

The A(zalin)-Game of 5e Ravenloft:

A meta plot and campaign outline Frankensteined (or Mordenheimed) from my theories, *Mist Hunters*, *VRG*, old lore – and a dash of “nightmare logic” to make it come alive

(WARNING: Here there be spoilers!)

As any fan of old Ravenloft content knows, and new 5E fans are finding out: behind all the “weekend of horror” adventures, there is almost always a larger plot unfolding in the shadows. And those plots almost always involve Azalin Rex, the lich-king of Darkon. One of the most powerful darklords and certainly one of the most knowledgeable about the demiplane, Azalin has always chafed at his shackles and tried to escape Darkon —and Ravenloft itself. Here at last, we can unveil Azalin’s current plot – one that has already had profound implications for the domains of dread, and could have many more unless brave adventurers can piece together his plan and rally both heroes and unexpected allies to stop him.

Note: This document is highly spoilery. True, Van Richten’s Guide to Ravenloft *has been out long enough*. But this also delves into the Ravenloft Mist Hunters (RMH) *Adventurers League* series, and many DMs may use concepts described here. If you are a potential player or want to remain unspoiled: turn back!

With that, let the games begin...

Part 1: You’ll Never Win if You Play By the Rules

Azalin Rex, lich-king darklord of Darkon, has understood the demiplane as few others could. Long ago he came to realize that Darkon was designed to torment him: while it is one of the largest and more impressive domains, it was prison nevertheless; trapped therein he was unable to learn magic, a crippling blow for a lich; and he remained haunted by the ghost of his son Irik whom he himself executed.

But what Azalin did not realize until quite recently, is that these are all petty torments meant to distract him from the truth. His true curse as a darklord has been his unending attempts to escape the clutches of his tormentors... and to be destined always to fail just within reach of success, forever fueling his repeated doomed efforts.

For all his intelligence and arrogance, Azalin came by this realization not by his own doing.

For several recent years Azalin focused on an advanced cloning experiment to facilitate several plots – exploring beyond Darkon’s borders, spying on his people, perhaps even learning new magic. Stymied by his magical curse, Azalin could not modify the basic *clone* spell to produce pliable copies of himself, so he turned to other methods: namely, an artifact known as the Apparatus. Azalin had vague memories of the huge device from some point, and while he didn’t have the knowledge or materials to explore its more complicated capabilities, the insights gleaned by his minions told him a rudimentary version of the artifact could clone a creature. Collecting the designs he needed, Azalin built a prototype of the Apparatus at his demnese Castle Avernus and got to work. So engrossed was he in this newest scheme, he almost did not notice fate knocking at his door.

Part 2: See the Full Board

One night, Castle Avernus received a guest. As usual Azalin initially left reception (or punishment) to his servitors, but the visitor politely yet indisputably insisted the lich-king be summoned. Intrigued by a brazen intrusion into the seat of his power, Azalin granted an audience to his unnamed guest. While later he could only remember the being as “the Caller”, Azalin could remember quite clearly what it said and left behind. It remarked that Azalin was “playing the wrong game” – in fact he was being played for a fool. Brushing aside the darklord’s incensed reaction, the Caller casually presented an ancient scroll case to prove the point. The spell scroll inside, the Caller said, was powerful magic familiar enough to the lich-king, and its visions would provide Azalin with all he needed. As the Caller moved to depart, the darklord skeptically noted the gift was freely given, and asked what price he would truly pay for it. The cryptic reply was simply “If you play, I win.”

Some time later, after proper investigation, Azalin prepared to use the scroll. He did so, reluctantly, in the tomb of his son Irik, where he’d also conducted his Apparatus experiment – for in a cruel twist, only here could he even extrapolate on

magic already known to him, in the presence of the ghost of the son who so disappointed him in life, and in death never stopped counseling him to find absolution. Dismissing Irik's foreboding about the item, Azalin cast the scroll's spell. As its divination magic unfurled the lich-king observed time, space, and reality itself seemed to bend around him. He could see beyond Darkon – indeed he could see not just other domains but even other planes. He could take a step back to view into the past or go down branches of the future like forks in a road. Intrigued, he followed the flow of time to the future of his current cloning scheme... where he saw only monumental failure. Retreating to a prior juncture in the temporal path, he followed it to another of his schemes, to test a magic device with clones in order to become a demilich – which lead not only to a failed escape but also mass destruction, his own near-extinction, and a meddlesome new darklord in a neighboring domain. Another path, to try to harness the power of the Vistani Dukkar, also ended humiliatingly poorly. And on and on and on. Turning back to his past, Azalin saw other failures – a malfunctioning portal, a botched conjunction – that he had not clearly remembered before the spell, but now were laid bare.

At first furiously perplexed by his own surprising string of unending failures, Azalin soon began to see the truth: this cycle was his damnation. Darkon was clearly a land constructed for him, as he had suspected; but peering through the layers of reality it was clear Darkon's people too were nearly all constructed along with the domain; what's more, time itself molded and shaped around the domain to facilitate the ongoing lie – including forcing a mind as powerful as his to forget the lessons he learned from each scheme. The entire demiplane was fabricated out of shadowy cloth, falling like layered veils, to quietly blind and bind him and all its prisoner lords.

With the spell scroll's power waning, Azalin surmised that if there was a way to disrupt the recycling nightmare logic, it would be found where these shadowy bonds were weaker, where they likely first took shape: in Barovia, the first domain. Moving across both vast planar distances but also ages of time, Azalin came to ancient Barovia, before his sneering nemesis Strahd von Zarovich became an accursed vampire. The shadowy tendrils that enclosed the demiplane's current reality were non-existent here – except in two places. First, in the Amber Temple, a place Azalin knew to be associated with Strahd's descent. There, the shadows sat tightly coiled, like waiting snakes. Perhaps more intriguing was the second place he spied them: enrobing a darkly powerful lich by the name of Osybus. Azalin observed the power-mad Osybus conduct profane rituals and then, even with his own apparent demise, transcend not just his mortal shell but seemingly reality itself. Present at both these instances of the nascent shadows was a strange amber substance, infused with the vestiges of dead evil gods. As Azalin attempted to observe more, the entity that had been Osybus seemed to turn to him – through the spell, planes, time, reality, and all of Azalin's protections. Turn and see him.

And with that, the spell's duration elapsed, and the world around Azalin returned to what it was.

Part 3: Shall We Play a Game?

