

The Fall 1022

[Chapter 1022 - Lucky Beads](#)

Zac was curious about his haul, but one thing took precedence. He closed his eyes and started scanning his body for any wrongness. Occasionally, Zac activated [Void Zone] for a minute before turning it off. He'd even start the first stance of the third layer of [Void Vajra Sublimation].

He'd seen just how deadly the secrets kept within the ghost temples were, and Zac knew he'd cheated by the end. With how abruptly everything ended, Zac wondered if he'd been caught in a trap the moment he left the small temple. And even if he hadn't, he had to stabilize his soul and mental state. Only an hour later did Zac feel fully confident he was really back in his manor and not caught in a Heart Illusion. Neither were his Hidden Nodes acting up, which hopefully meant he hadn't been marked or cursed.

"Null, did you see how I returned to the gates?" Zac asked.

"No idea. I was suppressed the moment you began crossing the peak."

Zac slowly nodded, glancing at the distant temple that still stood there like nothing had happened. Was that perhaps the point? Sending him back here was a way to sow a seed of doubt in his heart, where he'd feel uncertain about what was real and what was a dream. Something like that could gnaw at one's psyche for years, eventually turning into a Heart Demon that'd leave him exposed to future attacks.

The energies on the peak had returned to normal, but Zac still felt that terrifying Buddha staring at him from within the ghost temple. Standing in the gateway left him exposed, so he hurried back into his manor before his gaze turned to the beads in his right hand. The prayer band he'd seen in his vision only had eighteen beads, but his one had exactly fifty-four. It was much too long to make a bracelet and instead looked like something you'd wear around your neck.

Most of the beads looked the same as the ones in the vision, made out of wood and alternating between natural dark brown and painted black. The original bracelet also had one red bead, whereas this one had three silver ones interspaced between every 17-bead cycle. Most importantly, the beads emitted a mysterious aura of providence.

It was not the Dao of Karma or Samsara, but more like the intangible feeling of fathering fate Zac had sometimes sensed since his effective Luck surpassed 1,000. Thankfully, it didn't contain a sense of danger like the ominous feeling he'd carried the past two weeks. Instead, the beads just produced calm ripples that could only be sensed with one's heart. Zac had never seen a fate-augmenting treasure before, but the prayer beads looked just like he'd expected. He only hesitated a few seconds before he put them around his neck.

He'd risked his life to get his hands on this thing, so not using it was not an option. Especially since it didn't emit the slightest hint of any Dharma. The beads gave off a soothing rattle as they settled, and Zac felt a mysterious ripple enter his body. The mountain's incessant drone disappeared for a moment, but Zac could tell that wasn't the main use of the beads. The sense of danger had grown much clearer. If it had felt like an indistinct looming cloud before, it was now a sword squarely pointed at his back.

Zac opened his Status Screen to make sure, but the row detailing his Luck hadn't changed. Zac wasn't surprised. It wasn't like his other tools altered his Status Screen in any way. The exact effect of the beads was difficult to quantify, but Zac didn't believe they acted like an increase to his effective Luck, at least not in the way he expected. He had gained significant boosts to his attributes before, and the experience wasn't like this.

It felt more like the beads acted like a translator and amplifier of the intangible feeling his Luck generated. For some reason, he was almost certain another guest was targeting him now. Before, he hadn't been sure and had felt it could have been related to some danger hiding in the Stand of Saeward. Unfortunately, the improvement wasn't enough to give him a suspect.

Was it Kruta? Was he trying to lead him into an ambush with his message? Or had he become an unwitting pawn? After all, it was no secret that Zac had a Branch of the War Axe, and a big event on a conflict-based battlefield had a high chance of drawing him out. Zac shook his head, putting the matter aside. Perhaps the sensation would grow stronger after he left his secluded mansions.

Getting a better understanding of the [Lucky Beads], as he'd named the prayer band long ago, Zac absolutely felt the trade-off was worth it. The [Mind's Eye Agate] had been a huge help for his Soul Cultivation, but its usefulness was, unfortunately, reaching its end. Its calming and stabilizing effect wasn't needed since he'd begun cultivating his heart—he had no problem entering a powerful meditative state with a single breath.

The same was true for the Mental Energy it emitted. It wasn't enough for the fourth layer of the [Nine Reincarnations Manual]. Zac had everything needed to practice the next reincarnation, but it required way too much energy. It was essentially useless practicing the method until he got a Cosmic Core, and by that point, the agate would be too low-graded to help.

