

# LORE TO SLEEP TO -- D&D: SZASS TAM

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## A MAGE SOMEWHERE IN THE EAST

In 1986, TSR asked the designer Jeff Grubb to look into a Canadian contributor to *Dragon* magazine. Ed Greenwood had been sending the magazine material from a world he called the Forgotten Realms since 1979. TSR needed a new default setting for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*. Gary Gygax had lost control of the company in 1985, and with him went the claim of his own Greyhawk to that role. According to Greenwood's own account, as recorded on Wikipedia, Grubb asked him, "Do you just make this stuff up as you go, or do you really have a huge campaign world?" Greenwood answered yes to both.

Szass Tam came out of the second half of that answer. Greenwood had been placing his articles in *Dragon* for years. "Down-to-earth divinity" ran in issue 54 in October 1981. The magic-item series "Pages from the Mages" began in issue 62 in June 1982 and ran in five instalments through issue 100 in August 1985, with encore pieces in 1990 and 1992. Over his career he published more than 200 articles in *Dragon* and *Polyhedron*. One secondary source treats "Pages from the Mages" as the point where the Realms began to show through in the magazine. The research behind this documentary found no *Dragon* article before 1987 that mentions Thay or the Red Wizards, and no issue that names Szass Tam.

That hasn't stopped claims that one exists. In March 2023, when the *Honor Among Thieves* casting was announced, the blog The Wertzone wrote that Szass Tam had been "mentioned in *Dragon* articles of the early 1980s" and in the original 1987 campaign box before his larger roles. It also said Greenwood first wrote about him in a short story from "the late 1960s." Other summaries give 1977, or the late 1970s. No issue number, page or story title backs any of these. The most useful statement comes from Greenwood, quoted on both Wikipedia and the Forgotten Realms Wiki: "Szass Tam first 'really' fell into my forebrain in a story I wrote in 1977, though his name and the idea he was a mighty powerful mage dwelling somewhere in the east, who had something to do with undead, were floating around in my Realms writings a decade earlier." The story is unpublished and its title unknown. What the quotation does establish is that the character began as Greenwood's private idea before any TSR product. It also gives his core traits from the start: he's powerful, he's in the east, and he has to do with the dead.

TSR's reasons for choosing the Realms are recorded more clearly than Greenwood's for inventing Szass Tam. The company saw the setting as more open-ended than *Dragonlance*, whose novels and modules followed one

epic storyline. Once TSR decided to publish a second edition of *AD&D*, it took the Realms as a ready-made world. An open-ended setting needs regions where adventures can happen without a storyline to follow, and it needs villains that more than one writer can use. Thay turned out to be one of those regions.

Its first official appearance was in the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Set*, published by TSR in July 1987 and credited to Ed Greenwood with Jeff Grubb and Karen S. Martin. Fans call it the grey box. It held two 96-page books, the *Cyclopedia of the Realms* and the *DM's Sourcebook of the Realms*, along with four maps and two clear hex overlays. Two of the overview maps ran from the Moonshae Isles in the west to "the land of Thay in the east." In the setting's first published geography, Thay was the far edge of the map.

Wikipedia's article on the Red Wizards of Thay credits Greenwood with creating them and dates their first appearance to this box. Two other claims circulate and are wrong. A listicle on TheGamer says the Red Wizards were "first introduced in the second edition," and the Dump Stat Adventures blog dates them to *Forgotten Realms Adventures* in 1990. Both conflict with products from 1987 and 1988. The same blog also says the early Red Wizards drew power from an unnamed artifact lost in the Time of Troubles, but no primary source for that turned up. The research doesn't show what the grey box says about Thay in any detail, or whether it names the zulkirs or Szass Tam. Because his first appearance is usually given as a 1988 book, he probably isn't in it, though nobody has confirmed that from the text.

The creature type Szass Tam would belong to already had a history in the game by then. "Lich" comes from the Old English word for a corpse. Clark Ashton Smith used it for any corpse, animated or not, in "The Empire of the Necromancers" in *Weird Tales* in 1936. Gygas said he based the D&D lich on Gardner Fox's 1969 story "The Sword of the Sorcerer." The monster entered the game in *Supplement I: Greyhawk* by Gygas and Rob Kuntz. That booklet carries a 1975 date and was distributed in early 1976, so the mid-1970s is the safe description. *Supplement III: Eldritch Wizardry* in 1976 introduced Vecna. The first *Monster Manual* in 1977 gave the lich a fuller entry, and Gygas's *Tomb of Horrors* in 1978 made the lich Acererak the unseen master of a trap-filled tomb.

By 1988, then, D&D had spent about ten years presenting liches in two ways: as legends, like Vecna, or as the owners of dungeons, like Acererak. They were solitary and stayed put. What stands out about Szass Tam, and this is an interpretation rather than a stated design goal, is that he was a lich on a governing council. He had a vote in a living country's politics, rivals among the living, and an administration below him. That arrangement

drives most of the later changes to the character.

Thay's in-world founding story places the country in a longer history. The dates for when these details were first published aren't established, so they belong to later lore. Around 922 DR, a group of Mulan wizards led by Ythazz Buvaar rose against the God-Kings of Mulhorand and sacked the provincial capital, Delhumide. At the Battle of Thazalhar, the conjurer Jorgmacdon summoned the demon lord Eltab to fight for the rebels. The Mulhorandi army was routed, and Eltab was weakened so badly that the Red Wizards trapped him. That imprisoned demon became the center of Szass Tam's first starring scheme in 1995.

## DREAMS OF THE RED WIZARDS AND THE ZULKIR OF NECROMANCY, 1988

**S**zass Tam's first confirmed published appearance is in *FR6 Dreams of the Red Wizards*, a TSR sourcebook for first-edition *AD&D*. Steve Perrin wrote it. He was known as a co-designer of *RuneQuest*, and reviewers mention that background. Clyde Caldwell painted the cover; his portfolio lists it as oils, sixteen by twenty-four and a quarter inches, done in 1988. The book has 64 pages, a large colour map of Thay and an outer folder. Its product code is 9235 and its ISBN 0-88038-615-0. The retrospective site *Vintage RPG* gives November 1988 as the release month and names Valerie Valusek as the interior artist. The research found no other source for either detail.

*Vintage RPG* also offers the only account of how the book was written: TSR gave Perrin Greenwood's notes on Thay and the Red Wizards, and Perrin took them in his own direction. The site doesn't cite an interview, so this remains one reviewer's report. If it's correct, the first published Szass Tam was already a joint creation, with Greenwood's name and concept and Perrin's working version.

Wikipedia describes the book as covering Thay's government, personalities, economy, cities, people and wilderness "for an *AD&D* campaign of any size or level," with new spells and magic items unique to the Red Wizards and a four-colour map. About ten pages go to those spells. The book also touches on the neighbouring countries of Aglarond, Rashemen and Thesk, which later books kept grouping with Thay.

The government *FR6* describes explains why Szass Tam became useful to later writers. Tharchions, regional

governors, run the country day to day. They defer to the zulkirs, the highest Red Wizards, whenever those choose to step in. The zulkirs aren't united. They often work against each other so that none gets too powerful. As the Forgotten Realms Wiki summarises the structure, there are eight zulkirs, one for each school of magic, and together they form the Council of Zulkirs, which rules the Red Wizards and, through them, Thay. The rivalry is built into the system. Every zulkir is a possible usurper and every other zulkir a possible obstacle.

Szass Tam appears as the Zulkir of Necromancy. The Forgotten Realms Wiki cites page 52 as his first appearance, and several derivative summaries repeat that page, but none of the research checked it against a copy. He is one of Thay's rulers, one of the eight, and a lich. Several fan and wiki sources describe him as a "24th level Magic-User of the School of Necromancy," Neutral Evil. That is probably the FR6 figure, but it hasn't been confirmed against a scan. "Magic-User" was the first-edition class name, and "School of Necromancy" fits the book's structure of one zulkir per school. Another line circulates online, "Lich Male Necromancer 29" with Armour Class 0 and 64 hit points. Its source is unknown, and it looks like a later conversion. It shouldn't be attributed to 1988.

What does that mean in play? In 1988 Szass Tam was a statred character in a regional gazetteer. He was one very high-level spellcaster among eight, with numbers a Dungeon Master could use if needed. No adventure in the book was built to end with his defeat. He was part of the setting, a feature of the region that player characters might meet, avoid or be crushed by.

Much of what fans now associate with him came later. Wiki summaries credit him with command of the Legion of Bone and "Cyric's Legion," and name rival zulkirs such as Aznar Thrul of Evocation and Lauzoril of Enchantment. Those details come from later books. "Cyric's Legion" can't be from FR6, because Cyric only became a god after the Avatar crisis of 1989. The same caution applies to his biography. The Forgotten Realms Wiki gives his birth as 1104 DR, his rise to zulkir as 1157 DR and his transformation into a lich as 1159 DR, which one account ties to a failed invasion of Rashemen. All of that is in-world chronology from later sources.

There's little contemporary reception. The research found no review of FR6 in *Dragon* or *White Wolf* from 1988 or 1989. Wikipedia's Red Wizards article quotes Keith H. Eisenbeis in *Shadis*: the Red Wizards are "a great set of enemies [...] Powerful and power hungry, these bad guys can make the players into great heroes." The product and issue he was reviewing aren't identified, so the quotation can only be attributed through Wikipedia. On Goodreads, the reader David Sarkies wrote that Perrin "gives a good explanation of how a whole country

can, in fact, be evil, from the Zulkirs to the middle class to the masses of slaves."

Vintage RPG's August 2025 retrospective was more doubtful. Despite Perrin's pedigree, the reviewer found that the Red Wizards "don't really leap off the page," calling them "low-rent riffs" on Robert E. Howard's Stygians. That comparison is the reviewer's reading, not a documented influence. The reviewer called Valusek's interiors fairly unexciting. Szass Tam still stood out among the book's characters as someone with "a cool name" who is an "arch-lich bent on conquering his neighbors." The reviewer added that his status didn't fill them with dread. The critic most dismissive of the book still remembered him, which suggests how little he had to work with in 1988: a name, a title, a level and a vague aim to expand.

The research is thin on the next few years. Search summaries of Wikipedia list *Forgotten Realms Adventures* (TSR, 1990) by Jeff Grubb and Ed Greenwood, the second-edition update of the Realms, as including Szass Tam with statistics. The details couldn't be checked. The next changes that can be documented came through fiction and a boxed set.