The profound realizations Azalin has as a result of the spell not only altered his plans, they altered his very understanding of his prison – and soon enough, they would alter the fate of the demiplane and beyond. Azalin stopped playing the old games dictated by the rules his jailors gave him. Now he saw the bigger playboard, and would play on their level.

First though, he had to find out more about this amber substance, about what Osybus had done, and about the realities of the demiplane. So Azalin conscripted a Kargat agent to travel to the Amber Temple in the current domain of Barovia, to study the amber sarcophagi there. The agent was only partially successful – the guardians of the place proved formidable – so while the sarcophagi were not reached, small samples of amber and notes from the temple library about the sanctuary's long history were secured. Unfortunately, this commotion at the temple meant the expedition drew too much attention – from Strahd and other interested parties – to be repeated. Azalin made sure to punish the agent's carelessness once all useful information was extracted. But the experience made it clear he could not trust his minions to be his eyes and ears. He would have to find a way to do it himself.

For the moment though, the investigation gave him something to work on. The purloined notes of the historian Exethanter revealed details about the temple, and about the amber. It was no mere organic resin or rock, but rather a mysterious substance that absorbed magic, traits, or even entities infused into it. It was used at the Amber Temple to trap evil vestiges through a complicated binding process. (Azalin also discovered the Amber Temple had been the greatest concentration of these amber sarcophagi, but it was not the only location. They were scattered across the multiverse by members of the original multiplanar wizardly order. Over time the edifices mysteriously seemed to drift into the demiplane, like moths to a flame, suggesting a strange relationship with the place.)

Osybus had stumbled upon this amber himself and, discovering its absorbent capabilities, realized that it would let him channel the power – in his case, the vestiges of great evil – trapped inside. Osybus combined the substance with other materials of dark mystical meaning into something akin to the amber sarcophagi, and then in a ritual lost to the ages co-opted the evil trapped in the amber to become a more powerful being — though whether a god, or something else, was unclear. Whatever it was, it seemed unbound by planar rules, no matter how strict. It was exactly what Azalin hoped to achieve, finally allowing him to break free of his tormentors (and perhaps even turning the tables on them). **[TBD: the relationship between Osybus, the Scion of Darkness vestige, and “escapee”. It may be that Osybus is the Scion, and Vecna is the “escapee”. Or Osybus is the “escapee”, the Scion is just a vestige powerful & evil enough for the endgame, and not Vecna. Or some combination. This also should be left loose, to allow for each DM’s DP definition.]**

Azalin fabricated a version of the amber substance at Castle Avernus, infusing it with some attributes as a start to his own version of Osybus’s ritual. But trapped in Darkon, unable to learn new magic, he lacked many of the necessities to recreate Osybus’s apotheosis. The closest replacement the lich-king could find were in other domains — to Barovia, to Mordent, and more. Again, he was going to need to find a way to travel beyond his domain, *and* learn new magic.

Azalin knew he was tightly tethered to Darkon – trapped like all darklords within a land bent to reflect, imprison, and torment. He’d come to surmise that domains coalesced around the gravity of a darklord and their evil, so changes to that equilibrium around them could destabilize the domain and create a chance — even if it was remote — for the darklord to escape the gravity well holding them in place. If he tried to supplant himself with someone else, using the amber substance as an amplifier of their evil, he speculated it would draw attention to their heinous acts and shift lordship to them. But initial attempts proved unsuccessful: whether he tried to replace himself with clones from the Apparatus or some other evil creature, Azalin always remained at the heart of Darkon.

So the solution had to include not just diversion but also aversion – hiding his own power and evil – from his jailors at the same time. Fortunately his own hazy memory of his time entering Darkon (when he had briefly appeared as both Firan Zal’Honan and Darcalus before reuniting into Azalin as a darklord), and the lessons from the Caller’s spell scroll held an answer: split his soul, using the Apparatus. It was quite clear to him now that, like dust over a canvas, the history of Mordent had been covered up not only in the minds of its residents, but also its darklord. Wilfred Godefroy hadn’t used the Apparatus, as the ghostly lord currently believed – it was an alchemist named Rastinon, whose fate had become intertwined with Strahd when the vampire and Azalin had tried to escape Barovia centuries ago. Rastinon had used the Apparatus to split his soul. But like a river briefly stopped by a dam, the Dark Powers had altered the water’s course – in this case the very nature and flow of time and reality – to rewrite memories of those involved, even Godefroy and Azalin himself, to create a false history designed specifically to torment Godefroy, wiping away the alchemist’s original story.

Rastinon’s machine was useless in the hands of a pompous idiot like Godefroy, and admittedly even in Azalin’s hands it had yet realized only its basic powers like cloning. To upgrade his own Apparatus to take souls apart, it needed something known as the Rod of Rastinon, which Azalin secured through **[blackmail]** in **[Lamordia]** from **[Jander Sunstar – largely depends on whether a Lamordia adventure is included in the campaign]**. Later, he noted that he would need a second

rod, the Rod of Houtras; this rod on its own could facilitate body swaps through the Apparatus, but more importantly when used together with the Rod of Rastinon it could merge together entities – such as two aspects of Azalin.

When it came to dividing his soul, the lich-king faced another wrinkle: even after Rastinon had been split himself, it seemed his two halves were inexorably drawn back to each other. Azalin suspected a powerful being like himself would experience this in the extreme, and thus needed significant initial and ongoing energies to keep his soul pried apart. Mordent again held his answer: Rastinon's descendant, also an alchemist, had discovered a way to "burn" spirits as a form of spectral fuel for arcane activities. Azalin's minions were able to glean the basics from copying parts of the new alchemist's studies, allowing the lich-king to attempt these magical fires at a larger scale.

The final necessity was to hide these events from the dark powers ruling the land, so when Azalin split himself apart they could not immediately sense it and adapt reality accordingly. His inspiration came from the temporal insights from the Caller's spell scroll. Azalin was aware of time distortions in the lands touched by the shadow elves, the Arak. Years before the dark fey had a domain sharing their name, where time passed differently — much like elves saw it differently from humans. That domain had since been absorbed into Darkon, now the area known as the Mountains of Misery. (Azalin realized this was another example of reality-rewriting logic: when the domain of Arak disappeared, few subsequently even remembered it ever existed.) While the elves were long gone, their lingering effect on the land lingered around the mountains and the nearby town of Vradlock. In fact certain minerals deep below the earth that — when mixed with other materials — could slow time or remove things from it entirely. The alpine and alkaline Lake Temporus, and the frozen animals ringing its mineral-rich waters, was perfect proof. Mixed into the amber, this substance would be in a sort of temporal fugue state. It would not free him from his jailers — but it would give them a blind spot for a brief time.