Zac still hurried back to the manor gate, and a small wind kicked up as Zac dragged the dust from the [Mind's Eye Agate] into a container. It had lost much of its spirituality, but perhaps he'd find some use for it in the future. He was about to return to his study, but he suddenly noticed the prayer beads were gone.

"What the hell?" Zac swore.

He quickly entered a Void State and breathed out in relief upon seeing the beads were back. However, Zac almost swore again upon realizing he couldn't actually touch them. The beads were as intangible as the ghost temples, refusing to blend with the real world. Did that mean he wouldn't be able to take them off in the future?

"The Sangha's gifts aren't always easy to decline, huh?" Null giggled.

"You knew this would happen?" Zac frowned.

"Nope," the guide said. "But I did know treasures dealing with fate are generally a bit odd. Most have restrictions and unusual, or even dangerous, side effects."

"You're saying this might be a cursed item?" Zac asked.

"No, it should be something good. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been placed as a hidden prize at a top-tier starting location. Not all of them come with drawbacks."

Zac thoughtfully nodded, but he suddenly had an idea. He activated [Void Zone], prompting the beads to reappear. At the same time, Zac felt their effect drastically weaken. He tried taking them off and it worked without issue. Only then did he equip them again and let them return to their illusory state.

Having dealt with everything, Zac spent the next couple of hours further stabilizing his mind and going over his next step. Knowing he was being targeted didn't change Zac's opinion about heading to the Stand of Saeward. On the contrary, it only increased his desire to go. If someone was planning on killing him, what better place to deal with the threat than a battlefield rife with the Dao of Conflict? He'd essentially have a home-field advantage.

Still, Zac knew he wouldn't have felt such a palpable sense of danger if the plot didn't have a real chance of doing him in. Gaining the beads hadn't changed that fact, so Zac knew he needed to prepare something else. It was a bit early, but he saw no better option. Whoever targeted him had probably investigated him thoroughly. He had hidden some of his cards well, like the remnants, but he still felt exposed. Zac was in the light while they hid in the dark, and some of these guests had incredible means.

It was better to add some new tools to his belt, so Zac walked over to the teleportation array. This time, Zac turned into a wiry human he'd killed last year in a Red Zone, and he even wore the assassin's items before activating the teleporter. A familiar bridge appeared on the other side of the gate, and Zac entered the Keys of Ascension. Zac inwardly grimaced at the thought of spending 500 Mana an hour, but he expressionlessly crossed the bridge.

The price was steep, but how could some Mana compare to his life?

He soon reached the odd construct and infused the Daos of Conflict and Life. Meanwhile, he imprinted the purpose of his visit and held onto it as he entered the confusing maze of twisted dimensions. This time, he wasn't led to a fiery temple. Instead, he found himself in an abandoned square under a tumultuous sky. Judging by the deep scars on the walls, it had either been a battlefield or a sparring area. Perhaps a dueling spot where warriors fought to the death.

Even if the warriors were gone, there was an intense lingering aura of Conflict. It far eclipsed the Bloodwind Planet's atmosphere, though it lacked the corrosive bloodthirst you encountered on most battlefields. The truths were pure, aiming right at the heart of Conflict, and Zac felt a primal urge to start swinging his axe as he looked at the scars.

Conflict was not the only truth that held sway in the small square. It was completely overgrown, with hundreds of vines covering the walls and ground. Not two vines looked the same, but they all shared one feature. They radiated a terrifying amount of life force.

Usually, his Draugr vision carrying over to his human form was a boon, but today it was a detriment. The vines were almost blinding, like their insides were filled with liquid Life. The plants slithered and danced like snakes. It mostly seemed random, but they occasionally formed complex patterns that triggered something in Zac's mind. They mimicked the truths of Conflict in the scars, occasionally creating echoes of Zac's path.

Only a small circle in the middle was cleared-out from the vines. It was the same size as the invisible fire from his previous visit. This time, there was nothing of the sort. Instead, there was just a densely

engraved gemstone floating in the center, an emerald that seemingly had absorbed the environmental Daos for millions of years.

Zac had always been curious whether the Keys of Ascension had all these rooms ready to go or if it generated them with his Daos as a blueprint. Seeing the cultivation chamber, Zac leaned toward the latter. It just felt too attuned to his purposes for it to be happenstance.

He took a step forward, and a raging storm of impressions filled Zac's mind. Each scar was a well of endless truth, and every vine suddenly told him a story. Some spoke of valor, of victory. Others of brutality and bloodshed. Some even spoke of defeat but contained an iron will to rise again. Zac wasn't sure if he was hallucinating, but it looked like the dancing vines recreated battles between those who had left the marks.

