Beltar, I’m bored,” he complained.

“Yes, lord,” Beltar lisped. He grinned mindlessly as he flattened himself on the mildewed stone floor.

“What is there to do?” Sargandon pursed his lips, his fingers tapping on the stone.

“You could burn a village,” Beltar suggested.

“I’ve burnt every village at least twice already this year. It’s no fun when only one peasant limps, screaming, from his home. The rest fled south a decade ago.”

“Summon a dragon?”

“Last winter, five of them. They complained about the lack of royalty to eat.”

“Attack the castle!” Beltar scratched absently at his armpits.

“This is the only castle still standing for a thousand leagues in every direction.” Sargandon’s fingers paused. “I could destroy it and build a new one.” He shook his head. “I beheaded all my architects after they designed this Fortress. No one dares study architecture anymore and I’m all thumbs when it comes to sketching evil fortresses.”

Beltar sucked his lip. “Rain of fire? Lightning storms? Evil gargoyles?”

“Child’s play.”

“Animated puppets? Doughnuts of Destruction?”

Sargandon raised one carefully plucked eyebrow.

“Pastry power. You told me about it once.” Beltar nodded, his greasy hair

bobbing around his face. “That new spell you were inventing.”

“The spell had unintended consequences. It took me months to hunt down and destroy the nasty things.” He shuddered. “Do you have any idea what a man looks like after bismarcks have fed on his flesh? Some arts are too dark even for me. No, what I really need, Beltar is an arch enemy, a rival, someone to give me a bit of a challenge before I destroy him.”

Beltar scraped wax from his ear. “Aren’t any wizards left. You destroyed all of them, great master. Incinerated them with your brilliance, that you did.”

Sargandon twisted his fingers through his gelled beard. “Not all of them. Where did I put that amber statue?”

“The one with the man inside who’s screaming like he saw his own ghost? Down in the storage pit.”

“Fetch him forth, Beltar. I shall devise a counter spell. I shall release Gurandor and defeat him again.” Sargandon rubbed his hands together, an evil smile twisting his lips.

“I must say, your darkship, it warms my shrunken little heart to see you excited about something.”

“Put him there, by the fountain.” Sargandon studied the effect. “No, he clashes with the tiles. Perhaps by the window.”

Beltar grunted and strained as he heaved the enormous lump of amber across the marble floor.

“Careful, you fool! Even magical amber can break. I’d hate to have him split in half before I can wake him.”

Beltar settled the amber near the window. He polished dust from the surface with his tattered surcoat. The face inside caught the light, glowing golden red in the sickly sunlight. Gurandor’s mouth still hung open, frozen in that moment of time when the spell was cast.

Sargandon brushed his hand across the smooth stone. “Gurandor, my old enemy. You haven’t changed a bit. Four hundred thirty-seven years, six months, fourteen days. It will be just like old times again. It may take a few years for me to find the correct spell. I wouldn’t want to release you just to find you dead. I want you alive. You’ll be patient, won’t you?” The Lord of Evil cracked his knuckles. Power surged through the room.

Beltar scampered for the kitchens to hide.

The amber cracked, like ice shattering. Gurandor’s stiff body toppled to the marble floor.

Sargandon prodded him with a bony finger, his face creased with concern. “Frozen in time, not dead in amber. I know I spoke correctly.” He thumped Gurandor’s bony chest.

Gurandor sucked in a breath, gasping like a fish as he arched his back. He coughed, spraying amber dust, before collapsing.

Sargandon stood, cackling evilly. “Gurandor, my arch nemesis. You have no idea how long I have waited for this revenge.”

Gurandor pushed to his hands and knees, wheezing. “Seems like only a moment.” His voice cracked and grated, like an old man.

“Would you care for a cup of tea? I’ve waited for so long, I can be patient a while longer.” Sargandon snapped his fingers, almost dancing in his excitement. His robe swirled across the marble floor, gold trim sparkling.

Beltar scurried across the room, tea cups clattering on a tray clutched in his sweaty hands.

Gurandor used a nearby chair to pull himself to a sitting position. “Tea would be delightful. I’m parched.”

Beltar set the tray on the floor. He busied himself pouring tea, adding the appropriate sugar and cream. He handed one dainty cup to Gurandor, the other to Sargandon.

“It has been so long, my old arch-nemesis. How are you feeling?” Sargandon

sipped tea, one pinky extended.

“Like I’ve been trapped in a giant lump of amber. But I’m recovering.”

Gurandor sipped, then pulled a face. “I believe your cream has soured, Sargandon.”

