

The A(zalin)-Plot of *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft*: **A Theory**

(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.

Note: This is highly spoilery. By this point Van Richten’s Guide to Ravenloft has been out long enough that if you wanted to be spoiled you’d be spoiled. But there are also a lot of spoilers from the Mist Hunters Adventurers League series as well. If you are a potential player or want to remain unspoiled: turn back!

JANUARY 23, 2022 UPDATE: If you’re reading this, I’ve survived Mist Hunters! And walked away knowing if this theory, and that series, map up to each other. Out of respect for the IP and work of those who contributed to the series, I won’t add details related to the Mist Hunters meta plot until the final adventures (with the “reveal”) are published in March.

ORIGINAL THEORY DOCUMENT (TO BE REPLACED WITH THE NEW CAMPAIGN CONCEPT AND META PLOT)

Summary (drafted pre-VRG, updated at RMH premiere)

This preliminary theory – based on content in *Van Richten’s Guide to Ravenloft*, old lore, and some speculation with Ravenloft fans on social media – 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.]