## SECOND EDITION: FROM RIVAL ZULKIR TO WOULD-BE CONQUEROR

**T**he monster most closely tied to Szass Tam in the second-edition era is the dread warrior. The *Forgotten Realms* Wiki calls it his creation: an enhanced undead made from a warrior's body soon after death. It still looks like the person it was, but its skin shrivels and its eyes glow a feral yellow. The *AD&D* Complete Compendium entry agrees and adds the rules. It has to be made from a fighter of at least 4th level who has been dead less than a day, and it keeps at least minimal intelligence. In the setting's timeline, Tam developed the *animate dread warrior* spell in 1352 DR and began building an army with it.

The creature's first printing isn't settled. Search listings connect it to *MC3 Monstrous Compendium Volume Three: Forgotten Realms Appendix* (TSR, 1989), a set of 64 loose-leaf pages with four colour cardstock dividers, but nobody confirmed the entry there. The verified second-edition entry is by Anthony Pryor, in the *Monstrous Compendium* booklet of the 1995 boxed set *Spellbound*, page 4, according to the *Forgotten Realms* Wiki. The dread warrior matters because it gave Tam a specific product of his craft. A necromancer who makes

a signature soldier is thinking about armies.

The revised second-edition *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* of 1993, credited to Ed Greenwood, Julia Martin and Jeff Grubb, included a 128-page "A Grand Tour of the Realms." It would be expected to cover Thay, but no specific Szass Tam text or page from it was verified, so it can't be used here.

His first documented novel appearance is in *Red Magic* by Jean Rabe, published by TSR in December 1991 as the third book of the Harpers series. The Harpers send three agents into Thay, the druid Galvin, the centaur Wynter and the sorceress Brenna, posing as slaves and slavers. They are investigating Maligor, the zulkir of Alteration. Maligor wants to rule Thay alone. He plans to corner the country's gold mines, remove the other zulkirs and destroy his nemesis, Szass Tam. The cover copy calls Tam "the most powerful of the Red Wizards" and a "lich lord."

Szass Tam isn't the novel's villain. The Forgotten Realms Wiki says Maligor is stopped by "an unlikely alliance of three Harper agents and Szass Tam, Zulkir of necromancy." FR6's council of rivals produced this first story: when one zulkir grabs for power, the strongest of the others has reason to side, briefly, with outsiders who want the same zulkir stopped. In his first appearance in prose, the lich works with heroes against a common enemy.

Reviews of the novel have been poor. The Let's Read TSR review found Maligor a standard evil overlord with no backstory and few traits beyond "calculating and cruel," and called the character interactions "complete cardboard." The Bookstooge blog gave the book two stars out of five. Some readers found its picture of Thayan society, and the constant plotting among the Red Wizards, reasonably interesting. More than fifteen years later, a review of Richard Lee Byers's work used Rabe's handling of Tam as the low point to compare against.

The biggest second-edition change came in June 1995 with *Spellbound: Featuring the Realms of Thay, Aglarond, and Rashemen*, product code TSR 1121. Anthony Pryor designed it. He wrote extensively for TSR from 1991 to 1996. The Forgotten Realms Wiki's citation credits Michele Carter and Doug Stewart as editors. Despite its title, it is a geographical sourcebook. The box contained a 128-page Campaign Guide to the three countries, with city maps, sites, character kits, spells, magic items and major characters. It also held two 32-page adventures, "Throne of Deceit" and "The Runes of Chaos," and the 16-page Monstrous Compendium booklet with Thayan creations, Rashemi nature spirits and fey from Aglarond's Yuirwood. Vintage RPG called the set "basically a re-do of *Dreams of the Red Wizards*" that also detailed the neighbours.

For Szass Tam, the box cover and the adventures matter most. The Forgotten Realms Wiki says he appears on the cover at the left, though no source names the cover artist. This was the first time the product's art put him forward. The Campaign Guide details several zulkirs, and the wiki cites page 127 for Tam. A secondary summary claims the box has statistics for all eight zulkirs, but that is unverified.

The two adventures form a campaign. In "Throne of Deceit," the player characters defend Rashemen from a Thayan invasion. "The Runes of Chaos" follows it, and the product copy describes it as sending adventurers "into the heart of Thay itself to foil the mad schemes of the would-be Thayan conqueror Szass Tam." The Forgotten Realms Wiki says the adventures centre on his plot "to establish his absolute power in Thay."

The plot goes back to the demon in Thay's founding. In the wiki's synopsis, Eltab, demon lord of the Abyss's 248th layer, known as the Hidden Layer, has been imprisoned on Toril. Szass Tam sees that the demon will soon break free and releases him on purpose, meaning to enslave him permanently. He binds Eltab's mind with an artifact called the Death Moon Orb, forces him onto Thakorsil's Seat, and begins the Ritual of Twin Burnings. Once nine "runes of chaos" were woven around the demon, his will would belong to Tam. In the published outcome, the adventurers stop the ritual and Eltab escapes into a demoncyst beneath Thaymount. The wiki dates Tam's release of the demon to 1367 DR. The accounts of how Eltab was first imprisoned don't match: the founding lore puts it at Thazalhar after 922 DR, while this synopsis ties it to the war between Narfell and Raumathar. The sources don't reconcile the two versions.

This was a turning point for the character. In 1988 he had a level and an ambition. In 1991 he was a rival who helped the heroes for a while. In 1995 he was, for the first time, the central villain of a published adventure, with a specific plan, specific artifacts and a ritual the players could interrupt. The design is limited in a way that lasted for decades. The players foil the scheme but don't destroy the schemer. His goal is still internal: absolute power in Thay, with a bound demon as his weapon.

Contemporary reception of *Spellbound* is again missing. Rick Swan reviewed TSR products in *Dragon* in 1995, but the research found no review of this set, and none should be assumed. Vintage RPG later wrote of its fondness for the box and suggested it served as "a prime source" for Obsidian's *Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer* (2007), which is set in Rashemen and Thay.

Two books in 1997 added to the edges of the character. *Powers & Pantheons*, by Eric L. Boyd (TSR, September

1997), confirmed the rise to godhood of Velsharoon, a lich god of necromancy. According to the Forgotten Realms Wiki, Velsharoon had been a renegade Red Wizard who wanted to be Zulkir of Necromancy. He was driven out of Thay centuries earlier after a feud with his chief rival, Szass Tam, and several other powerful Red Wizards. The exact page isn't verified. Seen from later publications, this gave Tam a defeated rival who went on to become a god, a decade before Tam's own attempt to do so, though no source says anyone planned it that way. Lynn Abbey's novel *The Simbul's Gift*, published by TSR on 4 November 1997 as the sixth book of The Nobles series, is listed by the wiki among his appearances, but the size of his role isn't known.

The edition closed with a summary of the character. Dale Donovan's *Villains' Lorebook* (TSR, July 1998, product code 9552) profiled 29 characters, including Artemis Entreri, Manshoon, Jarlaxle, Halaster Blackcloak and Szass Tam. Each entry had an illustration, game statistics, campaign uses and a list of sources consulted. The Forgotten Realms Wiki places Tam's entry on pages 54 to 56. Secondary sources, apparently drawing on this entry, describe his appearance after some two hundred years of lichdom as less horrific than might be expected: a skeletally thin, pale man with dark eyes and thinning black hair and beard. When he needs to, he takes the form of a tall, scholarly, jet-eyed, fleshy-cheeked man in his sixties or seventies. A flipbook preview reportedly lists him as a 29th-level necromancer lich. That figure can't be confirmed.

The second-edition look matters for later comparisons. This Szass Tam can pass for a professor. Later toys and film settled on a skull in red robes, but the second-edition description made him a lich who could walk into a room without anyone knowing what he was.

His religion as the Forgotten Realms Wiki gives it, though the source edition isn't identified, fits that picture: he worshipped no god, felt no pull toward any deity promising eternal life, and had no patron. His pact with the god Bane belongs to later material. No interview has turned up in which Pryor or Donovan explained their choices, so the second-edition changes can be described but not explained.

## THIRD EDITION: AN EPIC STAT BLOCK AND A FACE ON THE COVER

When Wizards of the Coast relaunched the Realms for third edition, Szass Tam kept his place and gained numbers. The main setting book was the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, published in June 2001 and written by Ed Greenwood, Sean K. Reynolds, Skip Williams and Rob Heinsoo. The wikis place Szass Tam on pages 207 and 208, or 208 and 209. The two citations disagree and neither was checked against the book. The book covered Thay, the Red Wizards, the eight zulkirs and the Red Wizards' trade enclaves in foreign cities. It also included "The Color of Ambition," a short low-level adventure set in one of those enclaves.

The enclaves changed how most players would meet Thay. A Thayan trading post in a Sword Coast city put the Red Wizards within reach of first-level characters who would never cross the continent to Thaymount. Tam stayed at home, but his organisation came to the players.

Compiled third-edition text describes him this way: "Szass Tam is gaunt, but only his withered hands and the hint of dry rot occasionally wafting from his person truly attest his lichdom." The *Forgotten Realms Wiki* adds a tall frame, fine-boned intellectual features, dark eyes, a wispy black beard and a vermilion robe with voluminous sleeves trimmed with gems and gold. It isn't confirmed which book each detail comes from. The picture still matches the 1998 version: a lich you'd have to look at closely to identify.

A summary line repeated on fan sites reads: "Szass Tam (NE male human lich Nec10/Red10/Acm2/Epic7) is the shrewd zulkir of Necromancy. Over two hundred years old, he has tried to unite the zulkirs under his banner but lost prestige recently after a failed attempt to harness the power of a long-imprisoned demon." The fan sites don't name the book. The class notation, with epic levels added after a capped prestige class, looks like later 3.5-era practice, so the line may not come from the 2001 book. The in-world logic is clear either way. The Eltab scheme from *Spellbound* had become recent history that cost him standing. Third edition kept 1995's failure on the record and treated it as political damage.

The *Forgotten Realms Wiki* assigns him other traits from this period. His power base is the Citadel on the Thaymount. He commands the Legion of Bone, an undead army led by vampire and lich generals. He holds that

the living "defiled the world." He is immune to cold, electricity, polymorph and mind-affecting magic, along with the standard undead immunities. The last detail is the most revealing. A character who scorns the living and regards life as contamination is a step toward the character who later wants to unmake the world.

*Lords of Darkness*, which the RPG.net review dates to October 2001, collected 28 evil organizations into one sourcebook, with the Red Wizards in the first chapter, "Major Organizations." The author credits conflict. Wikipedia and the Forgotten Realms Wiki name Jason Carl and Sean K. Reynolds, while an AbeBooks listing names Sean K. Reynolds and James Wyatt. The Red Wizards chapter presents the eight zulkirs with Szass Tam as chief among them, a powerful archmage and feared lich. The Dungeons & Dragons Lore Wiki describes the spell *animate dread warrior* as unique to his apprentices, though nobody confirmed that the spell first appeared in this book.