Part 4: Putting the Pieces in Play

Azalin was at last ready to take the game to the next stage: the "Hour of the Ascension". His final preparations included collecting a list of various artifacts that may be of use, knowledge that was needed, and steps that must be taken to keep everything in place. That included: insight on Osybus and his ritual, the Rod of Houtras to activate the Apparatus's power to merge entities with the Rod of Rastinon, artifacts to continue the magic fueling the Hour of the Ascension (the Crown of Souls) or protect the King's Tear (the Urn of Dreams), and a sufficiently evil and powerful vestige in amber to galvanize his metamorphosis.

Within Irik's tomb, Azalin oversaw the creation of an enormous amber sarcophagus of his own, built around the Apparatus. The Arak minerals make the sarcophagus a temporal shield that would obfuscate the splitting of his soul, the subsequent escape of the two pieces, as well as his final ritual and transformation. Since the sarcophagus would hold the Apparatus and his inert body, it needed protection from more mundane dangers, Azalin acknowledged. And so the King's Tear, as it would become known, would be held aloft in the air by magic – obscured from the Dark Powers, and far removed from prying eyes.

Ready at last, the Hour of the Ascension began.

The vast legions of undead stationed at Castle Avernus served as the "soul fuel" to start the event. The resulting energies propelled the King's Tear into the heavens, and Azalin into pieces. The lives of the many Darkonians, snuffed out during the destructive magic of this first wave and then in the subsequent dissolution by the Shroud, became another source of fuel for the magical reaction. Since even that fuel was finite, a spectral lure would subsequently be placed at the site of the explosion, Castle Avernus, calling a siren's song only the dead could hear, drawing in many spirits from across Darkon to feed the mystical flames.

The ongoing conflagration keeps Azalin pried apart, but havoc has ensued. As the Hour of the Ascension began, the soul-fire hitting the sarcophagus's mystical amber time shields caused reality to warp — making Castle Avernus

constantly freeze, explode, and reform at once. More ominously, Darkon was changed: for example, the memory-wiping trait to the domain had on immigrants simply stopped functioning. And the effects spread far more broadly, ripping the demiplane's reality in ways big and small. The explosion literally pushed domains apart from each other, separating them all in the mists. And while the destabilizing effects continue to destroy parts of Darkon, occasionally they lash out further to further wrinkle the shadowy fabric of other domains as well. Each time this occurs, the demiplane's strange "nightmare logic" quickly fixes the damage in those other domains, like skin healing over wounds. Sometimes there is little visible effect afterwards, and sometimes there is more obvious scar tissue in a changed domain. The mists sweep over these domains to alter reality so that history is rewritten, lands contort, and no one is the wiser as memories and even people change. For example, Falkovnia saw the darklord fundamentally altered, and massive hordes of dead – typically a Darkonian domain trait but now expelled to this neighboring domain – suddenly besieging its unprepared populace. Tepest and the Shadow Rift were piled upon each other like plate tectonics, until just one domain remained. And so on – in general the further domains were from Darkon, the less significant the changes – but effects varied, and few domains were left unscathed with their old reality. Darkon faced the worst though, not just due to the explosion and warped realities: the loss of its darklord means the domain is quickly decaying.

None of this was ever truly part of Azalin's plan, but nor did it matter to him (except perhaps requiring his schemes move quickly before the King's Tear is consumed by the Should). This apocalyptic fate of Darkon is only a byproduct of Azalin's primary purpose: to split his soul into facets of himself to facilitate his explorations, in order to get the items needed for his apotheosis. That split was meticulous as well: the most evil, undead, arcane parts of Azalin coalesced into Darcalus, a nechrchor. Flung into the amber baths of Nevuchar Springs in Darkon. As a malevolent entity it cannot "choose" to be evil, and cannot earn the mantle of darklordship; but it is tempting bait for the Dark Powers to watch, and its presence also keeps other "Inheritors" at bay. (If they became darklord, it might rewrite Darkon and eradicate Azalin and his schemes in the process.) From its reliquary in the springs, Darcalus is tasked with using pawns to gather specific magic items to fuel the final apotheosis.

The human wizard-king portion of the Azalin appeared as Firan Zal'Honan – a spitting image of his living self that, while brilliant and amoral, is not truly evil (yet). Firan has slipped out of Darkon, with instructions for what he must do but only a hazy memory of his time as Azalin. While Darcalus is responsible for finding key artifacts through possession (facilitated by his thralls and the Eternal Order at Nevuchar Springs), Firan is responsible for in-person research into Osybus, ensuring the Hour of the Ascension magic is functioning, and keeping tabs on interesting people — friend or foe.

The additional benefit of two "facets" pursuing two missions: observed in isolation, Darcalus's or Firan's actions might not be pieced together to uncover Azalin's plan. For that reason, the two are only vaguely aware of their shared purposes, till the endgame is nigh – though Darcalus is more aware of the details than Firan, who in some ways has manifested almost as much as the original Firan from ages past, as much as the human component of him.

Part 5: New Players In the Game

(This is the part of the meta plot built where the campaign begins, building on Mist Hunters as well as original content, and old lore ideas/adventures. Specific Mist Hunters adventures are noted with "RMHs", with notes about other sources.)

With the Hour of Ascension begun, Azalin remains actively split apart into a free Firan and (less free, but still active) Darcalus. Each conducts research across the domains on their own mission with their own methods. Both come upon the Order of the Guardians and their allies, specifically the scholar Radaga. Both also realize the Order, the Ray Agency, and their allies may be both antagonists but also useful pawns – in particular, the Order has a horde of evil artifacts it studies and safeguards, or agents that research and collect more of them. The Ray Agency and their adventurers also might fetch

items and information, to be scooped up later. Furthermore, Firan's in-person presence among them can engender trust as a mole while Darcalus (via possessions) serves as a clear foe to the Ray Agency.