His mind was filled with the Dao, and the atmosphere urged him on. Every step filled him with the inspiration of a hundred battles, and every breath filled him with a cleansing wave that swept away all his confusion and hesitation. Soon, he reached the central circle and spread his Soul Sense through the whole square. It almost felt like the vines were putting on a show, leading him toward the answer he'd been looking for.

Zac had been hesitant until now, wondering if he was acting too soon. But he wasn't. This little square was the final key to the puzzle. It was time for him to create a skill from scratch. And it would be for his human side.

To this day, there was undeniably something missing in the skillset of Edge of Arcadia: it completely lacked any integration with Vivi. In contrast, he'd just gotten [Love's Bond] when evolving to E-grade, and it had been a major inspiration to Fetters of Desolation. His first skill, [Blighted Cut], even required him to use chains.

His two combat styles had been harmonized after figuring out his path in the Orom World, but the result meshed better with his Draugr class. Since day one, Alea and her chains had been an integral part of his Draugr toolkit. Meanwhile, Vivi was a much later addition.

He'd barely stepped into the path of Pure Life when he evolved, and it'd be years before he crystallized his Evolutionary path. In other words, Zac wanted to add a skill that incorporated the thoughts and concepts of how his Evolutionary Stance used armaments. Doing so would have multiple benefits. First of all, it would better tune his skillset, and thus Class Options, to his path. Secondly, it would allow him to create something he had felt missing in his class.

A persistent skill.

Edge of Arcadia was currently carried by a couple of incredibly destructive skills with long cooldowns. Hit fast, hit hard, and leave nothing behind. But when he'd expended [Arcadia's Judgment], [Rapturous Divide], and [Arcadian Crusade], he didn't have much to rely on except [Nature's Edge] and his high mobility with [Earthstrider] and [Ancestral Woods]. A persistent skill would broaden his toolkit significantly.

He wasn't planning on shifting the focus of the class, though. Zac still liked Edge of Arcadia's explosive nature and felt it suited his personality. He rather wanted to form a persistent skill that filled the same function as Vivi. To restrict and force openings. After all, his opponents were only growing more

powerful, and it was becoming harder and harder to land his finishing blows. Life and Conflict. Suffocation and destruction. Zac didn't want a cage like [Profane Seal]. He wanted a tidal wave of violence that cut off all escape.

Zac had tinkered with a skill fractal for almost a decade since he started working on his blueprint. Some of the Lost Plane lake water had gone into setting a foundation, and he'd filled in the gaps over the years since. Now that he sat surrounded by the warrior vines, he felt something crystallize. It wasn't exactly what he'd planned for, but it was close. And better. Zac didn't hesitate at all in following the surge of inspiration. This was why he was ready to pay so much, to the point he risked being pushed down an echelon. This was a chance to push his skill to become something uniquely terrifying and deadly.

In fact, he wanted to go even further.

Two inlaid boxes appeared in Zac's lap. Inside one was a slightly dried mushroom he'd found in the caves at the bottom of the Twilight Chasm. It looked like it was dying, but it exuded a vast aura of Life. Not only that, but it voraciously swallowed the ambient energy in the square to regenerate rapidly.

The other box held a single stalk of grass. It was almost half a meter long and looked more like a sword than a herb. Zac felt like he would be split apart just from looking at it, and the vines near the circle shied away. At the same time, his blood and adrenaline surged like he had swallowed a berserking treasure. Every cell in his body urged him to action, to grab the stalk and split the Heavens themselves.

The stalk was one of the best Natural Treasures Kruta had found during his travels on the battlefields. Kruta had been worried about his insufficient funds after missing out on the Fate Kernel, so Zac had taken the opportunity to buy the stalk and some other conflict-attuned materials. It helped improve his stockpiles of Conflict-attuned materials, which were vastly inferior to his accumulations for Life and Death. Zac had initially planned on keeping the stalk as a main material for his core formation, but he quickly realized the stalk had another use; to force inspiration.

Two minutes passed, and the mushroom had finally recovered to its original state after having been stowed away for the better part of two decades. It was an inferior alternative to the bulbous treasure he'd used to create [Pillars of Desolation]. However, between his far stronger foundations, the environment, and his improved Daos, Zac hoped to recreate the miracle of that day.

He'd accumulated for decades, all to get his hands on a second Supreme Pathbound Skill.