The Forgotten Realms Wiki's article on Warlock's Crypt, the lair of the ancient lich Larloch, appears to cite *Lords of Darkness* for a story that changed the 1995 plot after the fact. At least sixteen Red Wizards entered the crypt to kill or rob Larloch, and all of them failed. Szass Tam, visiting around 1366 DR, was the only one to survive, and the two made a deal whose terms outsiders never learned. The same article says Larloch supplied the Death Moon Orb, Thakorsil's Seat and several "hooded companions" for Tam's plans to control Thay and Eltab. The exact source of each claim wasn't checked separately. If the attribution holds, it's a clear retcon: the artifacts from the 1995 adventure now had a supplier, and Szass Tam was placed within a hierarchy of liches as a junior partner to an older one.

The *Epic Level Handbook* in July 2002 gave Szass Tam his most precise mechanical definition up to that point. The 320-page book provided rules for characters above 20th level. Its credits vary by source. Wikipedia lists Andy Collins and Bruce R. Cordell, with additional design by John D. Rateliff, Thomas Reid and James Wyatt, while trade listings give Collins, Cordell and Thomas M. Reid. Appendix I, "Epic NPCs of Faerûn," included Alustriel, Elminster, Khelben Arunsun, Manshoon, Storm Silverhand, the Simbul, Iyraclea and Szass Tam. A secondary description notes that the Realms and Greyhawk figures appeared "in illustration and in new epic level character sheet format."

The Forgotten Realms Wiki gives his line there as "NE male lich Necromancer 10/Red Wizard 17/Archmage 2," Challenge Rating 31, on pages 297 and 298. A search summary adds 29 twelve-sided Hit Dice plus 25, 211 hit points and Armour Class 31, which matches the 29 levels but should be checked against the book before

anyone relies on it. The Red Wizard prestige class is stretched to seventeen levels in this build. That tells players what the rules treated as central to him: he was mostly a Red Wizard, then a necromancer, and only barely an archmage.

The number mattered for the table. Third edition's standard game ran from 1st to 20th level. A Challenge Rating of 31 put Szass Tam outside it. For the first time, the rules said in plain figures that this character was not a normal campaign's final encounter. A Dungeon Master running a regular game could use him as a presence, a threat or a patron, but the book gave no realistic route to defeating him in combat without the epic rules. The *Epic Level Handbook* made him more powerful and, by the same measure, less available.

Other third-edition builds circulate, which complicates this. Fan sites give "Nec10/Red10/Acm2/Epic7," also 29 levels, following the 3.5 convention of capping prestige classes at ten. The Realms Helps site's character page gives yet another: Necromancer 10, Red Wizard 10, Archmage 1, Epic 1, Challenge Rating 31, 131 hit points and Armour Class 29. That contradicts the site's own Red Wizards page. The Forgotten Realms Wiki reports this last block with detailed spell save numbers: 18 plus spell level for most spells, 20 plus spell level for evocation, and 28 plus spell level for necromancy. Its source book is unknown. If the figures are accurate, they turn his specialism into arithmetic. His necromancy would be ten points harder to resist than his other magic, which in third edition's terms made the difference between a spell that often fails and one that almost always works. Realms Helps also says he normally prepares a quickened *teleport* and quickened attack spells, often using a 16th-level slot for a quickened, maximized *energy drain*. Slots that high fit the epic rules, but again no book is named.

The best-known third-edition image of Szass Tam comes from a book that told readers very little about him. *Unapproachable East*, published in May 2003, was designed by Richard Baker, Matt Forbeck and Sean K. Reynolds. Matt Wilson painted the cover. Glen Angus, Matt Cavotta, Mike Dutton, Wayne England, Matt Faulkner, Vince Locke, Raven Mimura, Jim Pavelec, Steve Prescott, Adam Rex, Matt Wilson and Sam Wood did the interiors. The 192-page hardcover cost thirty dollars, according to the RPG.net review. Retail listings label it for the 3.0 rules. The Forgotten Realms Wiki calls it a 3.5 release, which is doubtful, since the 3.5 revision came out in July 2003. The book covered Aglarond, the Great Dale, Rashemen, Thay and Thesk, and offered twelve prestige classes, including the Red Wizard. The wiki cites page 48 for its Szass Tam material.

Forbeck described how the book was made in a statement quoted on Wikipedia: "As the developer, Rich came

up with an outline for the book, lined up the writers, and then parceled out the work. As I recall, Sean turned in his chapter on Rashemen first, which was a great model for me to follow. I wrote a big chunk of the book after that." The quotation describes the process, not any decision about Szass Tam, and shouldn't be read as more than that.

The RPG.net reviewer's comment on the cover is the clearest period reaction to Szass Tam in third edition: "the excellent cover features Szass Tam under attack by a group of Rashemi berserkers and a coven of witches, but there is little to be learned about ol' Szass in this book." The reviewer also found the book thin on major personalities, their plans, stat blocks, descriptions and ambitions, while calling it overall "as a general resource on the East, it is the best ever." Wilson's cover made the lich the face of the region, and the text left him in the background. One reading the review supports is that third-edition Thay was presented as a place for player characters to act, with its most famous resident used as a signpost. Some search summaries claim this book's adventures centre on Tam's plot and name "The Runes of Chaos" and "Throne of Deceit." That is a mix-up with *Spellbound*.

Fiction carried the Eltab story forward. *The Crimson Gold*, by Voronica Whitney-Robinson, published by Wizards of the Coast in December 2003 as the third book of The Rogues series, sends Thazienne "Tazi" Uskevren of Selgaunt against the Red Wizards. According to the Forgotten Realms Wiki, the zulkirs gather at the Citadel in 1373 DR, and in that year Szass Tam helps her release Eltab. Only the wiki's summary supports the detail. The demon he failed to chain in 1995 was still part of his story eight real-world years later.

The last third-edition book with a documented Tam detail placed him in the setting's deep past. *Lost Empires of Faerûn*, published in February 2005 for the 3.5 rules, was written by Richard Baker, Ed Bonny and Travis Stout and edited by Penny Williams, with a cover by Mark Sasso. The 192-page book covered ruins-based campaigns and more than a dozen adventure sites. Its fourth chapter, "God-Kings of the East," on pages 60 to 82, surveyed Mulhorand, Unther, Narfell and Raumathar, the old powers around Thay. The Forgotten Realms Wiki cites page 108 for Larloch trading with Szass Tam to recover the treasures of Jiksidur, Larloch's former Netherese enclave. Over several visits Tam handed over surviving pieces, including a powerful metal vest called a "mantle," for which he or his agents killed several Harpers. One research report found no trace of him in the book, but the wiki's specific page citation is the better evidence. No stat block for him there was found. Here he appears as a lich among liches, trading with an older one in the rubble of empires.

*Champions of Ruin* (May 2005, 160 pages, by Jeff Crook, Wil Upchurch and Eric L. Boyd) and *Power of Faerûn* (March 2006) both dealt with villains, organizations and rulership, but what they say about Szass Tam wasn't confirmed.

Fans noticed how little of his story had been told. An EN World thread titled simply "Szass Tam" observed that most of his history hadn't been detailed beyond his becoming a lich about two hundred years earlier and becoming Zulkir of Necromancy. Posters directed each other to the *Epic Level Handbook*, the novels and *Unapproachable East*. By the end of third edition he had a Challenge Rating above the level range, a famous cover and a place in the Realms' web of liches, but no story that explained what he wanted beyond power in Thay. A novelist supplied one.

## THE HAUNTED LANDS: RICHARD LEE BYERS GIVES THE LICH A COSMIC GOAL

Between 2007 and 2009, Wizards of the Coast published Richard Lee Byers's trilogy *The Haunted Lands* in its Forgotten Realms novel line: *Unclean*, *Undead* and *Unholy*. Wikipedia describes it as featuring Szass Tam "in his attempt to rule over Thay and Toril." That sentence covers two different ambitions, and the change from the first to the second is what the trilogy added.

The bibliographic details are uneven. *Unclean*, ISBN 978-0-7869-4258-9, came out first as a mass-market paperback. Bookseller and wiki listings date it April 2007, though that month wasn't checked against the publisher. *Undead*, ISBN 978-0-7869-4783-6, is from 2008. One listing gives 1 January, which looks like a database placeholder. A later Audible edition is narrated by Kevin Kraft. *Unholy*, ISBN 978-0-7869-5021-8, is from 2009. An Amazon listing gives 3 February 2009, and bookseller listings give 352 pages. No cover artist is credited in the research.

On intent, there's a primary source. In a 2018 interview with S. E. Lindberg, Byers said Szass Tam was already part of Forgotten Realms lore as a wily, skull-faced undead master of the dark arts. What Byers added was the idea that the lich's ultimate goal was to destroy the universe and replace it with something better, which he called "the ultimate act of artistic creation if you want to look at it that way." The motive most associated with

the modern Szass Tam didn't come from a sourcebook. A novelist says he invented it, and he framed it as an artist's ambition rather than a conqueror's.

The trilogy runs across the break between third and fourth edition. The first two books are set in the late third-edition timeline, from 1375 DR. *Undead* crosses the Year of Blue Fire, 1385 DR, when the Spellplague struck. *Unholy* jumps about a century to the fourth-edition era, around 1478 and 1479 DR. The *Forgotten Realms Campaign Guide* came out in August 2008, between the second and third books, and describes the same end state: Szass Tam as regent and the other zulkirs in exile. The dates are documented. No source says whether Wizards of the Coast told Byers where the story had to end, or whether the sourcebook followed the novels. Any claim about an editorial mandate would be a guess.

*Unclean* opens in 1375 DR with Szass Tam moving against his colleagues. According to the Forgotten Realms Wiki, the zulkir Druxus Rhym is assassinated in his home in Eltabbar on the fifth of Mirtul. The wiki calls Rhym the zulkir of transmutation, which fits the earlier books, though one summary calls him the zulkir of illusion. The wiki's article on what it calls the War of the Zulkirs says Tam arranged the murders of Rhym and Aznar Thrul, and betrayed a Thayan army under the tharchions Azhir Kren and Homen Odesseiron to the Rashemi to spread fear among Thayans. Byers tells the story mostly through two new characters who aren't Red Wizards. Bareris Anskuld is a bard who comes home to marry his childhood love, Tammith, finds she has sold herself into slavery, and sets out to buy her back. Aoth Fezim is a warmage and scout of the Griffon Legion from Pyarados, with a griffon familiar named Brightwing. Patrolling the Pass of Thazar in the Sunrise Mountains, Aoth finds an undead horde and reports it to his tharchion, Dmitra Flass, who tells Szass Tam. The novel ends with Tam openly claiming the regency and civil war breaking out.

Seen against the 1988 sourcebook, *Unclean* carries out the scenario FR6 set up. A council built on rivalry finally produces a winner, and the winner is the zulkir with the most patience and the largest army of the dead.

