

## The Fall 417

### Chapter 417: Vanguard of Undeath

Zac's eyes were trained on the sea of parasites that came pouring out of their burrows and he calmly stepped forward as he activated his set of passive skills. A billowing cloud of miasma spread across the area and covered the ground, which elicited an annoyed grunt from Ogras who started to move away in disgust.

Zac could only shrug apologetically, knowing that the skill in his current form affected his allies as well, or at least his living allies. He would have to experiment some more if he ever got some undead companions.

The thousands of parasites didn't seem to care about the miasma though, and they rushed toward the two without hesitation. The situation was a perfect opportunity to Zac, and he activated [Vanguard of Undeath] for the first time. A storm of miasma immediately exploded out from his body, which in turn attracted the attention of all the beasts.

Even most of those who had been running toward Ogras changed their course as they seemed intent to take him out first as if their lives depended on it. They flooded toward him like a tide, but Zac didn't worry in the least. He was more interested in the changes that took place to his body.

His vantage rapidly changed as he felt himself grow, and his bones in his body creaked and groaned until he was standing at well over three meters tall. That was just one of the changes though, and Zac couldn't help but marvel at the others. His frame had received a huge upgrade in not only height but also bulk, and he stood his ground like a massive tank.

He wanted to check out his muscles for a second, but it was impossible due to the other addition the skill had brought forth. His whole body was covered in a thick medieval armor that ran in black and turquoise, created by extremely dense layers of miasma.

Even his equipment had been transformed by the skill. [Everlasting] had grown to match his increased size, and the circle of fractals in the middle had changed color from white to turquoise to match the details in his armor. Was this the effect of the Neprosium being able to incorporate almost any attunement?

Even [Verun's Bite] had enjoyed an upgrade, though it seemed that his Axe couldn't be infused in the same manner as his shield. A massive Fractal axe had instead formed over it, a grisly bardiche that was tailor-made for his hulking frame. The haft was almost two meters long and ended in a sharp spike.

The axehead was one-sided and slightly larger than what felt normal for such a long weapon, with its massive half-moon edge having a diameter of at least a meter. If it had been an actual weapon it would no doubt feel completely unbalanced, but it felt perfect in Zac's hand as he took a step forward that made the ground shudder.

An annoyed growl echoed in Zac's mind, and he realized it was Verun that didn't seem all too happy to be covered in death-attuned energies. A thought struck Zac and he simply put [Verun's Bite] away in his Spatial Ring, and the miasma axe thankfully stayed on without a physical base. It did however seem a bit faded until he brought out his axe again.

He could soon confirm that Verun wasn't actually harmed by the death-attuned energies, but it was more akin to being close to a nauseating odor. Zac could only impose on the Spirit Tool for now until he found a better solution. Perhaps he would have to invest in a Death-Attuned axe sooner or later anyway.

Power coursed through his whole body, and a glance at his status screen gave him a start. All his attributes apart from Luck had gained a solid 10% increase, pushing his power to another level. It wasn't as great as the buff from [Hatchetman's Rage], but judging by the modest consumption of miasma he would be able to maintain his current form for the better part of an hour without a problem.

Increased attributes, increased size, impervious armor, and a massive weapon. Zac felt like an invincible tank after having activated [Vanguard of Undeath], and he immediately started slaughtering the parasites. Each swing of his axe caused a ghastly wail to echo across the battlefield, and corpses of Avoli Parasites were launched dozens of meters from the force of his momentum.

But Zac only had time to swing his axe a couple of times before his Danger Sense pricked in his mind.

The next moment a handful of shadowlances flew up toward him and his mind froze by the unexpected ambush. The required movements were long ingrained into his body though, and his arm automatically moved to intercept the strikes with [Everlasting] before he even had time to question what was going on.

"Ahh! What are you doing!" Ogras screamed with frustration shortly after as a spectral projection stabbed at him as retaliation for the shadowlances.

"What am I doing?" Zac grunted in annoyance as he turned toward the demon, but froze for a second when he heard himself.

He sounded like a real devil, where his voice had sunk to a register that shouldn't be reachable for humans. There was also the chill of death to it, giving it an extremely terrifying cadence.

"Is this your new skill?" the demon said with complaint as he shot out another handful of shadowblades, half of which were aimed at Zac.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, I used a skill to transform. Can you stop attacking me?" Zac growled in annoyance as he crushed the spears with a swing of his miasmic axe.

"Do you think I want to? Your skill messes with my senses, it's like you've given me tunnel vision. I try to hit the damn beasts but I somehow end up targeting you anyway," the demon said with frustration written all over his face.

Only then did the true effect of the skill dawn on Zac. [Vanguard of Undeath] had a taunting function? This was something that had been a huge problem with his class before, at least until he got [Profane Seal].

To strike Zac in his Draugr-form was to slowly kill yourself due to the combination of [Deathwish] and Zac's massive Endurance. But why would anyone hit him if they figured that out? They could always flee or target Zac's allies instead, forcing him to stomp around by himself.

But it looked like [Vanguard of Undeath] at least partly shored up that deficiency.