“It’s sheep cream. The cows all died about two hundred years ago when I was experimenting with magical plagues. I sometimes regret that incident. More sugar helps.” Sargandon searched Gurandor’s face, seeking signs of his great power. The duel would disappoint if it were too easy. He wanted a challenge, a real struggle.

Beltar squatted on the floor between them, humming off key as he rearranged the tea service.

Gurandor set his cup aside. “I see your taste in servants hasn’t changed. But you have. How long has it been?”

“Four hundred fifty two—What do you mean, I’ve changed?”

“How often do you dye your hair, what little is still left?”

Sargandon’s hand crept to cover the balding spot on the back of his head. “My hair is the same color it always has been,” he lied. He’d used every youth spell he knew, and a few he invented, to cover the gray.

“You’ve put on a few pounds, too. But I hear that’s pretty much inevitable for older men.”

Sargandon sucked in his gut, running his other hand over his velvet robe. His belt had been a bit tighter lately but he blamed that on lack of exercise. He’d been so involved in freeing Gurandor, he simply hadn’t taken the time.

Gurandor pushed to his feet, holding to the arm of the chair. “You’re getting old, Sargandon.”

“I am not! Sorcerers do not age as normal men.” Sargandon stroked his beard. It was still full, dark, and nicely pointed. It was also a fake, but Gurandor couldn’t possibly tell. Nobody could. Sargandon’s eyes strayed to his reflection in the picture window at the front of the room. Were those lines? “I’m as young as I ever was. My vast powers are untouched.”

“You’re fooling yourself. Time is showing, Sargandon.” Gurandor flexed his fingers. “I, on the other hand, haven’t aged a day, thanks to your amber spell. Shall we begin?”

“Begin what?” Sargandon frowned, then stopped. Frowning might deepen the

wrinkles.

Gurandor straightened, stepping away from the chair. He shook dust from his robe. It sparkled like gold in the air. “The duel. It is why you broke the spell, isn’t it? Or is your memory slipping, old man?”

“I am not old!” Sargandon stamped his foot.

“Gray hair, paunchy belly, wrinkles on your face, can’t remember what you ate for lunch—definitely signs of old age.”

“Now you’re taunting me.”

Gurandor smiled.

“Prepare to die!” Sargandon raised his hands, his robe flaring dramatically.

The spell arced towards Gurandor, a line of orange fire. Gurandor blocked it easily, deflecting it out the window. Glass shattered. A nearby swamp detonated with a dull thud.

Sargandon staggered, drained by the simple spell. “Breaking the amber spell must have taken more of my power than I thought. Perhaps we should reschedule for tomorrow.”

Gurandor glanced out the window, watching the swamp gas burn. He wrinkled his nose at the stench of rotten eggs. “You’ve made a right mess of things. It will take me years to straighten it back out. No, I think we should fight this out, right here and right now. You challenged me, remember? Or is your memory slipping with age?”

Sargandon growled and flung another bolt across the room. It spattered harmlessly on the wall. He flexed his hand. Sparks fizzed from his thumb, an amber colored cloud sucking magic from his soul. “What spell is this? What have you done to me?”

“Nothing. You’ve done it to yourself, mixing amber with magic. I told you the consequences would be heavy.”

“Reverse it or I shall be forced to destroy you!” Sargandon bunched his fist, gathering his magic, only he had none left. The amber dust drained him, pulling his stolen years away. He staggered to his knees, unable to stand. The spells preserving him faded one by one as his magic died.

Gurandor shook his head. “You did us both a favor, you know, when you trapped

me. I'm still young, while you've grown old."

"You've tricked me."

"You did this to yourself."

"Tell me the spell that defeats me." Gray and white rippled over Sargandon's hair, bleaching away the artificial black.

"It's simple, really. You still haven't figured it out?"

Sargandon toppled to the floor, wrinkles sagging. He feebly pawed at Gurandor with one liver-spotted hand. "What power do you hold?"

Gurandor leaned close. "The one you gifted me: Time."

Sargandon sighed his last breath, eyes sliding closed. He sprawled on the floor, an ancient caricature of his former self.

Gurandor pulled the tattered velvet robe over Sargandon's face. "Time defeats us all in the end. It's a good thing your spell preserved me so well. This mess is going to take years to correct. Why must evil sorcerers always foul their own nests?"

He strode from the Fortress of Ultimate Evil into warm sunlight. The morass of magically created swamps showed the beginnings of dry land as Sargandon's power faded. Gurandor planted his fists on his hips as he surveyed the charred villages.

"At least you gave me plenty of time to set things right." He resolutely rolled up his sleeves as he strode towards the nearest village.

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Look for this and 22 other exciting stories in the upcoming Hall Brothers Entertainment anthology **VILLAINY**, available June 9th.

