

The infernal rhythm, ever-present and yet almost imperceptibly quiet, hammered into the wizard's skull as he drummed his fingers in time to it upon his desk. Slivers of black crystal rattled slightly as if in response to his expressed frustration, their clanks a jarring offset to the spectral sound.

"It's not time for Szass Tam to arrive, Firefinger. It's too early. Tick's assassination should have offset the foul lich's interests sufficiently!" The broad-shouldered wizard crumpled the vellum missive and threw it at the wall. "I haven't had time to bend these enchantments. There's more to do, more to finish; we don't have the resources" he bit off his words with an exasperated sigh.

The ambassador, standing some space away near the doorway, took a deep breath and strode to the zulkir's desk. "Zulkir Ma... might I suggest an alternative proposal? You've made progress in using the recovered fragments in controlling the elemental rifts. This is competing magic for certain, and I believe that Szass Tam is merely seeking control of those fonts of power. I mean no offense, but Mulmaster's purpose here in the north is – in the dread lich's eyes – merely as a container for these disparate magics. What if, and please bear with me here, we stayed our course? We welcome him into the city and explain the declaration of war as-given by those champions as nothing more than their perceived opportunity to smite the nose of the Thayan empire. We provide full disclosure: the crystals that were recovered from the prison of the aspect of Kyuss can be used to bind the elemental rifts, but if overloaded are guaranteed to smite all living creatures in the area? These champions will be arriving in significant numbers soon – Szass Tam's travel plans aren't exactly secret in this case – and should we spin this into an opportunity to busy him with striking against heroes, we can ensure that our other efforts are secreted away..."

Dar'lon Ma gazed at Ambassador Firefinger for a long moment. The wizard ran his fingers along his bald pate and sighed, then rose to his feet. "Ambassador, you are a curious creature. This has merit. A significant cost, yes, but the richest rewards often come from the biggest gambles."

The zulkir's smile was broadly chilling.

"Tell no one of this. Zulkir Tam arrives in two days, and we have many things to do."