Meanwhile the adventurers (who may have ties to these schemes, to be revealed over time) happen to uncover an amber sarcophagus in the House of Lament, and are referred to the Ray Agency by the Weathermay-Foxgrove twins who brought them to the House, suggesting Alanik might be of assistance. *(House of Lament VRG adventure)*

In fact, it's assistance from the adventures that's needed. The Order member predisposed to occult studies and who might help the adventurers – Radaga – is missing. Led by Firan's hints about the mythical amber baths in Nevuchar Springs, and then brought to Darcalus, Radaga has been dominated by the nechrichor. The Ray Agency is hired by the Order to find Radaga, and with the adventurers just recently arriving at his door, Alanik employs them in this task. Their research takes them through the masquerade ball and Radaga's home to find her gone. In her notes, it becomes clear she returned to Dementlieu very recently but then left again. That is because, after possessing Radaga to review her research, Darcalus uncovered the details of an artifact known as the Crown of Souls, in Kartakass, and took Radaga there. *(RMH-EP-01, expanded to include VRG scenes - Dementlieu adventure table ideas can also be included as sidebars throughout the series as many times they adventures start/end at the Ray Agency / manor in Port-a-Lucine)*

In Kartakass, Radaga-Darcalus travels from her home in Elmhurst to the caverns in the Martello Hills, but the protections around the catacombs and the Crown of Souls briefly disrupt the connection. Radaga, sensing a chance to elude her possessor, flees into the mists. Meanwhile Firan, interested in the Crown himself, heads to Kartakass and encounters adventurers coming from Elmhurst looking for Radaga. Feigning ignorance and working to win their trust, Firan helps them and lets them take the Crown if they insist, planning to retrieve it later. *(RMH-01, with a major expansion in the vein of the Feast of Goblyns chapter in the catacombs)*

Darcalus eventually locates Radaga (hiding, and conscripted, in Falkovnia), and repossesses her. Before it is able to send her back out on missions, she is found and returned to the Ray Agency by the adventures. There she is protected from Darcalus's intrusions for good, but has little recollection from her time under possession except for the names of a few artifacts and locations. Rather than directly return to the Order, Radaga stays on with the Agency to try to uncover the larger plots afoot. *(RMH-02, expanded to include VRG's siege of Lekar)*

In an attempt to keep a close eye on these adversaries, but also to continue his own mission, Firan appears at the Ray Agency and offers his services. He keeps enough distance to avoid suspicion (and allow him to continue his own work). For example, as Alanik prepares an expedition to Har'Akir based on Radaga's leads, Firan instead goes to Mordent to get Rastinon's descendant and information on the Apparatus. In Har'Akir, the adventurers uncover another amber sarcophagus – revealing that first they'd found was not unique, that entities of evil are trapped inside, and that their power can be harnessed through dark pacts. *(RMH-03-04, expanded to include additional exploration/travel of Har'Akir)*

Soon after, the adventurers also travel to Mordent on invitation by the Weathermay-Foxgrove twins, where they uncover clues to the Apparatus at the House on Gryphon Hill, and learn of Rastinon's descendant's nefarious spirit magic. **[Maybe also a functional Apparatus, or one being built, for some body-swapping reminiscent of I10:R2:HoGH.]** Mordent also ends up being a collision point for Darcalus and Firan – the former (via possession) for the Rod of Houtras, the latter there for the alchemist and his notes. The encounter sparks memories in them both and leads to an uneasy alliance. It also brings to their attention not just Gennifer's potential lycanthropy, but also that Laurie may be susceptible to possession. In a clandestine encounter Firan passes a focus item from Laurie to Darcalus's possessed host, allowing the nechrichor to track the adventurers' investigations. *(RMG-10, in a different chronology, heavily modified and expanded)*

Unfortunately the notes, alchemist, and Rod of Houtras are collectively lost by all parties to the illithids of Bluetspur, where the High Master has interests in them for its own plots. The adventurers find a way to follow the mind flayers, and

retrieve their stolen things from the alien domain, with Firan facilitating their return. *(Additional Bluetspur adventure borrowing from VRG and Thoughts of Darkness)* *[Could also be swapped in as a Lamordia adventure with other opponents instead of mind flayers]*

As part of the terms of their rendezvous in Mordent, Darcalus and Firan arrange for the former to possess a member of the Order that is being sent to Barovia. While Firan would benefit most in going to Barovia to learn important knowledge of Osybus, given his strong antipathy toward that domain, he is unwilling to do so. Darcalus possesses the Order's expedition mist walker, facilitated by Firan's knowledge of the Order and its Ray Agency allies. This method provides imperfect information relative to what Firan would collect, but it must suffice.

As the adventurers head to Barovia to find this missing Order expedition on behalf of their employers (and to understand an emerging pattern of possessions), the Priests of Osybus and Strahd von Zarovich both enter the game. The former, sensing evil power in Darcalus, and intrigued by the explorations of the Amber Temple, spy upon the various factions and try to intervene, but are defeated by Strahd's own intervention. Strahd's interest extends beyond a parochial protectiveness of his domain; he suspects his old rival, and wants to know more and sabotage it. He offers not just his aid but an "invitation" to visit him again later. Through his help, the adventurers catch up with the missing (possessed) Order member at the Amber Temple and return with him. *(RMH-05-06, adjusted and expanded)*

Meanwhile Firan has been planting the idea with Alanik that an artifact, Urn of Dreams in I'Cath, is critically important to this mystery of these amber sarcophagi and the hidden antagonist. (Firan does this in a way that cannot be traced back to him – the adventurers may even get suspicious of Alanik and his explanation.) In turn, Darcalus lurks through the domain via possessed denizens, to seize the Urn from the adventurers once they've claimed it from the Palace of Bones. In that confrontation, the adventurers learn that a key clue is in Darkon – either from Darcalus or the possessed host (who remembers the moments before being taken over, and begs players to help save the Watchers Stronghold). *(RMH-07-08, with some additions and expansions)*

The adventurers take what appears to be a tangent on this quest to help the Order get their house in order at the Wachter's Stronghold in Darkon. There they learn the Order's closeness to evil artifacts can lead it astray, but they save some members from their corrupted colleagues and the Whistling Fiend that comes to collect its precious artifact. While in the Mountains of Misery, the adventurers stumble upon the time dilations there at nearby Mt Nyid, Lake Temporus, and Vradlock – which seems useful, and maybe important, but in unclear ways. They find more immediately useful insights when arriving in Nevuchar Springs, finally facing Darcalus in true form and learning its possession capabilities firsthand. Likely defeated temporarily, Darcalus feigns destruction and allows the Eternal Order to revive it later. *(Additional Darkon adventure, borrowing from "The Heart's Final Beat")*

