

## The Fall 991

### [Chapter 991 - Blood and Thunder](#)

Zac almost felt like the wet black soil beneath his feet tried to drag him under, trapping him in an early grave. But he plugged forward into the unknown, his eyes sweeping back and forth in search of Sinner Mounds.

It was both annoying and liberating that they hadn't managed to find any information crystals on Sinner's Lament over the past years. That wasn't to say no one had visited the area, just that none of those selling information packages had one for sale when they passed. It was also possible they'd picked a seasonal environment that hadn't been open for a few decades, and any information had been lost already.

Either case, they were going in blind with only their instincts and smarts to rely on.

Visibility was extremely bad. The pervasive darkness that held Sinner's Lament in a death grip was not a simple lack of sunlight breaking through the curtain of clouds. The energy released from the ground contained chaotic but powerful truths, bolstering the gloom with Dao and sin.

"Look," Ogras suddenly said, and the three stopped in front of a stone monolith a minute later.

It was difficult to tell whether the fifty-meter-tall rock pillar was a natural formation or something man-made. Any potential markings had been scorched clean by repeated strikes from lightning. Yet, it emitted an incredibly foul aura, and none of them wanted to get too close.

"Doesn't look like a mound," Catheya said. "But it clearly has an aura of sin. Let's break it open and see what's inside?"

Zac felt it as good a plan as any, and not even the paranoid demon had any objections. A twenty-meter icicle of black ice appeared above Catheya's head a moment later, and Zac looked appreciatively at the deathly engravings covering it. He'd already seen hints of it before, but Catheya had clearly revamped her ice-focused heritage over the past year. Now, there was a strong aura of death inside, and Zac almost felt like she had conjured the deathly water of the Abyssal Shores and frozen it.

The icicle shot forward, but the expected scene of rock bearing blasted apart by a branch-infused attack didn't take place. A powerful repelling force emerged from the pillar in a shockwave, pushing the icicle back. Zac's eyes widened, and an enormous coffin appeared to protect the three just before a wave of destruction flung them away. Instead, the shockwave passed them and continued for hundreds of meters before petering out.

"Nasty stuff," Ogras commented, glancing at catheya. "Need help?"

Catheya scoffed, seemingly taking the pillar's rejection as a personal insult. Two more icicles joined the first, and the trio generated a powerful resonance as they assaulted the pillar once more. The whole region shuddered as Catheya fought the land itself, and Zac frowned upon sensing that the energy in the area was accumulating.

The shakes and shockwaves seemed to have pushed more liquid to the surface, turning the black soil into mud. The foul liquid contained a decent amount of the native taint, but it was far from creating a problem for Zac.

The only one who had a problem was Catheya, but she'd already created something looking like snowboots out of ice. The temporary shoes kept the dirt and corruption at bay, and she only needed to occasionally reforge them before too much chaotic energy forced its way inside.

Cathey's attacks grew increasingly ferocious, especially after Ogras coughed and started toying with his spear. And after repeatedly attacking the pillar for a minute, it finally gave out. A colossal eruption of sin swallowed everything in its wake, and Zac was alarmed to find the energy contained a similar force as the blue flames of his pygmy skeleton.

It acted like an array breaker, dismantling the fractal connections that made up his skill. Thankfully, the eruption only lasted a second, and the situation stabilized before [Profane Exponents] collapsed. After things calmed down, only a pile of shimmering rubble remained.

"Anything?" Ogras said, looking around.

"Our guides would notify us if we cashed in a bounty," Catheya said, shaking her head.

"Well, something with that much energy might still be valuable," Ogras said, rolling his eyes at Zac upon seeing his look. "What? Not all of us have wealth raining down from the Heavens."

"Hey, I'm with you on that one," Zac smiled. "Let's check it out."

"I'll wait here," Catheya said. "The energy in that rubble makes my hair stand on end. So much for a suitable environment."

