

The Fall 1011

[Chapter 1011 - The Quarry](#)

Zac checked everything was in order before stepping through the teleporter. He had returned to his human appearance for this excursion. He wasn't worried about being attacked—the Quarry was a green zone, after all. But Arcaz Umbri'Zi had created too many enmities in the short run since he'd arrived.

If someone spotted him walking around in the Quarry, there was a real risk of people coming over to annoy and distract him while looking for treasure. And he didn't want any strangers around if he found whatever item that made even an Autarch take note. It wasn't without some excitement Zac stepped through, and the soothing sound of a babbling brook and wind rustling in trees replaced the hymns of the Akaniṣṭha.

Zac had once visited a quarry on a field trip when he was young. It was that kind of environment he'd envisioned; a large hole dug out of the bedrock, perhaps with tunnels deeper into the ground. The picturesque image of a stream cutting through a hilly forest under a warm sunset was a bit jarring, even if he'd already read the reports. Of course, the information he'd gathered on the Quarry was more on function than form.

The Quarry was, just like the Keys of Ascension, a special Green Zone and one of the unique resources of the Perennial Vastness. It wasn't spiritual stones or metals you excavated from this place, but rather something called Fate Kernels. Fate Kernels were a special Natural Treasure useful for core formation and nothing else. They essentially acted as an amplifier of natural affinities, improving your connection to the Dao while speeding up the formation of your core. A Low-quality Kernel improved the formation rate by roughly five percent, with each additional grade adding another five.

Saving a bit of time usually wasn't that big of a deal for cultivators who counted their lifespan in millennia, but it was different when it came to breakthroughs. Even a talented cultivator would need months to form a core. Every single mistake during that process would lower the result. A big mishap would ruin the whole process and likely kill you. The Fate Kernels would lower the odds of this happening.

There were a few caveats, though. The most important was that they didn't last long. They'd dissipate a few minutes after being excavated unless you absorbed or returned them to the ground. Therefore, you had to find your kernel yourself—there would never be any Fate Kernels appearing in the Vastness City. There had been a few occasions where cultivators had managed to sell suitable kernels to other nearby guests, but the odds of that happening were incredibly low.

Secondly, you'd have to find a Fate Kernel matching your path. If the kernel's affinities were even partly off, they'd do more harm than good. Third, there was no way to easily find them. At least there were no publicly known methods. They were hidden by natural formations, and stumbling upon them was a matter of luck and fate—hence the name. They even moved around, so encountering a good but unusable kernel was useless. You couldn't sell the location to a suitable cultivator. Most cultivators would spend a couple weeks in the Quarry to try their luck. If they hadn't found anything by that point, they simply weren't fated.

As for Zac, he likely wouldn't have bothered with more than using the free week in the Quarry if not for Engo's comment. Learning about the function of the Fate Kernels had only increased Zac's confusion rather than explained Autarch's suggestion. After all, Fate Kernels wouldn't work on him.

The kernels improved your Core Formation process by amplifying your affinities, but what good did that do him? It was useless even if he lucked out and somehow found a Life-Death-Conflict Peak-Quality Fate Kernel. A 20% boost on 0 was still 0, something which Null had confirmed. A normal mortal might have had some use of the kernels, though cultivators with high affinities had the most to gain from them.

There were no other treasures in the Quarry except the Fate Kernels either. The environment was essentially F-grade, with just enough spirituality to not cause discomfort. It was a far cry from The Calamity, which was so overloaded by energies and Dao that it was almost hard to breathe. Even then, Zac was full of anticipation as he set out. Perhaps there were secrets to this place beyond the publicly known information in Vastness City. Lord Engo shouldn't be so bored as to throw out red herrings to random low-grade cultivators.

Zac looked around the forest and eventually spotted a small marking on a tree. He began walking in the opposite direction, following a series of guiding markers until he arrived at a stout tree almost twice as big as the others.

"You're here," Ogras grinned as he stepped out from its shadows. "How's the missus?"

"She's fine," Zac said as he looked around. "Odd that items useful for core formations would appear in this kind of world."

"Definitely," Ogras agreed. "This place reminds me of some of the rootless worlds I visited in the Million Gates Territory. It's almost unnerving there's not even beasts to keep you on your toes."

"So, we should just pick some random direction and start looking?" Zac asked.

"We might want to head to the riverbeds," Ogras said as he took out a large map depicting the region. "From the looks of it, the riverbeds have been producing a good number of Medium-quality Fate Kernels. A few have even walked away with High-quality kernels from there."

"What's special about that place?" Zac asked curiously.