The Forgotten Realms Wiki dates the war from 1375 to 1385 DR. Official D&D Beyond material later calls it a five-year Thayan Civil War, so the sources disagree on its length. On one side was the self-proclaimed regent. On the other were Lallara Mediocros, Nevron, Yaphyll, Lauzoril, Kumed Hahpret, Mythrellan and Samas Kul, guided by Dmitra Flass. By 1377 DR Tam had made Thaymount his seat. By 1385 he held the northern tharchs of Gauros, Lapendrar, Surthay, Delhumide and Thaymount, while the council held Priador, Eltabbar, Tyraturos, Thazalhar, Pyarados and the island of Alaor. The trilogy also gave the other zulkirs names, personalities and

deaths. In the sourcebooks they had mostly been job titles.

*Undead* begins about ten years later. Tam has spent the decade looking for sources of immense power. He forces the diviner Yaphyll to perform the Red Wizards' strongest divination. She tells him how to trap the council's army at the Keep of Sorrows, foresees the Spellplague, warns him cryptically of "White" and "Black Queens," and is engulfed in blue flame, which frees her from his control. The Forgotten Realms Wiki records another event in this period without confirming which novel shows it. Tam sacrifices the enthralled tharchion Pyras Autorian to summon Bane, Lord of Tyranny. Bane gives him knowledge of the chaotic magic that follows the Spellplague, the ability to raise more dead and greater power. In return, Tam will surrender his soul after a thousand years, once his conquest of Thay is complete. The wiki adds that he expected to escape the debt by becoming a god himself. On the Bookstooge blog, a fan reviewer summed up the reasoning: "why worry about your soul in 1000 years if you're going to remake the universe with you at the head?"

The pact overturns an established trait. In the wiki's summary of earlier material, Tam had no patron and felt no pull toward gods. The trilogy has him make a deal with one, on terms he intends to break. That fits the character, since he's patient, contemptuous and sure he'll outlast everything, but it's still a new relationship between Szass Tam and the setting's gods.

The Spellplague affected him directly. The Forgotten Realms Wiki describes the Death Moon Orb, the artifact from the 1995 adventure, exploding in his hand. A wave of azure fire nearly cancels his magic and burns the illusory flesh from his face and hands. It's an unusually literal event: the mask that let him pass as a scholar burns off in the catastrophe that ends an edition. The wiki also says the Spellplague effectively ended the civil war. Tam drove the council's legions out of Bezantur, the zulkirs fled by ship, and he prepared to rule while leaving the survivors in exile. The research only partly pins down the order of those events.

*Unholy* moves about a hundred years ahead. Thay's green fields are ruined, and much of its population is undead. The publisher's blurb says Tam "appears to have gone insane." It describes "a powerful undead sorcerer reigning in Thay over a frightened people and hordes of undead," while "the exiled mageocracy" watches "the new King of Thay" prepare "a great magical ritual they cannot allow him to complete." The exiled zulkirs and Aoth's mercenary company, the Brotherhood of the Griffon, live in the Reach, and Aoth's band is pushed into an "unholy alliance" with them. Tam builds the Dread Rings, fortresses where anyone who dies becomes an undead soldier and whose souls power his ascension to godhood. The ascension would destroy the existing

world.

The Forgotten Realms Wiki dates the attempt to 1478 DR, the Year of the Dark Circle. Bareris, who became undead during the war, learns of an artifact connected to the late Druxus Rhym, described in summaries as a diadem and a sceptre, that can remake the cosmos by destroying it. He destroys it as Tam tries to take it. Tam then defeats his assembled enemies quickly. Lallara Mediocros, Nevron and Bareris die fighting him. The ritual still fails, and according to the wiki the whole of Thay is raised onto a vast plateau. Reviewers mention a twist involving Tam's ally Malark. Tam survives and still rules Thay. The story that gave him a cosmic goal ends with him unharmed and in power, ready for the tabletop line to use.

Taken together, the trilogy changes the character in five ways. He goes from a scheming council member to an open usurper and sole regent. He gains the goal of destroying and remaking reality, which Byers claims as his own idea. He picks up the apparatus for that goal: the Dread Rings, the pact with Bane, the soul-fuelled ritual. The other zulkirs get characters of their own, and several of them die. And he is carried across the Spellplague into the undead nation that fourth edition would describe. The sourcebooks gave Szass Tam statistics. Byers gave him a reason to want something the statistics couldn't measure.

Reviews of the novels are limited, but they point the same way. FantasyLiterature.com called *Unclean* an "excellent sword and sorcery romp" and named Byers one of the better Forgotten Realms authors. It criticized the love stories as tacked on and lacking real emotion. It described Szass Tam as ultra-powerful, polite and evil, and said Byers "writes Szass Tam much better than Jean Rabe." Reader reviews gathered from Goodreads, ThriftBooks and The StoryGraph praise Tam as intelligent, charismatic and devious. They note that Byers, a horror writer, makes the books steadily darker, and that he shows Thay's cruelty plainly, with slaves sold for experiments or as food. Several readers found *Unholy* the weakest of the three and its last twenty pages rushed. No sales figures or print runs appear in the research, and none should be assumed. Almost two decades later, this is the version reviewers of a 2026 hardcover would measure Szass Tam against.

## FOURTH EDITION: REGENT OF AN UNDEAD NATION

The *Forgotten Realms Campaign Guide*, published by Wizards of the Coast in August 2008 for fourth edition, is credited in several listings to Philip Athans, Bruce R. Cordell, Ed Greenwood and Chris Sims. Some summaries leave out Athans. A secondary summary gives its length as 288 pages. Its product listing describes the new situation: "The world has changed since the Spellplague, and from this arcane crucible have emerged shining kingdoms, tyrannical empires, mighty heroes, and monster-infested dungeons." The default date moved to 1479 DR, about a century after the Spellplague.

The design reasoning comes from secondary sources and an EN World thread titled "Rich Baker on the Spellplague and other stuff." Baker and the team wanted a fresh starting point a generation later, which they described as a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* approach, and they needed an event in the setting to explain the changes. The Spellplague was that event. A search summary points to a Baker article, "Countdown to the Realms: Year of the Ageless One," in *Dragon* 362, dated December 2007, but neither the date nor the text was confirmed.

In Wikipedia's summary of the book, the Red Wizards are now united under Szass Tam, Regent of Thay. A secondary summary of the product listing calls Thay "an undead horde devoted to conquest." Martin Rayla's review for Gnome Stew listed "Thay has become a nation entirely dominated by undeath" among the edition's major setting changes, along with a restored Netheril, the merging of Abeir with Toril and the Plaguewrought Land. The Forgotten Realms Wiki adds in-world detail: Thayan commoners lived hard, destitute lives. For most of the fifteenth century DR the living couldn't rise to prominence in Thay. By 1479 DR the country had the largest concentration of undead in Faerûn.

A fan reading on the RPGnet forums, the "Let's Read" thread on the book, describes Thay's entry as centred on Szass Tam, with most of the space given to his statistics and a template for the improved undead that Thayan necromancers produce. The thread says the book has him determined to remake the world with himself as its god, which means conquering new lands. It also says the book advises Dungeon Masters to change his powers freely because his command of magic is so broad. The same thread mentions a pact with Bane taking him to power, but that couldn't be checked against the book, so it stays attributed to the thread. If the summary is accurate, the Campaign Guide adopted Byers's cosmic goal as the setting's official statement of what Szass Tam

wants.

His fourth-edition statistics, as listed in an online database of fourth-edition monsters that ties them to the Campaign Guide, show how differently the new edition thought about a villain. He is a Medium natural humanoid with the undead keyword, a Level 30 Elite Artillery. He has initiative +17, 388 hit points with a bloodied value of 194, regeneration 10 and Armour Class 45. He is immune to disease, fear and poison and resists 20 necrotic damage. Secondary summaries of the same data add Intelligence 32, Constitution 28 and Wisdom 27. His powers include an at-will "Vampire Lance" that deals necrotic damage and gives him temporary hit points, and a Necromantic Aura that deals 5 necrotic damage to living creatures that enter or start their turn within five squares. One summary gives page 275 for the block, which wasn't confirmed.

Those labels mean something specific. Fourth edition ran from 1st to 30th level, so level 30 was the top of its range but still inside it. "Elite" marks a monster worth two standard ones. It is less than the "solo" category built to face an entire party alone. "Artillery" means a combatant who does damage from range. It doesn't describe a caster of ten thousand spells. In third edition he had been 29 levels of classes and a Challenge Rating outside the game. In fourth edition he became a combat role that a party at the very end of the epic tier could, in principle, fight. The 1d6chan wiki says every edition after the first put him at roughly level 30. That's a fan claim, but it fits the numbers. How he's built changed more than how strong he is.

The Campaign Guide was badly received. The historian Shannon Appelcline, quoted on Wikipedia, called it, along with the *Forgotten Realms Player's Guide* and the adventure *FR1 Scepter Tower of Spellgard*, "some of Wizards' worst-received supplements ever." His explanation was that Wizards had broken up the old Realms to fit its "points of light" concept: old gods and characters gone, kingdoms fallen, the timeline pushed forward, the Realms in ruins. Reviews weren't all negative. The review roundup at Nuketown called Gnome Stew's review, "Big Changes, Good Book, Crappy Map," the most objective and largely positive, and noted that it compared the book chapter by chapter with the first and third edition versions. Other responses came from an RPGnet review, a Stargazer's World first look dated 27 August 2008 and an EN World discussion thread.

Szass Tam comes out of this differently from most of the old cast. Many established characters were removed or retired, the change Appelcline objected to. The Zulkir of Necromancy survived the century-long jump with his power increased. Being a lich meant the setting could skip a hundred years without killing him, and the novels had already put him in the position fourth edition wanted, as sole ruler of a country of the dead.

Fourth edition also took Byers's apparatus beyond Thay. The Dread Rings appear in R. A. Salvatore's *Gauntlgrym*, published in October 2010 as the first book of his Neverwinter Saga, though the research couldn't establish where they first appeared. In that story's timeline, a Dread Ring in the Neverwinter Wood was completed in 1462 DR. Its Thayans, led by Sylora Salm, planned to wake the fire primordial Maegera beneath Mount Hotenow and use the resulting deaths to power the ring.

The *Neverwinter Campaign Setting*, published on 16 August 2011 and written by Matt Sernett with Erik Scott de Bie and Ari Marmell, took the idea to the tabletop. Wikipedia calls it fourth edition's final campaign setting, and it was aimed at heroic-tier play. A fan close reading on the Octopus Carnival blog summarizes it this way: Szass Tam, in full control of Thay, has ordered the Red Wizards to build Dread Rings across the Realms, over sources of necromantic power, to channel energy toward his apotheosis. According to the Forgotten Realms Wiki, his agent in the region is the elf lich Valindra Shadowmantle, sent in 1479 DR to restore the Neverwinter Wood ring and prepare a Thayan takeover of the city. Whether the book includes statistics for Tam himself wasn't confirmed.