With Darcalus briefly out of the picture, Firan works to collect the necessary items (ostensibly on behalf of Darcalus and their shared missions). First he leads Radaga to experiment with the Urn of Dreams, using it to conjure nightmare-scapes and plumb their depths for more information. He uses this to trap her mind, and alerts the adventurers. They use the Urn to enter the nightmares – in fact, the Nightmare Lands – to help Radaga. That is the moment Firan strikes: he infiltrates Alanik's estate and takes the items he needs. That includes the Urn of Dreams, trapping the party within the Nightmare Lands till they find Radaga, who helps them find another means of escape. When they return they find several allies dead or missing, Alanik injured, and the items taken. The consolation is that some items are kept in the Ray Agency in Darkon — where Firan won't go. *(Additional Nightmare Lands adventure)*

Alanik and the adventurers realize Firan not only betrayed them, but both he and their mysterious antagonist (Darcalus) are after the same things. While it's unclear why, it is clear that Firan was interested in the Scion of Darkness (which he'd privately identified as a powerful evil vestige that could be used in the final transformation). The adventurers race to Valachan to learn of, or even retrieve, the vestige before him – but are pursued by Priests of Osybus who have been

dogging their efforts. Both groups are unwittingly forced into becoming players in the Trial of Hearts by Chakuna the domain's darklord. Assuming the adventurers win the Trial, the one with the vestige is approached by Darcalus in the mist and requests/demands they hand it over. If rebuffed, Darcalus possesses Laurie and looks for a good time to steal the vestige. If a Priest of Osybus or other person gets the vestige, Darcalus easily takes over them. *(RMH-09-10, adding the Priests of Osybus, expanded using VRG content)*

Realizing Darcalus is back, the adventurers likely determine they need to return to Darkon, but may need clues to understand why, and what to do. This is when Strahd von Zarovich's invitation to Castle Ravenloft arrives. During that unsettling visit, he offers up that Firan and Darcalus are both Azalin's original human name, that his old rival also has knowledge of the Apparatus, and the Kargat had been snooping in the Amber Temple. He does not know what Azalin planned, but provides hints about how to disrupt it (for example, play to Firan's current freedom and make him question why he'd re-merge with Darcalus). While in Barovia, the adventurers also finally confront their other antagonists, the Priests of Osybus, to learn more about their evil lord and what it might mean for the current situation. *(Story Award "Dark Invitation" blown out into a special encounter at Castle Ravenloft & Barovia)*

Upon arriving at Castle Avernus the adventurers discover more details of the great game being played and how the pieces are all linked: the conflagration fueled by souls, Azalin's disappearance, Irik's warnings... and finally from Ebb herself. When Firan appears to pick up the last pieces for the ritual, the adventurers with Irik's help may sow the seeds of dissent in him before he teleports away. Darcalus meanwhile uses Laurie to try to take the vestige-hero, and/or delay the adventurers from reaching the King's Tear. *(RMH-12, expanded to include more of Castle Avernus and its maps & minions)*

With the endgame nigh, the King's Tear begins glowing as the Apparatus powers up, and Ebb agrees to fly to the amber sarcophagus in the sky.

Part 6: The Endgame for the A-Game

With the necessary pieces in place (or as many as possible) Firan gathers up Darcalus and goes inside the King's Tear. The Urn of Dreams, along with captured heroes, creates dreamscapes that protect the central chamber (Irik's tomb). There the two pieces of Azalin are to be recombined (using both Rods) into the lich-king via the Apparatus. The process is then repeated with the Scion's host trapped in a special amber sarcophagi (assuming Azalin has it) merged with Azalin's phylactery. This makes the phylactery essentially an unholy artifact, amplified by the amber around it, that can pierce the veil of reality. Azalin, likely already half-heartedly fighting the adventures, is sent into his phylactery if defeated, and then becomes unbound.

More likely, though, something goes wrong. First, if not all the pieces are there, the Apparatus may malfunction. Second, Firan could have been tempted to turn and flee. In such a case Darcalus attempts to possess Firan, or someone else if needed, to complete the merger. Even then, Firan may give a hint to the players on how to win. Third, if the Scion is not available the villains may need to force the vestige-hero into the chamber (likely without the amplifying amber), or use a poor substitute vestige in amber (perhaps from Nevuchar Springs, or the Amber Temple, or even The Entity from HoL). Fourth, the party may simply destroy things. *(RMH-EP-02, expanded or adjusted to include reveals from the series)*

Assuming Azalin's checkmate move is blocked, several things happen. The Apparatus explodes, the magic keeping everything in place and Azalin apart ends, and the King's Tear falls. After the destruction, Azalin is whole again and quickly pinned down by the Dark Powers. Reality in Darkon is overwritten, Castle Avernus is put back into place. Azalin may be either returned to normal, or perhaps remains trapped in a block of amber, but regardless is again trapped in Darkon. Does he have full awareness that not only did he fail but reality was rewritten again around him? Or might he be cursed to have his memory rewritten too, with only the knowledge that he almost escaped but has now forgotten how. Either way – infuriated, unredeemed, and undeterred – he must try again... ***[Checkmate, and Game]***

APPENDIX: ORIGINAL “The (A)zalin-Plot of Van Richten’s Guide to Ravenloft” THEORY DOCUMENT

This theory document was drafted up and posted in early May 2021, shortly before VRG was published, based on PR and influencer posts as well as my own working knowledge of Ravenloft lore (e.g., who is Firan Zal’Honan) and how these meta plot tend to unfold. It was slightly updated after *Mist Hunters* was announced as well as pulling a few choice quotes from the *Black Dice Society* podcast (both themselves semi-canon or pulling from it). It turned out to be very close to the plotline laid out in *Mist Hunters*, though there’s a few differences. The two were merged together into the campaign structure in the main document. This is provided largely for posterity given the sourcing involved.

Summary

This preliminary theory – based on content in *Van Richten’s Guide to Ravenloft*, old lore, and some speculation with Ravenloft fans on social media, plus a few hints from *Mist Hunters* and *Black Dice Society* – is that Azalin is not only still around in 5E (despite not being profiled in VRG and listed as “elusive”), but is seeing another of his shadowy plots unfold.