Zac and Ogras walked over, their steps creating sloshing sounds as they sunk to their ankles. The taint in the atmosphere skyrocketed as they stepped onto the rubble, prompting them both to look around with vigilance. [Void Heart] had finally woken up and started to swallow energy that [Purity of the Void] couldn't deal with.

Meanwhile, Zac felt a pang of hunger from [Immutability of Eoz] kicking up in gear. On the demon's side, Zac could see the stream of corruption entering one of his sleeves grow so dense that it looked like a vapor.

"Look at this," Ogras muttered as he picked up what looked like a large raw ruby radiating waves of ominous light. "What nasty energy. Almost looks like crystallized blood."

"Blood of an unorthodox cultivator, if so," Zac said. "Sinner Crystals?"

"As good a name as any," Ogras said, picking up a few more. "Might be useful for nurturing my flag. What about you?"

Zac picked up a crystal and tried absorbing some energy. It was chaotic and chimeral, just like what rose from the ground. His nodes could deal with it even in these quantities, even if the crystals were quite energy-dense. Zac even judged them to be somewhere between Peak-Quality Nexus Crystals and the Cosmic Crystals he couldn't use yet.

"A lot of energy in these guys," Zac commented. "Just need to spend some effort to purify the gunk."

Unfortunately, it'd be faster to absorb Nexus Crystals if he wanted to recover energy, and he could just use Beast Cores if he needed large quantities of energy to push his levels. Ultimately, they weren't much use to him.

"You can even use these things?" Ogras said with some shock. "Wouldn't want to see the kind of blighted item not even your weird body can't handle."

"Me neither," Zac laughed. "I'll take a few for emergencies and to study. You can take the rest unless Catheya wants some."

"That's fine by me," Ogras grinned as hundreds of tendrils spread from his body, extracting the Sinner Crystals from the rubble.

"Enemies," Catheya suddenly shouted.

Zac and Ogras looked up just in time to see Catheya rip apart a spectral creature with a couple of smaller icicles.

"Wraiths?" Zac said with surprise, but he wasn't sure if he was correct.

One monster after another rose from the ground, sharing both the dark sanguine hue and chaotic aura of the Sinner Crystals. They were translucent, vaguely holding the shape of grotesquely misshapen humanoids.

The creatures that had appeared out of nowhere were spectral in nature, but the deathly energies in their bodies were just a small minority in the face of the overwhelming sense of sin. From an energy perspective, they reminded Zac more of the Qriz'Ul from the Lost Plane than any spectral.

"Guess it was too optimistic we'd get these good things for free. Are they here for my crystals?" Ogras muttered. "Well, we can't have that."

His words were followed by a sea of shadows, swallowing all the ghouls around them. Dark spears full of his Dao skewered the creatures a moment later, ripping them into shreds before they even had a chance to emerge.

"Something's wrong," Ogras frowned. "They're not actually dying."

Zac took out a small throwing axe and infused it with his Branch of the Kalpataru. He threw it into the chest of a phantom, prompting it to explode. However, Zac gained no kill energy either. When following the energy swirls with [Cosmic Gaze], he could also tell the creature was slowly trying to reform.

"Not even the Dao of Life can kill these bastards? What in the nine hells are these things?" Ogras swore as the sea of shadows surged. "They're not ghosts."

"I don't believe they're actual creatures," Catheya shouted, her hands already full dealing with an ever-increasing number of wraiths. "I think they're resentment taken form. They're essentially part of the environment. As long as the earth is cursed and there's enough energy, these things will keep appearing."

"So what, we need to blow up the earth to deal with them?" Ogras said, pointedly looking at Zac. "Well, that's your cue. You're the blow-things-up guy."

"Can't you capture them with your flag?" Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

"These things have no soul," Ogras said. "Won't work."

A piercing shriek from a phantom who had survived their onslaught interrupted their discussion. It clawed at Zac and Ogras from over 30 meters away, and deep bleeding grooves were dug into the ground as blades of condensed resentment ripped toward them. A spear appeared in Ogras's hand, and he launched a salvo of illusory stabs that stopped the incoming wave of destruction.