The result is a structure later designers kept using. Szass Tam wants to be a god, which is too large for a low-level adventure. His Dread Ring, an agent and the agent's army are the right size for one. The most ambitious villain in the setting became a distant cause behind first-level play. The research found no fourth-edition *Dragon* or *Dungeon* article about him. *Dragon* moved to digital publication in 2008, and from issue 368 onward full issues required a D&D Insider subscription. The claim that such an article exists would be unsupported. An unconfirmed claim about the anthology *Open Grave: Secrets of the Undead* (January 2009) should also be left out.

## VIDEO GAMES: THE OFFSTAGE MASTER AND THE RELUCTANT BOSS

When Cryptic Studios' *Neverwinter* launched on 20 June 2013 as a free-to-play action game published by Perfect World Entertainment under licence from Wizards of the Coast, it drew on the same 2011 *Neverwinter* push that produced the sourcebook and Salvatore's novels.

Szass Tam's role in it followed the sourcebook: he stayed away, and Valindra worked for him. The *Neverwinter* fan wiki says Tam commissioned the Dread Ring for his bid for godhood. Valindra takes her orders from the lich zulkirs of Thay.

The Dread Ring came into the game with the second free content module, *Shadowmantle*, on 5 December 2013, according to an Arc Games news post and press releases carried by PR Newswire and EDN. The module added the Hunter Ranger class, the Dread Ring zone and campaign, the Dread Legion skirmish, the Valindra's Tower dungeon and new artifacts. Players fight Valindra's army and then Valindra. An Engadget preview dated 6 November 2013 described her forces trying to raise a huge dragon as "the world's biggest dracolich." Fan wikis name it as the black dragon Lorrageath. One wiki summary files the Dread Ring under "Module 8," which the dated official releases contradict.

The module also introduced a faction that later tabletop books used as well. The Thayan Resurrection, renegade Red Wizards led by Rath Modar, had been exiled for speaking against Szass Tam, and they help the players' *Neverwinter* Vanguard inside the ring. In August 2014, according to the *Forgotten Realms* Wiki, the *Tyranny of Dragons* module tied the game to fifth edition's opening storyline. Rath Modar and the Resurrection returned as schemers allied with the Cult of the Dragon and its leader Severin. Their larger aim was to overthrow Szass Tam and restore the living Red Wizards, with Rath Modar hoping to become zulkir of Illusion. Tam doesn't appear, but his rule over Thay causes the plots in which his exiled opponents are the active villains.

The same season brought him on screen in another series. Beamdog's *Baldur's Gate II: Enhanced Edition*, released for PC on 15 November 2013, added new companions to BioWare's 2000 game and its 2001 *Throne of Bhaal* expansion, among them the wild mage Neera. According to the *Baldur's Gate* fan wiki, her quest "Destroying the Order of Eight Staves" takes the party to the Thayan estate of the Red Wizard Vicross. After Vicross and his guards die, the party rings a Bell of Summoning and Szass Tam teleports in. After some

dialogue he attacks. When his health drops low, he gives up and offers to send the party back to Tethyr. The quest gives 20,000 experience points to each character, and beating him a second time gives another 15,000 and a unique Wand of Whips. The wiki calls him a "265 year old Lich" and the Zulkir of Necromancy. A Beamdog forum thread names other Red Wizards and raised doubts about his involvement, but the quest pages document it. This was Beamdog's writing, added about twelve years after the expansion, not original BioWare content.

The design choice is worth noting. The party can win the fight, but the lich doesn't die. He withdraws and bargains. It's a video-game version of what the 1995 adventure did on paper: he appears, loses a round and leaves intact. Beamdog's standalone arena campaign, *The Black Pits II: Gladiators of Thay*, bundled with the Enhanced Edition in 2013, puts the arena under the mage Dennaton and a planetar called The Winged. According to the Baldur's Gate and Forgotten Realms fan wikis, a brief cutscene shows Szass Tam as the arena's secret patron. Den of Geek's list of the game's best villains also mentions his secret interest in a gladiator arena, apparently referring to this content.

Larian's *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023) uses him only as a password. A talking Ornate Mirror guarding a secret laboratory asks, in the spelling guide sites quote, "What th-ink you of the zulkir know[n] as Szass Tam?" Destructoid, Game Rant, Dot Esports and Prima report that answers like "A foul lich. May he die a thousand more deaths" are accepted. By 2023 his name was recognizable enough to work as a test of loyalty for players who might never have read a Thayan sourcebook.

Other claims fall apart when checked. The Forgotten Realms Wiki mentions cameos "in the Baldur's Gate and Neverwinter Nights series," but no specific *Neverwinter Nights* appearance could be confirmed. *Mask of the Betrayer* has Red Wizards and a Thayan academy, but the sources checked don't show Tam in it. Codename Entertainment's *Idle Champions of the Forgotten Realms* ran a "Red Wizard Emergence" event from 29 March to 7 April 2023, timed to the film's release, in which players fought Red Wizards and spent Corrupted Gems in a Thayan Enclave Shop. The sources don't show Tam appearing as a character, and a claim that he's a playable champion isn't supported. No *Magic: The Gathering* card bears his name.

For almost twelve years, *Neverwinter* kept Szass Tam offstage. That changed in 2025, and the change came from the film. *Module 31: Red Harvest* launched on 6 May 2025 on PC, PlayStation and Xbox, according to Massively Overpowered, MMORPG.com, press releases on Games Press and the official site. The *Neverwinter* fan wiki's date of May 2024 conflicts with all of the dated coverage. The press copy says Szass Tam "and his

wizard council, the Zulkir," rule Thay harshly while a resistance grows. A Harper agent learns he is "machinating on a plan of such significance that it could place the whole of Faerûn under the yoke of Thay," and Sergeant Alphonse Knox sends the player to help. The new zone, the Tower District of Tyraturos, uses a map inspired by Thay as shown in *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*. Official copy calls the film "critically acclaimed," and Massively Overpowered's headline called it the game's "D&D movie-inspired 31st module." PCGamesN reported that the zone spans three neighbourhoods and is built around vertical movement. The module's trial, "Shackles of Divinity," ends with a corrupted angel called Valkariel, not with Tam. The story involves his plans for deification and a captured celestial the player rescues.

The marketing describes a council ruling beside him, while the fourth-edition lore had him ruling alone. That may be a loose press release, or an early sign of the council's return in later tabletop material. The research can't say which.

*Module 32: Red Harvest Part II – The Soul Collector* was announced on 12 November 2025 and launched on 25 November. "The Lich has struck back," the press copy said. Tam attacks the fleeing resistance in Tyraturos. The player joins Xuna to rescue the missing Harper Tesser and then stops what the official account spells as the "Ritual of Ascendency." The copy calls Tam "the conductor of Thay and the orchestrator of the Rebellion's demise." The new zone, Doomvault Remains, is his underground site for grisly experiments. The name matches the dungeon in the 2014 tabletop adventure *Dead in Thay*, though no source says the reuse was deliberate. Six new heroic encounters include "Rise of the Necrotitan," an undead colossus made of fused zombie hulks. The trial "Soul Harvest" takes players into his extra-dimensional "Dreamvault" to fight him directly and end the ritual. Neverwinter also released a "Szass Tam Theme" as promotional music. No voice actor is confirmed. A claim that the storyline was among the game's more popular recent ones couldn't be traced to a source.

After almost twelve years as the unseen force behind Valindra's Dread Ring, Szass Tam became a boss players could fight in an online game, and the ritual he was trying to complete was still an ascension to godhood, as in Byers's novels. The next module, *Biting Cold*, launched on 19 May 2026 in a frozen zone called the Reghed Edge. The sources don't show it continuing his story.

## FIFTH EDITION: THE DOOMVAULT, THE DRAGON QUEEN, AND ORGANIZED PLAY

Wizards of the Coast brought back the title of his first sourcebook before fifth edition's core rules were out. During the Sundering, the in-world event that led the Realms into the D&D Next playtest and fifth edition, the company named a two-part storyline *Dreams of the Red Wizards*. The first part, *Scourge of the Sword Coast*, was a D&D Next adventure for 2nd-level characters about savage humanoids raiding the country around Daggerford. BoardGameGeek and RPGGeek list it as "Sundering Adventure III," and a Diehard GameFAN review of it is dated 6 February 2014. The reuse of the 1988 title is a documented link from one era's publisher to another's.

The second part was *Dead in Thay*, written by Scott Fitzgerald Gray. It served as Season 18 of the in-store D&D Encounters program and was released in April 2014 as a PDF on DnDClassics.com, before the fifth-edition *Player's Handbook*. It was built for characters of 9th to 11th level. The Forgotten Realms Wiki's summary of the product text gives the premise: "Szass Tam, the lich lord of Thay, and his Red Wizards threaten to dominate all of the Sword Coast." An elemental node called the Bloodgate has to be destroyed. Rebels of the Thayan Resurrection, with a cell led by Syranna, bring the adventurers into the Doomvault beneath Thaymount. There they must destroy the phylacteries of Szass Tam's chief lieutenants, which are kept in the Phylactery Vault of Kazit Gul, a crazed demilich who built the Doomvault to siphon the souls of anyone who dies inside. The Forgotten Realms Wiki describes the Doomvault's laboratories as "used by Szass Tam to fuel his ascension to godhood."

The dungeon has a stated lineage. Summaries attached to *Tales from the Yawning Portal* and Wikipedia describe it as a tribute to *Tomb of Horrors*, *Ruins of Undermountain* and other "killer dungeons" from the game's history. A deadly dungeon under Thaymount therefore looks back to Acererak's 1978 tomb, one of the lich adventures that came before Szass Tam existed.

Szass Tam never appears in *Dead in Thay*. The players attack the phylacteries of his lieutenants, the souls anchoring his liches, and his laboratories. They do not fight him. The blogger Merric Blackman described the Encounters finale on 1 August 2014. Groups infiltrated the Doomvault to destroy the phylacteries of the liches "that supported Szass Tam, the insane ruler of Thay," and afterward, "Szass Tam was no longer the force he

was," though his servant, the lich Tarul Var, survived. The finale drew 27 participants at Goodgames Ballarat, tying the store's highest attendance for the program. Players could weaken the villain by removing what supported him while he stayed alive. *Dead in Thay* was reprinted in *Tales from the Yawning Portal*, which reached game stores on 24 March 2017 and other retailers on 4 April 2017, so its premise stayed in the fifth-edition hardcover line.