"Not sure," Ogras said. "Might be energy patterns or something. One theory is that the 'best' region changes over time, or perhaps between Cosmic Galleries. My map has six other observed hotspots, but the riverbeds are the closest. Of course, with your Luck, we can probably go anywhere as long as we avoid the starting region or the dried-up veins."

"Well, this place isn't that big," Zac said. "The riverbeds are just over one day's travel away. We can check it out first. We can try another hotspot before returning if we don't find anything within a few days."

"Sure," Ogras nodded, stowing away the maps as they started running. "Let's rush straight for the hotspot. I hear it's almost impossible to find anything this close to the—"

"There's one," Zac interjected.

The two stopped, and Ogras followed Zac's eyes to a nondescript stone a few meters away.

"What? That thing?" Ogras said skeptically. "How could you possibly know that? I hear you need to release your Daos in waves to create resonance. And if that fails, break open things to see if anything's inside. Are you making things up, hoping to prove me wrong?"

"Just a hunch," Zac smiled as he walked over. "Proving you wrong would just be a fun bonus."

"Whatever," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "No one will be happier than me if you can actually sniff out Fate Kernels like a bloodhound. We might not be allowed to bring those things out of this place, but we could make some Mana selling your talents."

"Guess we'll find out," Zac laughed.

He touched the stone and felt a cool sensation, and his heartbeat sped up as his hand entered the surface as though it was liquid. He reached around a second before dragging out what looked like a metal walnut. A smile spread across his face as he felt the weak fluctuations from within. The kernel was clearly low-quality, and it contained a Dao Zac didn't quite recognize. He guessed it was something related to the peak of Impetus, but its aura was too weak to confirm.

"What the..." Ogras muttered as he walked over. "It doesn't even seem slightly related to you. There's no way you'd resonate with this thing. What did you do?"

"Honestly? Not sure," Zac said, a small frown on his face as he tried to gain some sense of the small ball. "I just felt it somehow."

Zac wasn't making things up. How did he know it was there? Even now, Zac wasn't quite sure. As Ogras said, the Fate Kernel didn't resonate with his Daos or path. Neither was it his newfound spiritual domain, which apparently was called Soul Sense, according to Catheya. It had told him it was just any normal rock. Yet he'd felt a minute pull from the stone.

The situation was a bit reminiscent of the trial Three Virtues had set up for him inside the Orom Word, where he had to use his heart to discern true from false. Yet, Zac could tell it wasn't his heart either. If that were the case, the knowledge would have spread far and wide. After all, while Heart Cultivation was quite rare, it wasn't unheard of. There were even cultivators having the heart at the center of their path, and there were others who had incredibly tempered hearts due to various reasons.

"Perhaps my Luck?" Zac ventured, even if it didn't feel like it.

"Well, whatever it is, keep it up," Ogras grinned. "Find me a good one, yeah? Shadows and Illusions. I'm not greedy, needing a Peak or Supreme-quality stone. Even a High-grade will do."

"Is that all?" Zac said with a roll of his eyes as he threw away the kernel. "First of all, let's see if it was a lucky hunch or not."

The guides wouldn't confirm or deny the matter, but there were some rumors that it was best to return any kernel you found. If you let them dissipate, you'd weaken your fate with the Quarry, lessening the odds of finding something useful. The grass rippled like water as the stone sunk into the ground. A moment later, it was gone, likely relocated to some other corner of the Quarry. During the process, Zac didn't sense anything, and he had no better answer as to why he'd known the kernel was there.

The two kept moving until Zac stopped again. This time he wasn't looking at a rock but rather up at a small bird's nest in a tree. He climbed up and observed the nest with all his senses. Eventually, he took out one of the eggs. He cracked the egg, and instead of yolk, a small amber broach depicting a beetle appeared. Before that point, it had looked and felt exactly like the other eggs.

"They come in all shapes and sizes, huh," Ogras muttered after Zac jumped down.

Zac curiously looked at the broach. "Earth and sun? Interesting combination."

"More importantly, it really looks like your treasure sense is tuned to these things," Ogras said, his eyes gleaming.

Zac nodded, frowning as he looked down at the pieces of broken shell in his hand. It was just like with the previous kernel. The moment the broach was extracted, he'd lost any connection to either egg or broach. Was it the formation he felt connected to rather than the kernels? Or was it something else? In either case, Zac felt it was related to why Lord Engo had sent him here.

The two continued toward the riverbeds, spending the better part of the day trying to understand Zac's ability. After 10 hours and over fifty kernels, they'd unearthed most rules of Zac's uncanny ability. By the looks of it, he could sense any Broach within 20 meters. However, the faster they moved, the smaller that sphere would get. If they ran at top speed, he would almost have to step right on the kernel to notice it.