This time, however, he is no longer trying to escape – or at least, not immediately. Instead, his goal now is to become a Dark Power. And his plan has three (perhaps four) steps to it.

The full theory is several pages long, so for those who just want the executive summary, here goes:

1. Azalin splits himself in two (or more) pieces, thereby shedding his darklord curse trapping (part of) him in Darkon;
2. The free part of him wanders the mists to learn the path to greater power from another lich;
3. Finding the necessary information (or “gift”), that free part of Azalin returns to Darkon, reforms the lost king, and completes the process (having aid in place before he split);
4. (Optional) As a Dark Power, Azalin either finds a way to escape Ravenloft entirely, or seeks to defeat the other Dark Powers (out of revenge, or to gain greater power, or both)... *if*, his plan is successful and his theories are right.

Full Theory

Now, let’s get into the detailed version, shall we? As step 0, let’s set the stage and get some context. Sidebars about old lore, outstanding questions, or other tangents will be interspersed in this document.

Old Lore Sidebar I: We want to compare what’s happening now versus what happened in previous editions — old materials give us clues to Azalin’s new plot, and this will anchor older Ravenloft fans in the current facts (VRG’s 5E Ravenloft doesn’t follow the timeline of previous editions, rather is inspired by it). We assume there either was no Grand Conjunction or it has no material effect on the campaign setting today – except perhaps providing Azalin with proof that trying to directly escape is fruitless and he should try something different. Azalin’s actions and the events right before “current day” in VRG most closely align to the old lore’s Grim Harvest (or Requiem) series in broad brush strokes: he decides he can’t escape in his current state as a lich darklord -- he must transform to achieve his goal. In the old lore he attempted to become a demilich, assuming he could then slip free. (Answer: nope.) He vanished, and Darkon split into smaller demi-domains. Now coming back to 5E, Azalin’s goal is still to transform -- but not into a demilich but instead into Dark Power. This has the two-fold benefit of escaping Darkon

and his curse, but also making him immeasurably more powerful. (It has potentially other effects, discussed at the end.)

Step 1: Divide and Conquer

In this telling, the event that Azalin orchestrated at the Hour of the Ascension was different from what he's tried before. And unlike the *Grim Harvest/Requiem* story in older editions, there was no Doomsday Device or Infernal Machine. In the 5E telling there was just: the Apparatus!

Azalin is aware of the Apparatus. It may be from his time in Mordent in the famous "Ravenloft 2" (*I10: House on Gryphon Hill*) where he was first introduced — though 5E seems to divorce Strahd from Mordent's history, and probably the same is true for Azalin. Still, Azalin would know that versions of the Apparatus, or blueprints for it, have been drifting around the Domains of Dread. For example, VRG has one Apparatus tightly tied to Wilfred Godefroy's story, has one cloning Jander Sunstar, and even has one being discussed in Bluetspur adventures (like *Thoughts of Darkness* in old lore). Whatever way Azalin learned of the Apparatus, he knows it can clone - combine - split people, and he could use it for his schemes.

So he built it, and he used it. Lo and behold, at the Hour of the Ascension in Castle Avernus, Azalin split in two: Firan Zal'Honan, and Darcalus. (It's possible he split into more pieces -- such as his "shadow" in VRG, heck even other pieces like Exethanter in Barovia -- but for this theory it's easier to just assume he split in two.)

Old Lore Sidebar II: *Firan Zal'Honan is Azalin's original name. (Azal'Lan meaning "wizard king" in his old land -- Knurl, in Greyhawk's Great Kingdom -- which he later took as his moniker.) The Ravenloft novel King of the Dead chronicles Azalin after he left Strahd and Barovia behind and entered the Mists. As he steps out into Darkon (which appeared to be long-established, but this is false history as it is newly formed) he did so as Firan Zal'Honan, with no memories. Over the course of the novel Firan learned of the evil ruler of Darkon, Darcalus, and tried to be a hero and confront Darcalus. Instead it turned out they were two sides of the same person -- Azalin, who had been split apart upon entering the domain. The two merged, Azalin's mind was reconstituted, and he found himself (trapped) as the darklord of Darkon. The experience may inform his plan now.*

Step 2: A Scavenger Hunt for a Gift

Assuming Azalin's plan worked, two of him exist: Firan with more of his original personality; and Darcalus as a more formless evil without much presence (VRG makes Darcalus a "necrichor", falsely assumed to have been summoned into some pools by a minor Darkonian character). The split is important, because neither Firan nor Darcalus has the concentrated evil or force of personality to be a darklord and hold together a domain, especially one as big as Darkon. So the Dark Powers lose track of Azalin as he splits, and Darkon shatters into sub-domains with evil entities striving to take up lordship - Darcalus being one of them. (Whether this splintering of Darkon was necessary for Azalin's escape plan is unclear.) VRG's Darkon section notes that a strange ongoing magic conflagration is happening at Castle Avernus, a "mysterious force now calls to spirits across Darkon, drawing them in to feed an ongoing magical reaction." Speculating based on an adventure description over in VRG's section on Mordent, home to the Apparatus ("An alchemist discovers a way to 'burn' spirits to provide fuel for magical fire"), it seems likely that Castle Avernus's ongoing conflagration is literally providing fuel to keep Azalin's powerful presence pried apart and free from the Dark Powers' hold.

However the exact details happen, it results in Firan not being tightly bound to Darkon, and he flees the domain.

Vexing Interlude: *In old lore when the Apparatus splits people it creates a “good” version and “evil” version, which would suggest Firan would be “good”. This would be problematic though, because Firan then likely wouldn’t want to fulfill Azalin’s plan (or need to -- he can just wander off scot-free). Azalin surely knew of this issue, so Azalin must have taken an additional step to ensure Firan was “not-good”, and would continue the plan. Probably some new capability of the Apparatus in 5E would allow for something like a split-clone, rather than a pure good-evil split. For example it can now do cloning, as demonstrated by Jander Sunstar (which fits with old lore as Azalin had created several clone “children”). Additionally on Black Dice Society’s Ravenloft campaign stream (which has tended to have inside insights) Firan as played by Mark Meer (also Azalin, we should note) says the Apparatus is “an amazing device... some would have one believe that two rather fierce enemies collaborated in its construction. Moreover, the Apparatus has the ability to separate aspects of a being... The theory holds that a single being, especially one with a dual nature, might be divided.” So it does appear that the Apparatus can work in many ways in the right hands, so likely Azalin was able to get it to split himself into the dual “aspects” of himself -- the powerful human archmage and the monstrous, lich-like evil nechrchor.*

It appears that the mind-wipe effect of Apparatus from old lore remains, as Firan doesn’t appear to remember being Azalin. He does seek to find information about “the escapee”. This term could refer to several individuals -- see below -- but one answer is that it refers to Azalin himself, as “the escapee of Darkon”. If that is the meaning, then Firan is pursuing the breadcrumbs Azalin left for himself pre-split in order to execute this plan (likely knowing the Apparatus’s effect on memories). Either way, Firan follows clues from Azalin or his own slivers of memory, wandering the domains to complete this step in Azalin’s plan: find Osybus.