Wikipedia calls *The Rise of Tiamat* his first fifth-edition adventure appearance. Kobold Press wrote it and Wizards of the Coast published it in 2014 as the second half of the *Tyranny of Dragons* storyline. The research gave garbled credits for it; the later compilation lists Wolfgang Baur, Steve Winter and Alexander Winter. The plot uses the same exiles as the *Neverwinter* module. Rath Modar's Red Wizards of the Thayan Resurrection are allied with the Cult of the Dragon, whose own spellcasters can't manage the ritual to bring Tiamat into Faerûn without them. The exiles hope Tiamat will help them overthrow Szass Tam. Szass Tam wants the cult destroyed because the defectors want his throne. According to the Forgotten Realms Wiki, his envoy, Nyh Ilmichh, offers the Council of Waterdeep an alliance.

If the player characters travel to Thay to negotiate, Red Wizards enter their dreams while they sleep to torture and interrogate them, and their answers help decide whether Thay joins the Council against the cult. The Power Score blog, which ran the adventure, reported that its players were interrogated in dreams they didn't remember because of their saving throws. In his first fifth-edition hardcover, then, Szass Tam is an evil power the heroes may need to bargain with. The 1991 novel had used him the same way. The danger comes from his enemies, and the players have to decide whether his help is worth accepting.

The 2015 *Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide*, fifth edition's regional sourcebook, described Thay, as secondary summaries report it, as ruled by the ancient lich Szass Tam and the Council of Zulkirs in a ruthless magocracy. Its Thayan enclaves sold magic openly while secretly trafficking in drugs, wicked spells and slaves in order to infiltrate foreign politics. The page numbers weren't checked. Mentioning the council next to the regent is a small point that gains weight later.

For about twelve years, no official fifth-edition hardcover gave Szass Tam a stat block. Dungeon Masters who wanted to fight him were left with the *Monster Manual* lich at Challenge Rating 21, or with fan-made versions such as those on Dungeonsports and Scribd, which aren't official. That gap shaped how he was used. The fifth-edition hardcovers treated him as the reason for adventures and never as their final encounter.

Organized play did otherwise. The Adventurers League storyline *Dreams of the Red Wizards* began with *DDAL-DRW-01 Breaking Umberlee's Resolve*, by Ashley Warren and Chris Lindsay, released on the Dungeon Masters Guild on 6 July 2019 as the start of a Sea of Fallen Stars series. According to the Forgotten Realms Wiki, the storyline was named in January 2020 and gathered the 2019 releases. It was a non-seasonal storyline for higher-level play, tiers two through four, with about twenty adventures and several larger "epics" for multi-table events. Wizards' Yawning Portal post "Game On: Campaigns in the Adventurers League" called it a living campaign for veteran players: "storylines may end, but the campaign perpetuates beyond it." Adventures premiered at Virtual Play Weekends before going on general sale.

The 2021 Adventurers League players' guide set out Tam's role. The dreams of the Red Wizards had driven many Thayan zulkirs and their minions to their doom, having "perished carrying out the will of Thay's regent, archlich SZASS TAM." Summaries describe the regent promoting younger, loyal Red Wizards into the empty posts to spread Thayan influence gradually. The epic *When the Lights Went Out in Candlekeep*, released on 30 November 2021, was promoted with a line about the Great Library being "about to shed light on the last pieces of Szass Tam's plan." The final arc, *Terminal Ambitions*, was split into Shadow Games, five tier-two adventures; The Cold Dark, five tier-three adventures; and Frozen Worlds, two tier-four adventures. The first Frozen Worlds adventure, *Fall the Cold Night*, was designed by Andy Dempz.

The second was *DDAL-DRW-20 The Death of Szass Tam*, designed by Alan Patrick and released on 3 August 2022. It's a four-hour, 48-page adventure for characters of 17th to 20th level, optimized for an average party level of 18. The official blurb: "Szass Tam arrives in Xorvintroth! Just as you were about to secure victory, the Regent of Thay is poised to turn things back in his favor. However, if Szass Tam is there to set things right, that means he's out in the open, and the rebel Zulkir Dar'lon Ma has a plan!" One DriveThruRPG buyer wrote that its bosses were powerful enough to be "measured in units of Tiamat." That's a single customer review.

Organized play then moved on as if the title were accurate. Wizards' August 2022 posts announced that the next arc, beginning that autumn, would take adventurers off Toril and into Realmspace from 9th level, alongside the 2022 *Spelljammer* release. One blurb begins: "Szass Tam is dead, but the appearance of a new star among the Tears of Selûne might be tied to his demise." The epic *Tears Among the Stars*, by Andy Dempz and Ginny Loveday, followed a mysterious "Anomaly" to the neogi stronghold of Journey's Legg.

The research didn't read the text of *The Death of Szass Tam*, so it can't say whether the lich truly dies in it or

whether a proxy or copy is destroyed. What can be said is that this death belongs to organized-play continuity, and later official hardcovers didn't follow it. The 2026 campaign book has him alive and plotting. No formal retcon statement was found. Listings on StartPlaying show *Dreams of the Red Wizards* tables still running under the 2024 rules.

In February 2022, while that storyline was under way, Ed Greenwood returned to Thay himself. *Thay: Land of the Red Wizards*, by Greenwood with Alex Kammer and Alan Patrick, the designer of DRW-20, was sold on the Dungeon Masters Guild as a 108-page book at \$17.99 for the PDF and \$39.99 in hardcover. Greenwood said it was meant to let tables use Thay as a country, with a full tour, military details, recipes, clothing, home furnishings, rules for Circle magic and new monsters. Geek Native described a Thay with a rising middle class and ambitious nobles, whose Red Wizards "fear Szass Tam more than they hate him," and reported that it reached the site's Platinum tier, more than 1,000 copies sold, within days. [Dungeonsanddragonsfan.com](https://dungeonsanddragonsfan.com) reviewed it favourably and singled out the Circle magic and the monsters. As a Dungeon Masters Guild product it's semi-official, not a core Wizards book. Thirty-five years after Thay appeared on the edge of the grey box map, its creator was writing about what people there eat.

Wizards' 2024-rules Realms books followed in November 2025. *Forgotten Realms: Heroes of Faerûn*, dated 11 November 2025, is a player book whose factions include the Red Wizards of Thay. *Forgotten Realms: Adventures in Faerûn*, the Dungeon Master's companion, is dated 11 November 2025 in one report and 12 December 2025 on the Wizards UK store, so the date varied by region. Noble Knight Gaming's first look says the standard cover of *Adventures in Faerûn* shows Valindra Shadowmantle, "a powerful lich and agent of Szass Tam from Thay." What either book says about Szass Tam in detail wasn't confirmed. As of late 2025, the Realms' main Dungeon Master book put Szass Tam's agent on its cover rather than Szass Tam.

## VARIANTS AND OFFSHOOTS

No source records Szass Tam having a child or an heir who took over his role. What exists instead is a family behind him, a creator's early version that predates publication, adaptations in other media, and continuities that went their own way.

The family comes only from the Forgotten Realms Wiki, and nobody checked the primary pages or established when these characters entered the record. The wiki describes the Tam family of Thay as "nearly as old as the nation itself," with its seat at a place called the Necropolis. It names Shevas Tam, a great Red Wizard of the eleventh century DR, as Szass Tam's father. Shevas objected to the fees of the Guild of Portages, killed its guildmaster and most of its members, turned them into undead and so founded the "long portage" trade route. A later relative, Kammnos Tam, supervised the zombies carrying goods along that route in the tharch of Surthay in the fourteenth century DR. If the account holds, undead labour was the family business before Szass Tam became a lich. That fits his later belief that the living are a nuisance to be replaced.

Greenwood's 1977 story and the idea from about a decade earlier make up the earliest version, which exists outside the published record. Nothing from it can be quoted beyond Greenwood's own description.

The film version is the most visible reinterpretation. In *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*, released in 2023, the Scottish actor Ian Hanmore, who played Pyat Pree in *Game of Thrones*, appears as Szass Tam in two scenes. According to Collider, he first appears in shadow, instructing his apprentice Sofina, and later in a flashback from the past of the paladin Xenk. He turns his followers into undead slaves and works through Sofina toward conquering Neverwinter. Her plan is to repeat a spell called the Beckoning Death on the city's population and raise a second undead army for him. Sofina, played by Daisy Head, is new to the film, an undead Red Wizard sorceress. One research note calls the Beckoning Death older Realms lore, but that isn't verified, and it's safer to treat it as the film's own.

The film's tie-in rules show how the adaptation ranked its characters. On 6 March 2023 Wizards released a free D&D Beyond bundle with statistics for Doric, Edgin, Forge, Holga, Simon, Sofina and Xenk. Sofina is a Challenge Rating 15 necromancer whose spells include *thunderwave*, *Evard's black tentacles*, *finger of death* and *time stop*, according to Wargamer and Game Rant. None of the reports lists a block for Szass Tam. The film's version of him never received official rules, while his apprentice did.

The games added proxies and dissidents. In *Neverwinter*, Valindra and Rath Modar's Thayan Resurrection split his world into an agent who serves him and a faction that exists to oppose him. *Baldur's Gate 3* reduced him to the answer to a riddle.

Toys gave him a fixed look. The LEGO Minifigures *Dungeons & Dragons* series, set 71047, released in the United States on 1 September 2024 and in Australia and New Zealand on 1 October at US\$4.99 per blind box, made him figure 11 of 12. Jay's Brick Blog describes the figure's red robes, exposed ribcage, flick-fire red "fireball" and translucent red skull. The toy settled a choice the sourcebooks had left open. The second-edition Szass Tam could pass as a fleshy-cheeked scholar, and third edition gave him gems and gold on vermilion sleeves. The minifigure is a skeleton in red, recognizable at once.

WizKids has announced another physical version. Its *Icons of the Realms: Arcana Unleashed: Deadfall* booster set is a line of 47 pre-painted miniatures including Szass Tam and the ancient serpentfolk called sarrukh, with two ultra-rare variants themed on demon lords. Boosters of one Large and three Medium or Small figures are priced at \$19.99, and bricks of ten at \$199.99. Its announced retail date is February 2027. As of September 2026 it's unreleased.

The Adventurers League death is an alternate continuity. Organized play reached "Szass Tam is dead" in 2022, and later official products didn't follow. Tables that played through *Dreams of the Red Wizards* have a Realms in which the lich was killed, or at least thought killed, at 18th level. Tables that use the 2026 hardcover have one in which he's still scheming.

