

## The Fall 992

### [Chapter 992 - Sinner Mounds](#)

The trio slowly moved away from the scorched battleground, unwilling to stay and afraid to run too quickly and trigger another event. Yet even after ten minutes, the surroundings showed no inclination of going out of control again, which allowed them to breathe out in relief.

"The lightning really saved our bacon there," Ogras frowned. "Were we just lucky, or was that by design?"

"It should be by design, right?" Zac said. "Otherwise, this place would be a deathtrap rather than a place for guests to refine themselves. It's not even considered a Red Zone."

"I think so as well," Catheya agreed. "I guess the lightning will be conjured when the corruption reaches a certain point. As long as we endure until then, we'll be safe."

"I guess we'll just have to keep going to find out," Ogras nodded. "Might also be because we destroyed that pillar. If we avoid those things and just look for the mounds, we might not attract such a calamity."

"Give me a few of those crystals you looted," Catheya said.

"What? Why?" Ogras said, his eyes narrowing.

"Has poverty driven you mad?" Catheya giggled. "I want to see if I can use them to create some sort of compass. Our current situation isn't too good, no matter if the ocean rises again."

"What do you mean?" Zac asked.

"We need to start looking for clues," Catheya explained. "With 300 Mana per mound, we need to destroy two every three days to break even. Even more, if you're deemed to have provided more to their destruction than us because of your strength."

"You're saying that with such a low daily quota, the Mounds are likely quite far apart," Ogras frowned.

"That'd be my guess," Catheya nodded. "If you're alone, you only need to find one every five days. If you find two, you're making a windfall. In other words, if we just run around randomly and have an unlucky streak, we might not see a single mound for a week. Especially if we get stalled by waves of phantoms."

"And if we fine-comb each region, we'll waste too much time," Zac sighed.

"Exactly," Catheya said. "Don't get fooled by all the Mana you've earned over the past days. Normally, Mana doesn't come so easily. Withstanding the eruption of resentment can be considered a basic test of strength, but we also have to use our heads."

"Can you experiment while moving?" Zac asked, his chains forming a chair. "Might as well continue further toward the center of the realm while we figure out a plan. I can carry you while you focus on the Sinner Crystals."

"Perfect," Catheya smiled as she sat down.

A moment later, a floating worktable of ice appeared in front of her, and one tool after another appeared from her Spatial Ring.

"Keep going. I'll scout the surroundings for clues," Ogras said before disappearing in a puff of shadows.

"It's hard to believe how much that guy has improved since I saw him in the Tower of Eternity," Catheya commented while she began shaving off the rough edges of one of the Sinner Crystals. "I mean, I improved because I got invited to the Abyssal Shores. But he's been in the Frontier the entire time?"

"Well, he did get sucked into a newly-born Dimensional Seed shortly after we parted the first time," Zac chuckled. "The birth of a new realm drowned him in Origin Energy, to the point his whole body got refined and improved. And that's just one of his lucky encounters."

"A gathering of fate," Catheya hummed.

Zac kept running toward the heart of the realm for the next hour, stopping at anything that looked out of place in the dour world. They could soon confirm that the bleak wastelands hadn't always been a desolate wilderness. They did find hints that large cities had once stood here. However, that was eons ago. Now, only hints of foundations remained.

Digging up the foundations of some of the ruins didn't provide any clues beyond the fact that the resentment in the ground was noticeably worse within any city limits. It gave credence to the theory a large-scale sacrifice might be the source of all the fell energy. Zac even found some Sinner Crystals sitting right in the soil within city limits.

Catheya ventured they'd be able to find Sinner Mounds if they found large enough cities. The resentment would be the densest there, possibly giving birth to whatever a Sinner Mound was. Unfortunately, they didn't have any better idea on how to find cities than mounds. Perhaps if they found a map of the fallen kingdom, but they didn't uncover so much as a scrap.

While Zac alternated between walking toward the inner regions and digging through the mud, Catheya was fast at work with her experiments. She had already refined dozens of raw Sinner Crystals, which now had the same shape as any Nexus Crystal.

From there, she'd begun carving intricate patterns on their surfaces, reminding Zac of the elevated Crystals he'd found in the treasury of the City of Ancients. However, these patterns weren't designed to make energy extraction easier, though Zac couldn't tell what she was up to.

"I've broadened my study of formations from just focusing on raising bodies," Catheya commented when Zac looked over curiously. "After visiting the Abyssal Shores, I realized I couldn't just focus on my cultivation if I wanted to become a real Heaven's Chosen. All the bigshots have some unique advantages. Formations will help me both in combat and while adventuring. After learning about the Left Imperial Palace, I've redoubled my efforts."

Zac nodded in understanding. He was the same, though almost to the point of overdoing it between his various side-projects like Soul Cultivation and his techniques.

"Well, let me know if you need more crystals," Zac said. "Seems there are accumulations everywhere."

