

## The Fall 988

### [Chapter 988 - Sinner's Lament](#)

"What the hell!" Zac swore, feeling he'd just lost his winning ticket as he glared at Null on his arm. "Did you guys do this?!"

"It wasn't us," Null said. "High-echelon cultivators can send global messages for 3,000 Mana. Looks like you really annoyed someone."

"Someone wasted 3,000 Mana just to ruin my plan?" Zac exclaimed. "Was it those Grand Firmament guys?"

"Sender is anonymous, and the voice you heard is randomized," Null giggled. "If you want to know, you just have to become a fifth-echelon guest and pay 3,000 Mana for the information."

Zac couldn't help but laugh at the shamelessness of the guides and the Perennial Vastness. They were really willing to monetize everything. Still, considering the message listed his killing of that guy earlier, the odds of it being the Grand Firmament Coalition. Unfortunately, he couldn't do much now that the secret had been spilled, but he didn't deactivate his blueprint projection.

Not everyone bothered with the message, and there was no lack of obstinate people believing themselves infallible among cultivators. Unfortunately, the elemental who had just approached him was not one of these people. It laughed a bit and left after bowing in Zac's direction.

"Just my luck," Zac muttered as he walked over to Catheya, who had followed him the whole way.

"Not satisfied?" Catheya asked with a scrunched-up face as Zac stopped projecting his core. "You've probably earned more Mana over the past hour than I have since arriving. I just want to lie down and nurse my wounded pride."

"You look a lot like Ogras right now," Zac laughed.

"His heart must be as tempered as those baldies by this point, having to travel next to you all the time," Catheya said with a helpless shake of her head. "So, how much did you earn in your little caper?"

Zac opened his status screen, and a smile spread across his face upon seeing his updated value.

[Mana: 4,621]

It wasn't quite what he'd expected after hatching his scheme, but it was far more than the 1,000 he had been hoping to get before fetching a mission. The problem was that he only managed to find weaknesses in two-thirds of the people he fought. And some had such small issues that he didn't get a bounty for exposing them, though he might have sometimes found problems where there were none.

Conversely, some of the issues were incredibly problematic to his eyes, yet the opponents always seemed gobsmacked at being charged over 50 Mana for a blueprint bounty. In fact, almost half of his 263 points in Bounties came from just three challenges. The truth of Ultom had clearly ingrained him with a unique understanding slightly different than the theories based on the Apostate of Order.

It allowed him to see things others couldn't, though he usually operated on instincts. It was rare he had a clear understanding of someone's issues like he had with the Stellar Mage. Mostly it was just a vague notion something would go wrong if forming a core that way.

More interestingly, it wasn't always he managed to see a weakness right away. As warriors channeled their Daos or rotated their Cosmic Energy through their bodies, the patterns subtly changed on their barriers. It was like a sort of stress test of their blueprint, and Zac suspected even more loopholes would appear when fighting proper battles with skills.

"Not much, I earned just under 2,400 Mana," Zac said with a studious nonchalance, though he couldn't stop his smile from widening upon seeing Catheya's face almost collapse.

"Let's just go to find your shadow," Catheya sighed. "You've had your fun, and the missions will be released in less than twenty minutes. At least you can distract the others while the other one and I snatch a good task."

"Sounds good," Zac smiled.

The two continued toward the large building Zac had already spotted long ago. It was far bigger than the quaint storefronts around them, looking like a large blue cylinder without windows. Inside was the mission center, though it sounded much more chaotic than the Void Gate's base, where he first signed up for the Void Star mission.

The two didn't particularly try to look for Ogras—two Draugr reeking of death in a town full of the living stood out. It had been an eye-opening experience walking under the guise of an Undead Empire imperial in this place. At least one-third showed open hostility upon seeing him and Catheya. They would probably have been ganged up on if not for the rules in place.

Catheya had also received a couple of challenges, mostly based on her origin. Catheya accepted three, winning two and losing one, providing her with a small source of revenue. Their affiliation was quite convenient in that way for the two of them, though Zac suspected things weren't as fun for the weaker Revenants.

He hadn't seen a single one on the streets so far, though he'd seen three members of the Eternal Clan in the distance. Apparently, they arrived together twelve years ago and showed no inclination to mix with the other undead races. That was fine with Zac, though he made a mental note to watch out, just in case.

Ultimately, his clash with Uona was barely a blip on the radar for a massive force like the Eternal Clan. It was probably written off as a failed investment for Noz'Valadir before they moved on with their lives.

"Looks like you've had a lot of fun," Ogras' voice suddenly echoed out of nowhere. "A bit too fun, apparently."

"Well, what can you do?" Zac smiled. "How did it go on your end?"

"I ran around like a madman, scanning the crowd for people to challenge. Managed to get six wins and four losses," Ogras said. "Shame my guide won't allow me to use the flag."

Zac was a bit surprised. Ogras had come a long way from the unimpressive scion he met during the integration, but the people here were no pushovers. Zac had won over twenty matches in a row, but he was almost cheating thanks to his Middle Integration Stage Technique and monstrous raw attributes. The only ones who could put up a fight were those who had techniques of their own or similar advantages like Dao Intent.