Home games have produced their own versions under his name, on fan wikis such as Othya and Nitharos, the latter spelling it "Szazz Tam," on WithWeapons as "Emperor Szass Tam," and on World Anvil campaign pages. They show that tables reuse him outside official canon. They carry no authority over it. A Sage Advice clarification about "shadow zulkirs," separatists claiming the title in some Thay book, points to further splintering of the council, but the book it refers to isn't identified.

## WHAT CHANGED AT THE TABLE

**T**he clearest way to follow Szass Tam's development is to ask a practical question of each era: what could the players do to him?

In 1988 the answer was probably nothing. FR6 gave him a level, reported as 24th, and a place among eight rivals in a gazetteer, with no adventure aimed at him. He was part of Thay the way a mountain range is part of a map. The players might go around him or be crushed by him, but no published plan invited them to defeat him.

In 1991 and 1995 the answer became: interfere with his plans. *Red Magic* put him briefly on the heroes' side against another zulkir. "The Runes of Chaos" gave the players a ritual to disrupt, nine runes that couldn't be allowed to finish and a demon lord on a stone seat. The pattern set there lasted almost thirty years. He fails, loses face and survives. A 3e-era summary line recorded the cost: he "lost prestige recently after a failed attempt to harness the power of a long-imprisoned demon." Losing prestige is a political outcome. The players had damaged his standing without harming him.

Third edition answered in numbers: the players could do nothing unless they left the standard game. The *Epic Level Handbook's* Challenge Rating 31, with 29 levels divided among necromancer, Red Wizard and archmage, put him beyond the 1st-to-20th range. If the reported save numbers from the unconfirmed 3.5-era block are accurate, his necromancy was ten points harder to resist than his other spells, so a player character targeted by his speciality would almost never save. The more precisely third edition measured him, the more clearly the measurement ruled him out as an opponent. The Realms Helps fan compilation describes a character who suits that position: "calm, cultured, and even pleasant," with "wise, cold cruelty," someone "quite prepared to abandon servants and attempts that fail, simply trying again later in a better way." A villain who drops failed plans and starts again can be defeated any number of times without ever facing the party.

Byers's novels changed what was at stake in those defeats. The Szass Tam of the 1990s wanted Thay. The Szass Tam of *Unholy* wanted the universe gone so he could make a better one. The patient politician became an apocalyptic would-be god, and Byers says he made that change himself. The apparatus came with it: Dread Rings, soul-fuelled rituals and a pact with Bane he meant to escape. From then on, stopping Szass Tam meant stopping the end of the world, even if the only thing in the players' reach was a single fortress.

Fourth edition answered with a combat role. As a level-30 elite artillery monster he became, by that edition's own measure, a fight a top-level party could win. Meanwhile the *Neverwinter Campaign Setting* exported his Dread Rings as adventure sites for heroic-tier characters, run by an agent. The villain became reachable in principle, and his projects became reachable in practice at first level.

Fifth-edition hardcovers answered: the players could dismantle his support. *Dead in Thay* sends them after phylacteries, lieutenants and laboratories. Merric Blackman's report that afterward "Szass Tam was no longer the force he was" describes exactly the result the design aimed at. *The Rise of Tiamat* made him someone to negotiate with, and interrogations in dreams made the players' own answers part of Thay's decision. For about twelve years there was no official stat block, so no official way to fight him.

Organized play answered differently. *The Death of Szass Tam* put him "out in the open" at 17th to 20th level. The 2026 hardcover then did what no fifth-edition hardcover had done and gave him a full stat block as the end of a campaign.

What that stat block does shows the consequences of making the character fightable. In Bell of Lost Souls' summary of the D&D Beyond preview, he flies, casts *fireball* and *lightning bolt* at will as 8th-level spells, and has *finger of death*. His non-spell attacks are Paralyzing Touch and Soul-Draining Ray. He teleports with a burst that damages nearby creatures as he vanishes, and he can cast *blight* or *dispel magic* as a legendary action. Wargamer adds a multiattack of three attacks in any mix of touch and ray, and names *counterspell*, *shield* and *power word kill* among his spells. Most reports give Challenge Rating 25, and at least one gives 23.

Wargamer tested the fight and published the result under the headline "I tested D&D's new Deadfall adventure, and Szass Tam obliterated my party." On his first turn Szass Tam paralyzed the party's wizard and kept him paralyzed. Under the fifth-edition rules, hits against a paralyzed creature are automatic critical hits, and he kept up the pressure until the wizard's hit points were low enough for *power word kill*. The wizard died without taking a turn. The reviewer compared it to old complaints about the carrion crawler's paralysis and called the encounter a death sentence for a four-person party, a "cruel combat rollercoaster" that could be "tremendously exciting or incredibly frustrating." The test party was the right level but lacked the magic items a full campaign would supply. For decades the character's reputation had depended on his never having to fight fair. The first official 2024-rules version of him that does fight reportedly removes a player from the game before that player can act.

His appearance followed a similar course. In 1998 he could pass as a scholarly man in his sixties or seventies. The third-edition text notes that only his withered hands and a hint of dry rot give him away. In Byers's *Undead*, the Spellplague burns the illusion from his face and hands. The LEGO figure of 2024 is an exposed ribcage and a red skull. The disguise that made him a political operator gave way, in fiction and then in merchandise, to the skull that makes him instantly recognizable as a villain.

One feature held throughout: he works through other people. Sofina in the film, Valindra in *Neverwinter* and on the 2025 cover, the lieutenants in the Doomvault, the Red Wizards in players' dreams. D&D Beyond's primer calls him "a true mastermind-style archvillain who prefers to enact his schemes through proxies," an "unknown puppetmaster" who is "willing to play the long game" with "each defeat being only a temporary setback." The official description of his method matches how designers used him for more than thirty years, and it's also a description of a villain designed not to be fought.

## CULTURAL IMPACT: THE FILM, THE TOY SHELF, AND THE VILLAIN LISTS

Most people who know the name Szass Tam probably learned it from a film in which he appears for two scenes. *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*, from Paramount Pictures and eOne, opened on 31 March 2023 with about \$40 million in its first weekend, according to SlashFilm. Its worldwide total is reported between roughly \$200 million and \$208 million against an estimated \$150 million budget. Wikipedia gives about \$208 million, Collider reported \$202 million at one point, and CBR and ScreenRant give \$205 million. Rotten Tomatoes lists 91 percent from critics, and sources report the audience score as 92 or 93 percent. ScreenRant and CinemaBlend both called it a box-office disappointment despite the reviews, and ScreenRant later reported that it became a global top-ten title on Netflix.

Wikipedia calls Szass Tam the film's "overarching antagonist." The Forgotten Realms Wiki describes the flashback. He interrupts a ritual and uses an ancient artifact to cast the Beckoning Death, a red cloud that suffocates its victims and raises them as undead, as his coup to seize Thay. A figure called Dimitra, "First Princess of Thay," appears. The wiki, speaking as a fan wiki, finds the film's account hard to reconcile with the

books. It appears to combine the zulkirs' gathering at the Citadel from *The Crimson Gold*, the council in Eltabbar, Byers's takeover from *Unclean* and a new, film-only event in which Tam turns his own subjects into an army. The wiki suggests treating it as unreliable narration, since it comes from Xenk's childhood memories and from a book written a century later.

The filmmakers explained some of this. In a ComicBook.com interview, producer Jeremy Latcham said they wanted a child who showed "not all Thayans were bad," so Xenk is "almost a half-Thayan." They also wanted him "half-dead," which Latcham acknowledged is "not really a thing in the lore." Their answer was that Xenk went through part of the Beckoning Death and survived, which is why the sigil is burned into his forehead. A separate ComicBook.com piece reported that Drizzt, Salvatore's drow ranger, originally filled the role that became Xenk. The screen version of Szass Tam's coup was shaped in part to give a hero his scar.

The writer-directors described the villain in an IGN interview that Collider quoted. John Francis Daley said: "This character poses a huge potential threat to not only our characters but the world that they live in." Jonathan Goldstein said: "Szass Tam is someone that will be recognized by longtime players. He's a character who comes from the lore. He's one of the few that we plucked from the game. He's super creepy, and he's very powerful, and there's a lot of mystery about him." Goldstein's point that he was one of the few characters taken from the game explains why the film leaves him mostly in shadow. He was there for the players who would recognize him, and the plot was left to Sofina.

The film brought a deep-cut Realms villain into general entertainment coverage. Collider, ComicBook.com, Newsweek, Epicstream and ScreenRant all ran explainers timed to the release. Newsweek described Tam as the "real villain" pulling Sofina's strings. Collider's summary of the backstory, in which he hired rogues and adventurers to collect artifacts, matches D&D Beyond's later primer, which says that as a living man he built power "operating in the shadows, using a pseudonym to recruit adventurers" to find magic items. Bell of Lost Souls gives that false name as Tarloth Narmandur. In July 2025, Bell of Lost Souls wrote that the film was many people's first introduction to him. Wikipedia still notes that his profile is "not quite as prominent" as those of the liches Vecna and Acererak.

The film's influence can be traced in licensed products. *Neverwinter's Red Harvest* credited the film's Thay as the inspiration for its map and was promoted as movie-inspired. Wizards of the Coast's D&D Beyond ran explainers on the Red Wizards around the release and later on Szass Tam. *Idle Champions* timed a Red Wizard

event to the premiere.

Merchandise placed him among D&D's best-known villains. LEGO's twelve-figure series put him alongside Strahd von Zarovich, the Lady of Pain, Tasha the Witch Queen and a mind flayer. When LEGO and Hasbro had room for five villains, the Zulkir of Necromancy was one of them.

Critics' lists say the same. Den of Geek's list of the game's best monsters and villains calls him "a powerful wizard in life, apocalyptically horrible in death" and "one of D&D's signature villains," offering a crash course in the highest necromantic arts, the politics of the Sword Coast and the power of the Red Wizards "all in one skeletal blow." The same article says he became a lich on the battlefield "without any extra preparation," a lore claim the research couldn't support. He also appears on ranked lists from GamersDecide, Game Rant, ScreenRant and CBR. Villains Wiki reports a fan "survivor poll" that placed him with Acererak, Asmodeus, Demogorgon, Iggwilv, Orcus, Strahd, Tharizdun, Tiamat and Vecna. It may be an EN World thread, but its origin isn't confirmed.

The film's future is uncertain, and nothing ties Szass Tam to it. At San Diego Comic-Con in July 2026, Goldstein said, as *Deadline* and *Variety* reported, that he and Daley had written a sequel, but that he didn't know whether it would be made, for "financial reasons": "They're expensive movies to make." CBR and *Bell of Lost Souls* reported that Hasbro may offer the script to other studios. None of these sources says the script involves Szass Tam. A separate Netflix live-action series, *The Forgotten Realms*, from Shawn Levy with writer-showrunner Drew Crevello, isn't connected to him in any source found.