The range wasn't too impressive, but it was still an amazing ability. Most cultivators would be lucky if they found one or two kernels a day in the starting region when turning over every stone and inspecting every tree. One thing they hadn't managed to confirm was whether he could tell the kernels' grades before they were extracted from their formations. Every single one they'd found was low-quality. Part of it was because they were so close to the teleportation array, but it hinted at how rare the higher-quality kernels were.

No wonder most people wouldn't spend too much time in the Quarry. The odds of finding a suitable kernel were quite low, and it would most likely only provide a 5% boost. At some point, it became more efficient to just farm Mana and improve your core formation process that way instead.

A sudden energy surge made Zac and Ogras stop and look over. It wasn't some beast or another kernel, but three cultivators who appeared between the forests. They'd moved quickly using movement skills but had stopped upon noticing Zac and Ogras. The three were of the same race, an alien-looking four-armed biped that could only narrowly be considered humanoid.

There was no hint of aggression or killing intent on them, so Zac and Ogras just walked over to chat. There were usually a few dozen people in the Quarry, though the numbers would most likely thin out as the mission release approached.

"Any luck?" Ogras grinned.

"Got one," one of the three nodded. "You heading to the riverbeds?"

"Why, something wrong?" Ogras asked.

"A few really loud people there right now, " the alien shrugged. "Might want to check out another hotspot if you're planning to form resonance."

"Loud?" Zac asked.

"Some gravity cultivator is creating earthquakes, makes it hard to sense anything," one of the others explained. "Another one is using sound waves to pulverize the rocks on the riverbeds. It's quite loud."

If calmly meditating and sending out your Dao into the area in hopes of resonance was one method, then destruction was the other. If you blew up everything around you, you had a chance to unearth kernels. It wasn't a surefire method, though. Most pointed toward the kernels being able to flee when attacked that way, which could empty a whole region. Neither option had proven better than the other in finding suitable kernels. One was simply a targeted search, while the other cast a wider net in hopes of striking it rich. It ultimately depended on where your talents lay.

"We're already halfway there. It would be a shame not to check it out. Besides, those kinds of people can't go on forever," Zac smiled.

"You three look a bit annoyed. Are you here to exchange pointers to release some stress?" Ogras grinned.

"No, thank you," the alien laughed, confirming he'd already maxed out his duels for the month. "Rather, we'd want to exchange some information."

"Oh?" Zac asked curiously.

"An eighth hotspot has been discovered. It'll probably be general knowledge in a few weeks, but who knows? Going before the others might improve your odds of finding something good."

"What do you want in return?" Ogras asked.

"Nothing important. We just want some details on what happened with the global mission. We were camped out here when the mission appeared."

"Oh, sure," Ogras said, his smile widening. "You met the right people. We didn't enter ourselves, but we were outside the teleporter that day. That crazy Draugr got his hands on it."

"The one from the message?" the first alien exclaimed.

"That's right," Ogras nodded. "Real lunatic, that one. Came stumbling out of the teleportation gate covered in blood. Heard he created a mess inside. Broke a Calamity Mountain and then killed his way back. Stay clear; that guy is nothing but trouble."

Zac inwardly rolled his eyes but kept his face impassive.

"Did he announce if he's planning on selling the item?" the third humanoid asked, speaking up for the first time.

The third was clearly stronger than the two others and most likely the leader. Zac had already realized it cultivated a mixed-meaning Dao where one half was Life. Zac guessed it hoped the [Calamity Core] was a life-attuned item and thus useless for a Draugr.

"No idea," Ogras shrugged after seeing Zac wasn't about to speak up.

"Thank you," the leader said, handing over an information crystal. "Best of luck on your hunt."

"Have a good one," Ogras waved, and both groups went their way.

The two didn't meet any more cultivators and didn't bother looking for more Kernels. Between Ogras using his teleportations and Zac using [Earthstrider], the two reached the riverbeds in half a day. They stopped at a crest, looking down at a vast expanse of dry soil. The riverbeds lived up to its name. There had to be thousands of them, stretching as far as the eye could see. A few were only a dozen meters across, while others were so wide they might as well have been great lakes.

There was almost no water running. The smaller rivers were completely dried out, while the larger ones had a few trickles that any F-grade cultivator could jump across. The land between the rivers had some trees and shrubbery, but the plants all looked withered and on their last legs.

"It's time for us to work," Ogras said as he jumped into the dried-out river. "And by us, I mean you."

Zac snorted and jumped down from the ledge. He was just about to respond, but the moment his feet touched the riverbed, he felt his consciousness being wrenched away. Zac thought some Mentalist had ambushed him, but furiously struggling was to no avail. The world darkened, and Ogras' voice grew distant.

Then, there was only the constellation.