"Let's not tempt fate just yet," Catheya smiled.

Unfortunately, trouble came knocking even if they weren't looking for it. Zac noted that the ground started to get wetter again, and it felt like he was walking through moss after rain. The ambient energy was also stirring, and Zac could tell where it was headed.

Five minutes later, he saw the first resentment wraith rise through the ground. Zac was about to strike it down, but an illusory spear ripped it apart as Ogras appeared.

"Anything good?" Zac asked.

"Nothing," Ogras sighed. "Just a bunch of deposits. I did find a few tombstones, but there was nothing inside."

"You dug up the graves?" Zac laughed as he destroyed another wraith. "Asking for trouble."

"Nothing happened," Ogras shrugged. "I destroyed a smaller pillar on the way back as well. The accumulation had already begun, but releasing a bunch of crystals seemed to have hastened the process. Also, we're clearly being targeted. It's like the bloody ground is conscious. When I moved quickly, I reached dry land. But when I stopped, the blood caught up. Even returning to my previous locations showed it had dried up after I left."

"So running away probably won't work, even if we leave before the ocean emerges," Catheya commented. "In return, we can hasten the tribulations by splitting up and destroying pillars."

"You don't feel we have enough excitement already?" Ogras laughed.

"Well, it might be important," Catheya smiled. "There has to be a connection between these surges and the Mounds. And the more eruptions we withstand, the better our understanding will be."

"Well, let's take care of this before we figure out our next step," Zac said, his chains already weaving a net of destruction around them.

"You two deal with this round," Catheya said. "I want to keep working on these crystals and see if I can figure something out while the resentment is surging."

"Sure," Zac agreed.

He'd have to cover a wider area, but it didn't much matter. Now that they knew they just needed to stall, they didn't have to fight as hard. The wraiths weren't too smart, and even simple tricks would slow them down.

"Good luck, my handsome guardians," Catheya winked as a small icehouse rose around her. "I'll be in my lab."

"Pretty convenient, that," Ogras muttered. "I guess it's time to get our hands dirty again. I guess it's time to see how my little helpers deal with this place."

A moment later, a stream of spectral creatures streamed out of the demon's sleeve.

"You've given them Sinner Cores?" Zac asked curiously.

"It's an experiment," Ogras nodded. "We'll see if that little bastard knows what he's doing."

"Bah! How could such a simple experiment stump me?" a derisive snort countered as the goblin warlock emerged. "It's just some condensed resentment marked by ritual magic. It might have proven a bit troublesome if the essence remained, but this is clearly but a shadow of the original resentment. A tenth of a percent, at most."

The goblin punctuated his words by gathering the resentment and throwing it into a pack of ghouls. For some reason, the creatures went insane and started fighting each other instead of advancing.

"See? Simple enough."

"There's the trademark Ra'Lashar overconfidence," Ogras laughed.

"You two are friends again?" Zac asked curiously.

"Hardly. But we've reached an accord," K'Rav said.

"As in, he gave up," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

"What do you know? I've gotten the chance to see the true nature of the wider universe finally. With this 'System' in place, I am better off helping with the realignment process of the [Shadewar Flag]. That way, I can be grandfathered into the Heavenly Path and given a chance at rebirth."

"So now I have a half-competent helper," Ogras grinned.

"Bah! You might have found some clues while sipping on the truths of the Lost Plane. But so what? Every Ra'Lashar Warlock has done the same, and see where that got us. Besides, a fool like you wouldn't be able to realize those goals in tens of thousands of years if not for my expertise."

"Alright, I'll leave the two of you to it," Zac said with a helpless shake of his head as he covered the other side of the ice lab.

Ten minutes later, they found themselves in a sea of thousands of shrieking wraiths that tried to rip them apart. Thankfully, they could quickly confirm by the increased intensity of thunderclaps that another lightning punishment was already accumulating.

Eventually, the sky lit up, and a purifying rain showered the surroundings. Zac had already set up his shield canopy but thoughtfully looked at the sky.

"Hold the fort, will you?" Zac said as he started walking.

"Ah?" Ogras said with surprise, rolling his eyes upon seeing Zac walk out of cover. "Lunatic."

"I'm just going to—" Zac said, but his explanation was interrupted by a flash of white.

Zac felt like his whole body was set on fire, and every muscle twitched from the voltage coursing through his limbs. Even his Miasma was electrified, though the effect was highly unstable. It was lucky [Black Death] was attached to a chain, or he'd most likely have dropped it. Since there was no time to lose, Zac forced his arms to listen. He threw his axe at one of the few nearby wraiths still standing, his eyes observing all changes.

It worked. He had infused his edge with his electrified Miasma, and the wraith had been completely destroyed. He still didn't get any Kill Energy from destroying the creature. Still, he could see that the

accumulation of resentment had been destroyed and purified rather than ripped apart only to reform later.