Ogras reluctantly started helping out by testing the limits, and they found that it did not just work on ranged skills. For example, when Ogras used his movement skill he accidentally ended up closer to Zac rather than further away a couple of times, which would have allowed Zac to launch a strike if he wanted.

There were limits to the efficacy of the skill though, and Ogras got better and better controlling his actions as time passed. After struggling for a bit over a minute he managed to essentially rewire his brain as he described it, where he intentionally aimed off-keel to circumvent the effect of [Vanguard of Undeath].

But a whole minute in a battle between elites was the same as an eternity, and it would give Zac multiple opportunities to destroy his enemies. Zac also quickly learned that he could control the effect a bit, and reducing the area he taunted lessened the mental strain on him.

Conversely, the area he could cover if he strained was pretty massive, and he realized he could easily cover the whole cage he created with [Profane Seal]. So if he managed to trap his target he would essentially be able to force a fight.

The skill worked even better with the brainless parasites as long as he kept his taunt active. They heedlessly threw themselves at him with even greater fervor than the battleroaches back in the Underworld. They unleashed barrage after barrage of attacks on either his armor or shield, but the strikes barely left a scratch in his current shape.

Spectral parasites kept appearing one after another as strikes against his new armor would activate [Deathwish] just like strikes at his body. Large pockets of carnage were simultaneously carved out by his miasmatic axe, each swing taking out over five of the beasts without him even infusing the axe with a Dao.

He quickly realized he had some control over the spectral axe, though it wasn't as convenient as [Chop]. Still, he was able to elongate the handle by another meter, and the edge could grow to be almost as tall as a full-grown person.

Along with his increased size he had suddenly tripled his range and strike zone, which finally allowed him to mow down his enemies by the handful rather than one by one as he did with [Unholy Strike]. He realized that skills like [Deforestation] or [Winds of Decay] were still far superior to clear out a large number of enemies, but it was still a pretty convenient boost.

Zac almost felt drunk with power from using his ultimate form, as this truly was what he expected from his ultimate strike. The only thing missing was a pair of wings like the ones Ogras got, but he guessed that wasn't really on theme for an Undying Bulwark.

Better yet, this was only the first of his two new skills. Zac was about to try out the second one as well, but he suddenly stopped himself as he turned to Ogras.

"You might want to back away from the battle," Zac said. "I think my other skill might target you as well."

"And you're not just trying to mess with me?" Ogras muttered, but he still flashed away to spectate the battle on a hill far in the distance.

The miasma in the area started to churn and swell as Zac fused more and more of his stored miasma into [Undying Legion], but he was shocked to realize that the skill still kept craving more even after having imbued the fractal with a third of his miasma. It actually gobbled up half of his stores before the skill was satiated.

This was a shocking cost, more than twice compared to [Profane Seal]. It was to the point that Zac started to regret trying it out on these trash parasites rather than saving it for a real battle. But it wasn't like he could refund the miasma so he could only keep going.

One shape after another started to rise from the hazy shroud created from [Fields of Despair]. They were humanoid skeletons who shone with sinister energy, and Zac felt their power was comparable to pretty strong peak F-Grade warriors judging by their auras. Figures kept rising until over a hundred of them stood in formation, creating a small army.

The skeletons were all whole and without cracks, but the gear they wore was mismatched and obviously worse for the wear. The swords and armors were chipped and filled with rust, but they still contained deathly energy that felt strong enough to kill the peak F-Grade parasites in a swing or two.

Zac nodded in relief when he saw the skill, as the skill quest had been a bit troubling.

It had required him to gather the resentment of 500 000 kills, which made him worry about what would happen when he activated [Undying Legion]. The fact that it would be some sort of summoning skill was pretty obvious going by the name, but he had been afraid that he would summon everyone he had killed over the past months.

He didn't feel shame or regret for all those kills, but he also didn't feel proud about the kind of person he had become. Being put face to face again to the victims of his carnage would have been a bit much to handle, so the nondescript skeletons were no doubt a relief.

The parasites didn't worry about where the skeletons had cropped up from and they immediately pounced on their new targets. The skeleton warriors themselves immediately went to work without needing any prompts from Zac. One parasite after another got ripped to shreds, and a continuous surge of miasma filled Zac's body as he simply watched on.

The skill might have had a massive initial expenditure, but Zac was happy to see that there was no cost at all to maintaining the skill after the skeletons had formed. They kept hacking and slashing without Zac losing an iota of miasma. It was actually the opposite as his reserves kept getting filled thanks to [Fields of Despair].

A thought struck Zac as he watched on, and he tried infusing the Fragment of the Coffin into one of the skeletons. The summoned warrior immediately turned a shade darker, and its sword started to emanate a pretty terrifying aura.

Any beast the Dao-infused skeleton cut started to immediately rot and fester, and the effect was even greater than when he used the Seed of Rot with his axe. Any parasite that was struck with the sword was turned into a pile of goop within a minute. The scene made Zac realize he had forgotten one of the weapons in his arsenal, as he always used the Fragment of the Axe when fighting with his weapon lately.

It was a good reminder that he also had such a tool in his toolbox.