Who?

Osybus and his story is new content for 5E, first in oblique hints within *Curse of Strahd*, and now direct and indirect references within VRG. Osybus was a lich that Strahd defeated in his human days with help from Osybus’s traitorous followers. (There’s a lot more plot -- and debate — concerning Osybus’s priests’ influence on Strahd’s damnation, but for this plot that’s not relevant.) In retaliation, Osybus had Strahd trapped in Barovia, as a defeat both Strahd and Osybus’s own traitorous followers. He did this by manipulating the Dark Powers into stealing Strahd & Barovia away into the Shadowfell. How’d Osybus manipulate them? VRG answers that in two places: Osybus himself became a Dark Power.

Controversial Interlude: *Van Richten’s Guide to Ravenloft’s statement that Osybus became a Dark Power is going to rankle some folks. In previous editions there was a longstanding tradition to not officially define the Dark Powers – by TSR, WoTC, Arthaus/the Kargatane, etc. In fact, the one publication that did define them and their motives – the novel Lord of Necropolis (interestingly also about Azalin and the Hour of the Ascension) – was declared “non-canon” by most of the Ravenloft community. The reasons the Dark Powers were always kept vague were a) things are scarier when they’re undefined, b) the DPs were not meant to be fought, they were the ultimate gothic/cosmic force heroes can’t defeat, and c) it gave the DM latitude with some DP-ex-machina if needed. VRG follows this tradition at first – stating upfront the Dark Powers are the DM’s to interpret. But even there, VRG offers a few suggestions that nudge DMs to define the Dark Powers (vs keeping them vague like older editions). Indeed, that same section of VRG gives names for Dark Powers -- Osybus being one of them, two others*

being Vestiges of the Amber Temple. That starts to show the writers' cards. But it's later in the book when we get the full hand: buried in the "Priests of Osybus" monster entry it not only explicitly states the identify of a Dark Power -- Osybus himself -- but by extension it suggests corporeal creatures can become Dark Powers. It also suggests some motives of the Dark Powers (revenge). Many DMs and Ravenloft aficionados will not like both the definition of the Dark Powers as well as codifying their motives -- and that's fair. But for the moment we will need to work with it for this theory, which at its baseline will assume the Vestiges and the Dark Powers are one-and-the-same. (A couple of alternative versions of this theory provided later may be palatable to those who don't like this approach to the Dark Powers.)

Azalin may have learned about Osybus when he served Strahd in Barovia, or through more recent plots. Regardless, Azalin knows what happened to Osybus, and wants to follow in his fellow lich's footsteps, but doesn't know how. So he must find Osybus. Where is he? In one of the amber sarcophagi. VRG suggests amber sarcophagi are scattered across Ravenloft, offering Dark Gifts to those tempted toward evil. Each has a unique vestige in it, so Firan must go gallivanting around the realms of terror to find Osybus the Vestige. When he does, he'd accept the Dark Gift from Osybus: the path to become a Dark Power as well. (We know from the Amber Temple that Vestiges offer more or less powerful Dark Gifts -- extending that logic, Osybus is one of the greatest of them all. And is most likely hard to find.) This idea of a search is reinforced even by casual references, like Firan's potential appearance once the adventure in the House of Lament is completed.

Step 3: Put the Pieces Together

The assumption is that Osybus's Dark Gift is not instantaneous, but requires a few steps -- much like Vampyr's powerful Dark Gift to Strahd. That is quite important, as Firan needs to return to Darkon before it takes effect. And required that beforehand, a key piece be put in place: before the Hour of the Ascension, Azalin set up an amber sarcophagus for himself: the King's Tear, the golden star hanging over Darkon's sky, waiting for Azalin's return (the fact that it passes in front of the sun and stars shows that it's "tangible" not part of the false sky). Coming back to Darkon, Firan would need to merge again with Darcalus — whether destroying him or otherwise — as it's likely Azalin wants his united consciousness to ascend. This assumes Firan goes along with this, and also assumes the Dark Gift can be transferred to the merged Azalin. Taking those assumptions to be true, Firan performs the necessary ritual to remerge, formally accepts the Dark Gift, and enters his sarcophagus.

And voila — Azalin becomes a Dark Power.

An Interesting Addendum (Step 4?)

What does Azalin do then? It's unlikely he'd be content to become an amber-entombed Vestige Dark Power hanging in the air over Darkon. That isn't much of an improvement for a darklord, even if he is more powerful now. So there are three answers, from most boring to most dramatic:

- Vestiges are more powerful and free than we saw in *Curse of Strahd*. They rule over Ravenloft, and that's fun (or food).
- Osybus is the Vestige that escaped its prison in the Amber Temple. So Azalin's plan's Step 4 is that he too must break out (probably with some help). If he escapes, he has all of the Dark Power powers but none of the prison. This idea

is validated if “the escapee” Firan is looking for refers to Osybus, the escaped Vestige. (The question then is where does Firan find Osybus if not in an amber sarcophagus, and if he can still grant Dark Gifts.)

- A different take on Step 4: Azalin wants to infiltrate the Dark Powers and destroy them from within. He doesn’t merely want to get power -- he may want to get revenge. (As VRG says, “The lich considered the Dark Powers his personal rivals and spent centuries concocting audacious plots to escape Ravenloft.”) If not only revenge, perhaps Azalin also wants *more* power and become *THE* Dark Power by defeating all the others.

Alternative Take #1 (when Dark Powers =/ Vestiges) — Old Ravenloft Fans, Look Here!