After seeing Ogras' spears during the last tribulation, he'd had the idea. Zac figured it might be the key to dealing with the Sinner Mounds.

'That hurt, you know,' a voice suddenly appeared in his mind as one of the chains flicked his head.

'Sorry about that,' Zac wryly smiled as he retreated beneath the shield canopy again.

A while later, the chaos subsided. Overall, the surge hadn't been quite as bad as the previous one, which possibly was linked to destroying the huge pillar before.

"The sky really holds a sealing formation designed to keep the resentment in check," Catheya nodded as she stepped out of her hut. "A lightning cultivator would likely be able to speed that process up by infusing their Dao into the clouds. Or even borrow its strength."

"Did you figure anything out with the crystals?" Zac asked.

"The Sinner Crystals did resonate with the environment when the resentment surged, especially after I engraved some amplifying patterns on them. I can create an array that can tap into that force. But I don't know how to tune my compass to a Sinner Mound without seeing one," Catheya sighed. "We might have to find one by chance and study it before I have any solution."

"Split up and search?" Ogras offered. "We should all be able to deal with at least one or two surges without too much trouble, especially if they get weakened when split up."

"Seems like our best bet," Zac nodded.

"Wait," Catheya said as she took out three crystals. "I figured we'd need a way to communicate, so I got these. Some outside communicators encounter issues inside the Perennial Vastness, but these are made by native materials."

"Don't stray too far," Zac said as he accepted a crystal.

The three split up, with Zac running straight ahead while Ogras and Catheya veered slightly to the left and right, respectively. A few minutes later, they were out of sight, swallowed by the darkness.

The sky rumbled as Zac ran. Occasionally, he flew into the skies with [Abyssal Phase], but it didn't much improve his vantage. The pervasive darkness swallowed the horizon, leaving him with a meager field of vision. Like this, minutes turned into hours.

"The wraiths have started gathering here," Ogras' voice suddenly echoed through his crystal.

"Nothing here yet-" Zac said, but he was soon proven wrong. "No, never mind. They're here."

"And here," Catheya soon added, and the screeching wails of her enemies joined the cacophony around Zac. "A clue, perhaps?"

It did seem like Ogras' tide had appeared slightly before Zac's, while Catheya's came last. It might mean the corruption was stronger in the demon's direction, which could indicate a mound. Then again, it might be the opposite, with a mound on Catheya's side gobbling up the surrounding resentment.

"Well, it's worth following up on," Zac agreed. "Let's see how the surges look when split into three."

In the end, the eruption came and went. Splitting up had weakened the onslaught somewhat, but it turned out that wasn't an advantage. In return, it had taken longer for the lightning punishment to condense, forcing them to waste more energy to stall the wraiths.

They gathered up for the next couple of surges to defend together before splitting up again. Eventually, ten surges and the better part of a day had passed, and Zac started to wonder if they'd missed something. But finally, there was a change.

"I think I have something," Catheya's voice suddenly echoed through the communicator. "Come over to me."

Zac changed course, veering straight left, following the tracking feature in Catheya's communicator. Half an hour later, he'd caught up with Catheya, and the demon arrived soon after.

"What's going on?" Zac asked.

"Over there," Catheya said, pointing toward the horizon. "I've seen lightning strike at the same spot three times now. It happens every 20 minutes or so. Furthermore, the resentment in the ground is being dragged over there."

"Finally," Ogras grinned, glancing at Zac. "I was starting to worry your luck was on the fritz."

"Let's just go," Zac smiled, and the three rushed toward the spot Catheya indicated.

Soon, they found it. In fact, it was hard to miss after getting close. Every large natural landmark in Sinner's Lament had probably been blasted by the lightning, so seeing a large hill really stood out.

Calling it a mound was an understatement. It was over 200 meters tall and twice as wide. Most of it was covered in the dense clouds of resentment, but Zac could see lingering bolts of lightning crackle within the sanguine mist before dying out.

It was undoubtedly a lingering effect of the previous punishment from above, but it was far from enough to extinguish the extreme amounts of sin that had accumulated. The mound oozed resentment, both literally and figuratively.

The mission had mentioned they needed to destroy a Sinner Core to claim the bounty. Zac had no idea what the core looked like, but it didn't much matter at this point. If he blew up the whole hill, the core should also get destroyed. If not, he'd keep digging.

"Alright, you guys ready?" Zac said. "I'll blast it apart in one go."

"Go for it," Ogras grinned. "It's finally time to earn some Mana. And I bet there are thousands of Sinner Crystals in this thing."

"Wait, you lunatics!" Catheya laughed, lightly slapping Zac's arm. "Give me a second to take some measurements. Besides, we should wait to see what happens when the next lightning bolt strikes."

"Alright," Zac sighed, but he still sent a mental command to his Duplicity Core.

Miasma was replaced by Cosmic Energy, and [Verun's Bite] appeared in his right hand. The moment Catheya was done, the Sinner Mound would be met with judgment.