

“Zulkir Ma.”

The words slammed into Dar’lon’s ears. The voice was grating and hollow, and entirely unwelcome in all ways. Slowly, the broad-shouldered turned his bald head to gaze at the lich that now stood in his doorway.

“Zulkir Ma. I have arrived. Your city is in disarray, your wizards are unfocused, and your grip here is tenuous at best.”

Dar’lon cleared his throat and began, “Gracious salutations, Zulkir Tam, I was – “ The bald wizard felt an arcane force close around his throat and he was unceremoniously thrown to the floor of his own office.

“You will listen, Zulkir Ma, and you will observe. You trend towards disappointment. I have arrived in Mulmaster and I will demonstrate just what a ruler does when his subjects are allowed such worthless, impotent thoughts as ‘rebellion’ or ‘war’.” The lich spat the words out in disgust, and his empty eye sockets aimed at Dar’lon as he squirmed on the floor. “I will show you what happens just this once. And you would do well to take note of the consequences.”

The lich waved his ancient hand and the arcane bonds around Dar’lon’s neck and limbs loosened. The scent of perfume washed over the room, slightly floral and with a hint of pine, as the undead wizard continued, “I have established my own wards throughout Mulmaster. It was once known as the City of Danger, and my magic – my kiss, as I call it – will reinforce this. Observe!”

A flickering, two-dimensional viewing portal sprang into existence on the floor at Dar’lon’s feet. In it, two red-robed acolytes stood shoulder-to-shoulder and grasped slender crystal rods while chanting at a raging rift of elemental fire. Looks of concern washed over their faces, as if concentration was becoming more difficult; these looks changed to alarm and then exhaustion as the seconds dragged on. Shortly, they slumped to the ground, drained of energy and will, and the rift grew steadily in size. The acolytes, unable to move out of the way, were consumed entirely and Szass Tam dispelled the portal.

“*Szass Tam’s necrotic kiss*, I call it. Every living being in Mulmaster, save for those that I have deemed worthy of immunity, is now afflicted. Those that will not swear their undying loyalty will serve as undying fodder as I see fit. There is no cure, no magic, no ritual that will undo it, for it is bound to me. They will find no solidarity in their allies; the greatest weakness of the so-called champions that even now are arriving in our city is simply that they are still alive. It is an issue that can easily be remedied.

I pray that you will prove your worth in the coming conflict, Dar’lon. Do not make me change my mind.”

The lich let the words linger for a moment, then turned and stalked out of the room. Dar’lon coughed and rubbed his neck, then struggled to his feet. The stakes of the impending gambit had undeniably been raised, and panic had begun to set in.