As far as Zac knew, Ogras hadn't developed anything special except for his Body Tempering. So to eke out six victories out of ten as a newcomer, and without his Taboo Weapon, was an incredible result, even if it only provided a net benefit of around 200 Mana.

"Good job. You didn't happen to hear anything about who might have sent out the message?" Zac asked.

"Nothing definitive. But the leader of the Grand Firmament Coalition, Nerven Serku, is the most likely suspect. Maybe it's about saving face in front of his subordinates. The organization is bound to collapse if you just let your people get killed while looking the other way."—

"Sorry, I might have created a grudge against you right out the gates," Catheya sighed.

"That's fine. They're the ones who messed with us first. Besides, it might be for the best. If I can get the whole coalition to hunt me down, I'll make a lot of Mana."

"I guess that's true," Catheya laughed. "But remember, no fighting inside the Mission Hall, or you'll be ejected. Some people will be there just to annoy and distract people. Don't bite. Eyes on the prize."

"I got it," Zac nodded, and the two entered the building from one of the many entrances.

There were no receptions, mission boards, or information crystals inside. There wasn't much of anything. The cylinder-shaped building was almost completely hollow, a room with a diameter of 50 meters running all the way to the ceiling. Across its inner walls, there were dozens of levels of walkways, with hundreds of small balconies jutting out a meter or two.

There were thousands of small glowing bubbles floating in the air in the center. They were the left-over quests that hadn't been taken since the previous release. Most of them shone with an orange light, while there was an even mix between red and green. There were far more green quests than red, but less than half of the monthly red quests were claimed. They were simply too dangerous.

Curious about the missions, Zac focused on a random green bubble.

[Green Mission: Weeding out the Gerorin Forest. Daily Salary: 22 Mana. Remove a minimum of 150 Materia-attuned weeds a day to receive a salary.]

'What does staying in Gerorin Forest cost?' Zac inwardly asked.

"12 Mana a day, but you can visit that place ten days for free," Null answered. "You also get to keep the herbs, but the chance of finding something worthwhile is pretty low."

In other words, the quest provided 10 Mana of profits daily, provided you managed to reach the quota every day. Even if you succeeded, it was a far cry from Catheya's 1000 Mana profits in 18 days. Still, it could provide 300 Mana a month. If you completed these kinds of quests for three decades, you would have accumulated over 100,000 Mana.

"Display the quest," Zac said, prompting Catheya to look over curiously.

"How hard is it to reach a quota like this?" Zac asked.

"It's harder than it sounds," Catheya said. "If you don't have some advantage that can help, from herbal knowledge to an elemental-based Dao, you might not make any Mana. And it's not just finding the herbs. Most likely, they'll be guarded by Beast Kings of varying strengths. If you get wounded, you might fail to meet the quota for days while having to pay the entrance fee."

Zac nodded in understanding as he released the quest. Nothing came for free in the Perennial Vastness, and even the weakest cultivators in this place were powerful elites. Green quests didn't mean easy, just easier than the others. Catheya hadn't made a big deal about the quest she mentioned, but those glacier critters had most likely been extremely deadly. Just withstanding the environment would be a struggle for someone without an Ice-attuned Dao.

He hadn't realized it before. But if the quest was so profitable, why wouldn't Catheya have stayed for the full month instead of leaving after just 18 days? She had most likely been pushed to her limits or wounded and forced to leave the dangerous environment.

"Let's find a spot," Catheya said, leading Zac up a set of stairs until they were roughly midway up the walls.

More than two-thirds of the balconies were already claimed, while some people were content staying at the railing of the walkways. The balconies provided nominally better positions, but many felt it was not worth getting into a dispute over. There was ultimately a strong element of chance for the mission release.

Catheya and Zac claimed one of the balconies while he spotted Ogras appear on the opposite side of the building. They were still connected through a string of shadows, allowing them to converse freely. It was a benefit brought by his weird constitution, where the shadows could be considered part of his body.

"If you see something interesting, immediately reserve it," Catheya reminded. "You have thirty seconds to decide whether to take it or not. If not, just give it up before the 30 seconds are up. You can only have one mission active at a time."

"Got it," Zac said.

There was no way to prepare for the mission release. Everyone just stood waiting, looking out across the large empty room. The conversations eventually died down as the lingering quests from last month faded away. Another minute passed, and Zac looked on with anticipation as the ambient energy grew.

Suddenly, a bolt of golden lightning, followed by utter chaos.

A typhoon of innumerable glowing balls had appeared out of nowhere like a storm trapped in a bottle. They swirled around in the central region of the mission hall, their rapid movements so erratic it was often hard to even make out the color of individual tasks. The only clue was the weak hint of various Daos you could feel when focusing on certain regions. No wonder Catheya managed to snatch a valuable quest before a whole coalition. In the face of such chaos, there were no guarantees, even if you knew about the quest.