"They might not be real, but their claws definitely are," Ogras frowned.

"And they just keep coming," Catheya added.

She wasn't joking around. At first, there had only been a handful of them. In just half a minute, that number had passed one hundred. And it kept increasing. Meanwhile, the wraiths they destroyed just reformed, adding to the tally.

"Gather the crystals as quickly as you can," Zac said as the large jagged edge of [Gorehew] appeared around his axe. "If they're formed or attracted by the Sinner Crystals, the wraiths might dissipate when they're stashed away."

"I'll take the left," Catheya commented as hundreds of crystalline flowers appeared around her.

It looked like they gently floated on the wind in a beautiful display. But to [Cosmic Gaze], they all looked like miniature bombs filled with ice and death. They flew into the field of wraiths and began a deadly dance that ground all wraiths to dust over and over in an endless cycle.

Zac took on the other side, releasing [Deathmark] while personally wading into the army of phantoms. The corrosion of his domain skill had reached another level upon elevating the skill to Peak Mastery. The bloody ground frothed and bubbled, and plumes of smoke rose from the ghouls as the skill broke them apart.

The corrosive domain dealt with the resentment wraiths as they came, but their demise was hastened as one axe wraith after another joined the fray. They looked like death incarnate by this point, valiant executioners conjured from the underworld.

A war erupted by two very different sets of wraiths, where claws meet axes. The wraiths summoned by [Deathmark] were far superior, but the resentment was endless. Zac and his summoned helpers killed everything as fast as they appeared, but the situation worsened. Two were destroyed, but three reemerged, and Zac could tell they were surrounded by thousands already.

"That's all of them! There are no more crystals left!" Ogras shouted from his spot at the rubble. "Holy hells, what's going on?! It's an ocean! We're surrounded!"

Zac frowned, and the world froze a moment later as he became a stream of death. He flew straight into the sky, reaching hundreds of meters in no time. He immediately understood what Ogras meant. It really looked like the area around the broken pillar had become a lone island in a sea of blood. The

waves looked frozen now that his perception of time had been shifted, but the bloody ocean stretched as far as Zac could see even when this far into the air.

Worse yet, he could see how innumerable wraiths were rising from the waters. He couldn't even begin to calculate the numbers, but he suspected there would be millions in a matter of minutes. Just how much blood and resentment had been trapped in the ground, and why was it all coming back up now?

"It's bad," Zac said after landing on the ground. "There's no way we can deal with what's coming."

"Well, the crystals are gone, and they're still coming," Ogras said. "So let's run?"

Ogras appeared next to Zac the next moment, Catheya already brought over in his shadows. The surroundings twisted a few times over as Ogras teleported them away through the Grey World, but the demon soon stopped.

"Uh," Ogras muttered. "I think we might be in trouble."

"What's wrong?" Zac said as he fought off the wraiths that were already bearing down on them.

"We're trapped," Catheya sighed as she pointed to the left. "We moved in a circle. Look."

Zac glanced over and saw the broken pile of debris just fifty meters away. It had already been claimed by a storm of wraiths that now ambled toward them. Zac knew how quickly Ogras could move with his movement skill, so something was obviously wrong.

"I think the ocean is forming a natural trapping formation. How is this an Orange Zone?!" Ogras spat.

"Fight and move," Zac said. "It might be just movement skills that are blocked."

The trio immediately set out, with Zac in the front and the other two dealing with the wraiths to the sides. The chains of [Love's Bond] were already empowered by [Blighted Cut] and dripping with corrosion, and they moved like deadly snakes piercing one wraith after another. A swing of [Gorehew] summarily destroyed the few that made it through the web of destruction.

The wraiths returned fire in kind. Claw raked through the air, and balls of condensed resentment were spat. Even the rising tide of bloody water formed spikes and constraints, trying to hamper their escape. Yet Zac was like a steamroller, destroying everything that impeded their path with a storm of violence.