Among players, the latest signs of interest are small but dated. In July 2026 the blog Patchwork Paladin posted "Campaign: Szass Tam Stole My Life," and a group-finding site listed a game called "Deadfall: Szass Tam Must Die." Both appeared before the release of the book that prompted them.

## PRESENT DAY: DEADFALL AND WHAT HAS BEEN ANNOUNCED

The current official Szass Tam comes from *Arcana Unleashed: Deadfall*, released by Wizards of the Coast on 15 September 2026. Wizards announced it with its 2026 lineup in early March, reported by Comicon on 3 March and by Game Rant, alongside a D&D Beyond calendar post. Bell of Lost Souls headlined its coverage "The Red Wizards Return In 2026." Pre-orders opened in July. The hardcover lists at \$29.99. EN World noted that the low price suggests a shorter book, closer in size to *Eberron: Forge of the Artificer* than to older campaign books.

Its companion, *Arcana Unleashed*, released the same day, is a 160-page player sourcebook of high magic. ICv2 lists eight arcane subclasses, 33 new and revised spells, 19 magical creatures, 47 magic items, nine arcane factions, six group patrons and an introductory adventure, *Tomb of the Shadow Serpents*. Wizards marketed the pair as a "Season of Magic."

Amanda Hamon was lead designer on both. The Forgotten Realms Wiki and EN World credit *Deadfall*'s designers as Makenzie De Armas, Ron Lundeen, Sarah Madsen, Ben Petrisor, Anthony Joyce-Rivera, F. Wesley Schneider, David Somerville, Shu Qing Tan and Jason Tondro. EN World reported that at a mid-August 2026 press event Hamon confirmed this was the Red Wizards book announced almost four years earlier, which would make it a delayed project. The original announcement wasn't located. One lead points to around Wizards Presents in 2023, so the start date remains uncertain and rests on EN World's report. Hamon also spoke about D&D at San Diego Comic-Con in an interview Skewed 'n Reviewed published on 30 July 2026, but its contents weren't retrieved.

EN World called *Deadfall* the first full-length adventure for the 2024 ruleset. TechTimes, on 17 September 2026, called it the first official campaign for levels 11 to 20 under the rules fans call "5.5e" and described the release as closing that edition's big-campaign gap. The official pitch calls it "the ultimate Red Wizards adventure" and "a new Wizard War," in which the characters carry out "a series of dangerous, clandestine missions to undermine and defeat the archlich Szass Tam." Its contents, according to the publisher and press, are five adventure chapters, more than twenty maps, a *Thay Gazetteer* that Wargamer puts at 24 pages, fourteen magic items and six high-challenge creatures unique to the setting, including the Rendelith, the sarrukh and a

full stat block for Szass Tam. The reported statistics are covered above. A set of numbers circulating online, 285 hit points and specific ability scores, matches a fan-made block too closely to trust.

The setting, around 1501 DR, reverses fourth edition. The EN World preview and the Dungeon Mister guide describe a Thay whose zulkirs are "no longer sycophantic puppets." In reviewers' paraphrase, Szass Tam, after decades of absolute rule, is "just one of eight zulkirs on a council that does not kowtow to him," and some of the others consider themselves his equal. The party works for a zulkir whose name previews spell as Xelene or Xelnene Thrul, described as good-aligned or "slightly more benevolent." She is a descendant of an earlier Zulkir Thrul who, in the preview's words, "murdered countless Thayans a century ago." The preview spells him "Azbar," probably meaning Aznar Thrul, whom Byers had killed. She has learned of Tam's plot, and the other zulkirs have dismissed her warnings. Operation Deadfall aims to stop a ritual, spelled Malefice Mortum in some previews and Mortem in others, that would fill a huge undead horde with demonic power, creatures called malefites, so that he can overwhelm the council and rule alone again. Bell of Lost Souls connects the demonic energy to Orcus. Dungeon Mister says discovery could also weaken the barrier between the mortal world and the Nine Hells. Players can recruit Red Wizards in hiding who oppose him, and the campaign ends with an assault on his lair.

D&D Beyond marketed the book with two posts that describe his status differently. Post 2221, "Who is Szass Tam, and Why Must He Be Stopped?", lists his titles as Zulkir of Necromancy, commander of the Dread Legion, tharchion of Thaymount and "Supreme Regent of Thay." It recaps the civil war and repeats the thousand-year bargain with Bane. It says he hasn't yet reached godhood, but if he did he would be "an exponential threat, rivaling Vecna, to the multiverse," and that he "cannot be allowed to rise back into power over Thay." The post also gives his route to the zulkirate: he killed the previous Zulkir of Necromancy, the vampire Nyressa Flass. The Forgotten Realms Wiki says instead that other Red Wizards killed his predecessor. The official post is the stronger source, and the difference is worth noting.

Post 2237, "A Message from Zulkir Tam," is written in his voice as a letter to the Red Wizards, with a puzzle for readers. He says he has served Thay "for nearly four hundred years," that he "graciously relinquished regency," and he denies rumours that he plans to overthrow the council. Someone, he complains, is spending resources to paint him as Thay's enemy. He demands declarations of loyalty. Those who kept faith "will be remembered," and those who tried to dismantle the nation "will not be forgotten." The primer has him wanting

to "rise back into power." The letter has him claiming he gave power up gracefully. Together they show the current official position: at some point he stopped being regent, and he wants the position back.

How and when he lost the regency is the biggest gap in the current record. Research notes cite D&D Beyond as saying that after his ascension failed he lost the regency and brought the council back as a puppet government, and later tried to repeat the ritual outside Thay. But no in-world cause or first publication for the loss could be pinned down. The 2015 regional guide already put the council beside him, and the 2025 *Neverwinter* marketing spoke of his "wizard council." Given the evidence, the loss of the regency is a documented present situation without a documented origin.

Reviews in September 2026 were mixed, and the reviewers kept returning to Szass Tam. Wargamer called the campaign largely "an excuse to run high-level combat encounters." It found the players mostly doing "grunt work" for their patron, said the preset sabotage options replace player agency with a shopping list of targets, found the character writing thin, and judged the book "lackluster" despite its "tough-as-nails final fight against Szass Tam." [Dungeonsanddragonsfan.com](#), reviewing under the headline "A Fantasy Spy Thriller That's Shaken, Not Stirred," found that the book gets more right than wrong. It praised the player choice, the contingency planning, the high-level treasure, the guidance on running a spy thriller and a "solid" gazetteer. It also found the campaign easy to win, and said that after chapters of investigation, disguise and blackmail, the spy structure "evaporates" into two dungeon crawls in a row. *Bell of Lost Souls'* headline was that it "Might Not Be A Perfect Spy Thriller, But It Is Fun." The RPNBOT podcast titled its episode "Seize the Means of Undead Production."

[Dungeonsanddragonsfan.com](#) made the comparison that matters most for this history. It called *Deadfall's* Szass Tam "a somewhat generic threat and typical BBEG," using the players' shorthand for a campaign's big bad, and set him against Richard Lee Byers's novels, which it dated to 2007. Those books, it said, showed "an evil, twisted, complex and even occasionally charismatic villain."

The book appeared in several formats. Digital editions came out on D&D Beyond, Foundry VTT and Fantasy Grounds. Beadle & Grimm's sold a Platinum Edition that EN World put at about \$500. It splits the book into four booklets and adds fifteen WizKids miniatures, including six Red Wizards in paint schemes exclusive to the set, eighteen battle maps, handouts and props, and it was marketed with the question "Is your party ready to take on Szass Tam?" [GeekDad](#) covered it in July 2026 alongside Gen Con.

In video games, the *Red Harvest* pair from May and November 2025 is the most recent Szass Tam material in *Neverwinter*. The May 2026 module left Thay, and no further content about him has been announced.

Two future items have dated sources, and both are unreleased. WizKids' *Deadfall* miniatures set is announced for February 2027. The *Honor Among Thieves* sequel is written but not greenlit, according to its directors in July 2026, and nothing shows whether Szass Tam or Thay is in it. Beyond these, no dated announcement of new Szass Tam material after *Deadfall* was found, and anything further would be speculation.

## BACK AT THE COUNCIL TABLE

In 1988, Steve Perrin's sourcebook placed Szass Tam on a council of eight wizards who worked against each other to keep any one of them from gaining too much power. In 2026, the official material places him on a council of eight that no longer bows to him, where he's suspected of plotting to take sole power. After thirty-eight years, a civil war, a Spellplague, a century-long jump in the calendar, a regency, a failed apotheosis and a death in organized play, the Zulkir of Necromancy is back in roughly the position where he started.

The return isn't complete, and what was kept is telling. His biography never changed: born, by the Forgotten Realms Wiki's dating, in 1104 DR, zulkir in 1157, lich in 1159, while the setting's present moved from the 1350s DR to about 1501. Because he's a lich, the setting could skip a hundred years, kill off most of its established characters and keep him, which is why he's one of the few villains from before fourth edition still active under the 2024 rules. The official letter written in his voice says he has served Thay "nearly four hundred years." The fixed biography is the main thing that has kept him usable.

Byers's contribution was also kept. The Dread Rings, the soul-harvesting laboratories, the bargain with Bane and the hunger for godhood have all passed from the novels into sourcebooks, dungeons, an online game and D&D Beyond's official primer, which still warns that a divine Szass Tam would rival Vecna. What wasn't kept is the regency that came with it. Wizards has shown the result of his coup, but no source found explains why he lost it, and the current books start after it has already happened.

The design problem runs through his whole publication history. For most of it, designers kept Szass Tam out of

direct combat. The 1995 adventure let players foil him. Third edition's Challenge Rating 31 put him beyond reach. *Dead in Thay* sent players after his lieutenants' phylacteries. *The Rise of Tiamat* had players bargain with him. The film kept him in shadow and gave his apprentice the stat block. Meanwhile, the qualities critics praised in him, the courtesy, the charisma, the idea of unmaking the world as a work of art, were developed mainly in prose, where a villain can hold a conversation. When a hardcover finally made him a full encounter, the reviewer most familiar with the novels called him a generic big bad, and the reviewer who ran the fight saw a party wizard die without taking a turn.

His return to the council table may be the attempted solution. A regent-god can only be fought, but a zulkir among rivals can be spied on, framed, outmaneuvered and suspected, which is what *Deadfall's* spy structure asks players to do. The reviews suggest the solution went only partway, since the spying reportedly gives way to dungeons before the book ends. Byers's version of Szass Tam talks his way through a trilogy, and the tabletop version has only just been put in reach of the players, after thirty-eight years. His defining trait on the page, a patience that treats every defeat as temporary, also describes how Wizards of the Coast has handled him. The company keeps bringing him back without resolving the difference between the character the novels wrote and the one the rules let players face.

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