The theory above assumes that Osybus is a Vestige Dark Power and grants a Dark Gift that mirrors his own path. An alternative is that Osybus became a Dark Power, and that’s all we know. And that’s all Azalin knows. In this situation, the first step to Azalin’s plan goes the same way. But then instead of looking for Osybus’s amber sarcophagus, he goes looking for information about what Osybus did. Perhaps that is locked up in the amber sarcophagi; perhaps it’s across the domains of dread; perhaps it’s actually back in time! Ravenloft has always had some loopy time flows, and Azalin himself sent people to the past in previous editions – to Strahd’s past before Barovia became his domain. And if time travel is involved, who also has bent (or ignored) time a lot in old lore? Madame Eva, whom Firan has sought out as an Ally. This alternative theory has Firan, now free from his darklord prison, doing another time travel caper to go back to study Osybus. In a crazy, almost Raistlin-Majere-way, maybe Firan/Azalin *becomes* Osybus to either take his place in the transformation, or just briefly to learn information. Maybe he leaves behind for himself the information he needs in the “current day” to finish the process -- which means the lich Osybus of legend was in fact Azalin creating Ravenloft itself in order to ironically free himself from Ravenloft.

A variation on this idea is that Osybus is a Vestige but his Dark Gift doesn’t make one a Dark Power. (That *is* a rather insanely powerful Gift.) In that case, Firan must glean what he can from the Vestige Osybus and then take the rest of the steps (or go back and have a re-merged Azalin take those steps).

Alternative Take #2 (You Got it All Wrong)

This works in parallel to the original theory, not in place of it — because it’s not about Azalin’s plan, it’s about the underlying truth of the Dark Powers. Specifically: Azalin's theory is wrong. He *thinks* the Vestiges are the Dark Powers, and in-world that’s actually not a bad guess: they are powerful eldritch evils that grant dark gifts. But the reality is that the Vestiges are, at most, a front for the real Dark Powers. Azalin's intel about Osybus is only partly correct -- the old lich became a Vestige, not a Dark Power. (Perhaps Azalin is being played by Madam Eva, or the Dark Powers themselves.) So when Azalin completes Step 3 above, to his horror he finds he's a Vestige trapped in the King's Tear, *and* back to being darklord of Darkon. Now he can't even physically be in his domain, despite his power growth. It’s pretty much a giant step backward, and an unbearably awful result for him — so it’s something the *true* Dark Powers would truly love.

This, if I were to run this meta plot, is the truth. Because this allows me (as an old school Ravenloft fan) to keep the Dark Powers undefined and mysterious, but allows the use of the vestiges, and delineates the muddling between them.

What About Vecna?

Some folks have theorized that Azalin is not looking to follow in the footsteps of Osybus, but rather those of Vecna. There is some reason to consider this: Vecna was in Ravenloft in old lore and escaped (and is a third interpretation of “the

escapee” Firan is researching); he is an easter egg in the Amber Temple (the God of Secrets is likely him); his old lore domain (Cavitus the skull-shaped city) is an easter egg in Klorr; and he seems to be behind some uber-5E-wide meta plot (the timey-wimey obelisks in many published adventures).

However, involving Vecna here is likely not correct.

First, Vecna is not confirmed to have ever been in Ravenloft in 5E. The easter egg is Klorr is a bit oblique, and VRG’s only reference to him for Tovag, the domain of Kas the Destroyer aka Vecna’s traitorous lieutenant, only says that Vecna escaped *destruction* not escaped the Domains of Dread. Second, Osybus was introduced very pointedly at the same time that VRG introduced both its Dark Powers/Vestige link and introduced Azalin’s plot -- it seems too coincidental to be chance. Third, having a third lich (or even fourth, if you count Exethanter) (fifth if you add Khazan!) running around in Ravenloft’s meta-plot just seems too confusing. Fourth and finally, Vecna is likely to be part of some 5E-transition-to-6E multiverse-shaking adventure, not one unique to Ravenloft.

What Else Could Go Wrong?

This all assumes that Azalin is completely successful in his plan. Historically, that has... not usually been the case. (There’s a reason he’s compared to Skeletor.) In fact his plan may have already gone awry, or if not it likely will – perhaps with the intervention of “a band of adventurers”.

- *If it already has gone awry:* most likely, the splitting apart of Firan Zal’Honan and Darcalus went wrong. As noted above, it may be that Firan came out of the Apparatus more “good” than Azalin anticipated, and struggles between following through with the plan and doing the right thing (or just the selfish, free will thing). In this case, to get back on track, someone ... unclear who (a party of adventurers?)... would need to nudge Firan to complete the steps, or manipulate others to do it for him.
- *If it will go awry in the future:* a band of adventurers at some point could foil things. Killing Firan or Darcalus, destroying the King’s Tear, or even destroying Osybus / his sarcophagi are all options. Equally interesting is what happens then. Does Azalin get tricked or even convinced to re-merge as the lich-king darklord of Darkon again? (This is where Arthaus’s materials left things: after Azalin was reconstituted after the *Requiem*, he reunited Darkon.) Or does Azalin, or Firan, get a new domain? Or this time does the failed plan truly spell the end for Azalin as it backfires and destroys him, or the Dark Powers get sick of his s---t and let him be destroyed rather than re-imprisoned? (It’s even possible someone helps turn Firan to the light, and Azalin remains forever fractured.)

In-World and Out-of-World Open Questions (likely answered at least in part in VRG)

- What is Darcalus actually like? Is he essentially a non-player necrichor, or plays a more active role?
- Is “Death”/Necropolis not in the picture in 5E, or is it perhaps Azalin’s shadow? Related, is “the Shroud” consuming Darkon similar to previous editions, where it was the necromantic field around Il Aluk / Death?
- Is “the Caller” somehow tied into this plan, like in Azalin’s plan in the Arthaus Gazetteers?
- What is Eva’s role in all this? She likely knows exactly who Firan is, and probably knows his plan. Is she playing him toward her own larger goal, is she secretly sabotaging him... or does his goal actually help her out too somehow?
- Is the dissolution of the Core a byproduct of Azalin’s plan? Did the Apparatus’s power surge, or just the rules-bending escape by Firan – shattered not just Darkon but the demiplane?
- Is the Adventurers League series “Mist Hunters” – a series of domain-hopping adventures that ends facing “an implacable foe” with demiplane-wide repercussions – built around this plot? [Answer: Yup!] Early signs from the

adventures suggest the NPC macguffin Radaga is researching Amber sarcophagi with a mysterious partner — perhaps its Firan Zal'Honan. [Answer: Kinda yup, except for the Firan part, a surprise.]