The familiar sea of shadows had swallowed the sea of blood to their left. Innumerable spears wrought havoc, while Ogras complemented it with a graceful dance with his spear. Zac could tell the demon had made many improvements in his combat technique. He'd seen just how big a boost Zac's stances were when they reunited in the Void Star, and it looked like the demon had worked hard on that aspect during his years in the Million Gates Territory.

Still, Zac could tell Ogras wasn't actually embarking on the path of techniques like himself. It seemed more like the demon had developed a combat style that meshed better with his Daos than the crude techniques he'd learned back in Clan Azh'Rezak. Ultimately, Zac felt intent would suit the demon's battle style better.

Catheya froze the whole ocean on her side, which seemed to slow down the formation of wraiths. Those that made it through the sheet of ice were then summarily destroyed by her flowers. The trio's strength was more than enough to deal with the onslaught, yet Zac didn't feel optimistic about the situation.

He wasn't wasting much of his Miasma to deal with the wraiths, but Ogras and Catheya should already have used up more than 20% of their stores. And if anything, the situation only seemed to be getting worse. They had been running for ten minutes already, but the only change was that the ocean had gone from reaching their ankles to their knees.

"We'll run out of energy if nothing changes," Catheya said, echoing Zac's thoughts.

"The sky!" Ogras suddenly said.

Zac looked up, and he almost groaned. A huge swirl was forming above their heads, gathering tremendous energy. The cloud almost looked like a strobe; they'd probably have been blinded if not for the Dao-empowered darkness.

And then the darkness was dispersed.

The world was drowned in a cleansing white as a waterfall of punishing lightning rained down from the sky. The whole sanguine ocean was pushed to a boiling point, and each bolt annihilated thousands of wraiths. That didn't mean Zac and the others were safe. The lightning was indiscriminately trying to destroy everything on the ground, them included.

Ogras had blocked the first bolts with a wave of shadows, but his skillset wasn't optimal at defending. Still, the quick response gave Zac time to activate [Profane Exponents] again. A huge five-meter coffin formed an umbrella of protection while Catheya froze and shattered the bloody sludge around them to prevent lightning from spreading to their legs.

Ogras even fished out a set of metal spears and drove them into the ground in a circle around them, using them as lightning rods that would lead any stray arcs into the ground. It felt like they were witnessing the end of days as thousands of bolts rained down from the sky.

"Not good," Zac swore as he felt one impact after another on his shield.

The lighting wasn't just pure destructive energy. It contained a complex set of patterns that were even more effective at destabilizing his skill than the shockwave from before. Each bolt destroyed some of the fractals, leaving the whole barrier weaker. Zac could feel how the skill grew more unstable by the second, and nothing he did managed to turn the tides.

Meanwhile, the resentment of Sinner's Lament was trying to fight back. The millions of destroyed wraiths had turned into a shroud of darkness that tried to block out the lightning. But it was futile. Zac would have thought the Old Heavens themselves had descended if not for the lack of that ancient fury. The shroud of sin was purged, and the bloody ocean vaporized or pushed back into the ground.

Zac desperately held on, channeling huge amounts of Mental Energy into the skill to forcibly keep it together. Eventually, it looked like both the Heavens and the Earth had been exhausted, which allowed the three to breathe out in relief.

The skies didn't clear up, but they at least returned to their normal level of gloom. The sea of blood was gone, and so were the wraiths. [Profane Exponents] immediately collapsed after Zac stopped infusing the skill with mental energy.

"Whew," Ogras said as he dragged out one of his spears from the ground.

It had melted and turned into a twisted ornament, though Zac noted the material had transformed somewhat. The metal now contained a hint of that purifying lightning. If reforged, could it perhaps be turned into something that destroyed the wraiths more permanently if they returned?

"Three hours in and we almost get ourselves killed. This place is far more dangerous than the trial zone I visited."

"Welcome to the Perennial Vastness," Catheya laughed. "Where every zone is a deathtrap."