Zac felt like he was inside one of those cash games where people tried to grab onto as many bills as they could in a limited timeframe. His gaze flitted back and forth, trying to find an orange light that resonated with his Daos. He was somewhat confident in completing suitable Red Missions from the get-go. But those required either perfect alignment, a lot of helpers, or massive stores of Mana.

If you had none of those, you'd be courting death in such a place. Even if you didn't get yourself killed or wounded, you'd still have an extremely hard time completing the quest, meaning you'd probably lose thousands of Mana.

The three of them planned on taking on a quest together to work on their cooperation and get the hang of things. A Red Mission was out of the question because they all had different paths. It would be better if they waited until they reached the middle echelons before taking such risks together.

Zac finally sensed something promising in the storm. Something emitted hints of ice and some illusory Dao. Such a quest would mesh with Catheya and Ogras while letting him get a taste of the dangers in an unfriendly Orange Zone. But before localizing the specific quest bubble, Zac suddenly heard an incredibly loud bang behind him, followed by a blinding flash that inundated him in the Dao of Light.

It was just for a moment, yet he lost track of the wisp of Dao in the chaotic storm. Zac swore with annoyance, glancing back at two men who had positioned themselves right behind their balcony. One held a cymbal in his hand, while the other held a lamp that was the source of the strobe-like light drowning their balcony.

They clearly weren't there to get a mission but to ruin the hunt of others. And they weren't alone. The Mission Hall had become a madhouse where all senses were assaulted. Some factions even had guards that physically blocked their surroundings to lessen the commotion for those looking for suitable missions.

"I'll remember your faces," Zac snorted.

"Too bad they're fake ones, you rotting bastard," the man snickered, once more slamming the cymbal.

"Ignore them," Catheya said.

'I have something,' Ogras suddenly said from within the shadows. 'Orange bounty eradication quest. Some ancient burial site called Sinner's Lament. Lightning and Darkness, with Death creeping up from the ground. Decent rewards from what I can tell.'

Zac felt it sounded even better than the one he had just lost out on, but he first glanced at Catheya, who nodded. "Sounds good. No orange quests have bad rewards, and bounty eradication quests are quite popular since they mostly rely on martial strength. It should be a suitable first mission."

"Take it," Zac said.

Two seconds later, Null spoke up as a mission prompt appeared in front of him. "You have a mission invitation from guest Ogras."

[Orange Mission: Destroy the Cursed Mounds of Sinner's Lament. Bounty: 300 Mana per destroyed Mound. Mounds are considered destroyed when the Sinner's Nucleus is crushed. Maximum Participants: 10.]

"Accept," Zac said, and he was surprised to sense the mission's Dao aura from his bracelet.

"It's to breed some conflict. If people sense the auras, they might figure out where we're going," Catheya explained upon seeing Zac's reaction. "Alright, let's get out of here. Our two friends here are giving me a headache."

Zac wanted to do something against the two agitators, but he didn't dare create another mess. However, he felt a frigid cold emanate from Catheya as she passed the two disruptors.

"The years are long, and the two of you are at the bottom of the totem pole," Catheya smiled. "Watch your backs."

With that, they left the mission hall, and Zac saw a stream of people leaving. Many likely rushed toward the teleporters to get out of the city before their grace period ended. Others wanted to be gone before too many people recorded the aura lingering on their wrists.

Zac didn't much care. He welcomed low-echelon cultivators hunting him down in the Sinner's Lament. Time was limited, and the more free Mana he could get, the better.

"Before we head out, I need to deal with something," Ogras's voice suddenly appeared.

"What?" Zac said with confusion.

'I didn't break through my Body Tempering Method when I got the creature from that Umbra bastard. It's sealed, but I can't keep it for much longer now that it has been taken out of suspended animation,' Ogras explained. 'I need three days.'

Zac nodded, realizing Ogras had the same plans as he; to accumulate breakthroughs for free contribution points.

"Let's meet up in three days, then," Zac said, drawing a surprised look from Catheya. "If you need me, I'll stick around in Vastness City a while longer."

"You're planning on scamming some more people?" Ogras laughed. "In a place like this, there's bound to be people taking that message as a challenge. Have fun, I'll use a few of my trial visits to get a feel of the dangers while dealing with my matter."

Ogras was right on the money. The notice had harmed his business, but the days around the mission release were the liveliest. It would be a shame to just give up on all that free Mana.

"What about you?" Zac asked, glancing at Catheya.

"I've already expended all my trial visits," Catheya slowly said. "If it's just three days, I'll accompany you. Maybe you can take a look at my core as well? I formed my blueprint by combining my clan's heritage with the truths of that place, but I may have missed something."

"Of course," Zac agreed. "But I'm just going by instinct when I find weaknesses. I doubt I could explain even if I found something."

"Just knowing there's a problem is enough," Catheya said, locking her arm in Zac's. "Why don't we take a stroll through the market district? It's one of the livelier places this time of the month. You can't duel

there, but there are arenas right outside. If you showcase your blueprint, you can lure a few people out of the safe zone."

"I'll go stab something in the wilderness," Ogras muttered. "I'm afraid I'll go crazy over the unjust treatment of the Heavens otherwise."

"Alright," Zac smiled. "To the Market."